

ON LOVE: CONDITIONAL AND UNCONDITIONAL

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At the very heart of our experience of being human, each of us has an intuitive sense of the value of unconditional love. We discover great joy when we can love without reservation, suspending judgments and opening fully to the the vivid reality of another's being. And we usually feel most loved when others recognize and respond to us wholeheartedly. Unconditional love has tremendous power, activating a larger energy which connects us with the vastness and profundity of what it is to be human. This energy is the energy of the heart.

We often experience glimpses of unconditional love most vividly in beginnings and endings-at birth, at death, or when first opening to another being, in love. At these times we feel moved and inspired by the very presence of another person's existence. Tough, frozen places inside us begin to melt and soften as the circulation of love warms us like spring sun. Yet soon enough, especially in intimate relationships, we come up against inner fears, restraints, or cautions, about letting our love flow so freely. Will we get hurt, can we trust this person? Will this relationship meet our needs? Such cautions lead us to place conditions on our openness: "I can only be this open and vulnerable with you *if*. . . I get my needs met; you love me as much as I love you; you don't hurt me;" etc., etc.

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The pull between loving unconditionally and loving with conditions heightens the tension between two different sides of our nature-the personal wants and needs of our conditioned

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Adapted from a talk. Portions of this material will appear in a forthcoming book. *Challenges of the Heart: Love, Sex and Intimacy in Changing Times* (Shambhala, Fall, 1985).

self and the unconditional openness of the heart. Yet this very tension between conditional and unconditional love, if clearly seen and worked with, can actually help us learn to love more fully. The friction between these two sides of our nature can ignite a refining fire that awakens the heart to the real challenge, the outrageous risk, and the tremendous gift of human love.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

The expression of unconditional love follows the movements of the heart, which is its source. We could define "heart" as that "part" of us where we are most tender and open to the world around us, where we can let others in and feel moved by them; as well as reach outside ourselves to contact them more fully. The unconditional love that springs from the heart has both a receptive side-appreciating others. Letting them be as they are, and feeling touched by them-and an active side-going out to meet, touch, and make contact, what the existentialists call "being-with."

It is the heart's nature to want to circulate love freely back and forth, without putting limiting conditions on that exchange. The heart looks right past things that may offend our personal tastes, often rejoicing in another's being despite all our reasonable intentions to maintain a safe distance, or break off contact if a relationship has become too painful. Love in its deepest essence knows nothing of conditions and is quite unreasonable. Once the heart has opened and we have been deeply touched by another person, we will likely feel affected by that person for the rest of our lives, no matter what form the relationship may take. Unconditional love has its reasons which reason cannot know.

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CONDITIONAL LOVE

Yet, insofar as we are not just pure heart, but also have conditioned likes and dislikes, certain conditions always determine the extent of our involvement with another person. This is inevitable. As soon as we consider the *form* of relationship we want with someone, we are in the realm of conditions. Because we are of this earth, we exist within certain forms and structures (body, temperament, personality characteristics, emotional needs, likes and dislikes, sexual preferences, styles of communication, life-styles, beliefs and values) that fit more or less well with someone else's structures.

Conditional love is a feeling of pleasure and attraction based on how fully someone matches our needs, desires, and personal

considerations. It is a response to a person's looks, style, personal presence, emotional support-what he or she does for us. It is not something bad, but it is a lesser form of love, in that it can be negated by a reversal of the conditions under which it formed. If someone we love starts acting in ways we don't like, we may not like him as much anymore. Conditional liking inevitably gives way to opposite feelings of fear, anger or resistance when our structures rub up against another person's structures. Yet beyond both conditional yes and conditional no lies the larger unconditional yes of the heart.

CONFUSING THE TWO ORDERS OF LOVE

Attraction to another person is often most intense when the two orders of love are in accord: this person not only touches our heart, but also fulfills certain conditions for what we want from an intimate partner. On the other hand, it is quite confusing when these two orders do not mesh. Perhaps this person meets our conditions, yet somehow does not move us very deeply. Or else he or she touches our heart, so that we want to say yes, while our personal considerations and criteria lead us to say no to a committed relationship.

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One common way of confusing the two orders of love is by trying to impose our conditioned no on the larger yes of the heart. For instance, perhaps we decide to end a relationship because it is impossible to get certain essential needs met. Our heart, nonetheless, whose nature is to say yes, may want to keep right on loving the other person just the same. Trying to cut off the love that is still flowing toward the other person can do damage to us by constricting the very source of joy and aliveness inside us.

Another common way of confusing the two orders of love is to try to impose the yes of the heart on the no of our personal considerations. Imagining that we should tolerate unconditionally that which is conditioned-another's personality, actions, or life-style-is a confusion that often has painful consequences. Unconditional love does not mean having to like what we in fact dislike or saying yes when we need to say no.

Unconditional love arises from and responds to an entirely different place in people than conditional like and dislike, attraction and resistance. It is a being-to-being recognition and acknowledgment. It is an expression of that which is itself unconditional-the intrinsic goodness of our tender, open hearts, beneath all our defenses and pretenses. It does not necessarily involve 'loving' in the narrow sense of amorous,

desirous, adoring sentiments. It is rather, an unconditional openness, or sense of connection *that* could be characterized by the qualities of *letting be* and *being-with*. Arising from our own "basic goodness" (Trungpa, 1984), unconditional love resonates with and reveals unconditional goodness in others as well. The goodness of the human heart, which is born tender, responsive, and eager to reach out and touch the life around us, is unconditional in that it is not something we have to achieve. It simply *is*.

TRUSTING IN THE GOODNESS OF THE HEART

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As a spontaneous expression of the heart, unconditional love is naturally available to everyone, especially in the early stages of a relationship. Yet it often becomes obscured by a couple's struggles to see if they can communicate, meet each other's needs, or create a working partnership. It may also get buried beneath preoccupation with problems of everyday life, family responsibilities, and work demands. How then can we stay in touch with the revitalizing presence of unconditional love in an ongoing relationship?

The most obvious answer is to learn to trust in the heart. Yet how do we do this? We need an actual way to develop trust in the unconditioned, *not* as an article of belief or hope, but as a living experience. Western psychology does not generally recognize the presence or possibility of unconditioned awareness or being. It views human awareness in terms of conditioning factors, such as instincts, drives, stimulus-response patterns, genetic factors, childhood history, archetypes, birth trauma, and so on. Although a notion such as Carl Rogers' "unconditional positive regard" is appealing, it can easily become a high ideal rather than a grounded practice, in that it is not based on any understanding of unconditioned being.

In Buddhist psychology, unconditioned, awake mind or heart *tibodhicua*; is a central focus. Although invariably wrapped in the cloak of our conditioning, it is considered to be the always present, open ground of human consciousness (Welwood, 1977; 1982). That in us which is unconditioned, beyond all our images and stories about who we are, is our pure primordial presence, openness, and receptivity to what is. Because it is always present, if only in the dimly perceived background, unconditioned being is not something "special," or an ideal to be achieved. It is, rather, "ordinary mind." In this sense, unconditional love is also quite ordinary, and so regarding it as a high ideal to strive after can distance us from it by obscuring its basic simple nature.

The best training I have found for developing trust in the unconditioned is mindfulness meditation, which comes from the Buddhist tradition. The Buddhist term for unconditional love is *maitri*, which means all-encompassing warmth and friendliness toward one's own experience. *Maitri* develops gradually but very concretely through the practice of mindfulness and awareness. Mindfulness involves just sitting and being in the moment, without doing anything, without trying to concentrate on anything, or think good thoughts, or even get rid of thoughts. While letting thoughts and feelings arise and pass away, the practice is to keep returning attention to the breath, which is a literal expression of well-being and presence even in the midst of the most unsettling states of mind. Through this practice, we can gradually realize that our existence is basically good and wholesome, simply because we are present, awake, responsive to life, and facing the world with a tender heart. Underneath all our confusions, we can glimpse what is unconditioned in us—our availability for facing and experiencing what is. In appreciating this unconditioned goodness, we can begin to let ourselves be because we don't have to try to *prove* that we are good.

The process of discovering basic goodness can be likened to clarifying muddy water—an ancient metaphor from the Taoist and Buddhist traditions. The basic nature of water is essentially pure and clear, though its turbulence often stirs up mud. Our minds are also like this, essentially clear and open, but muddied with the turbulence of conflicting thoughts and feelings. If we want to clarify the water, what should we do? What else but let the water sit? Not trusting our own basic goodness is like not trusting that water is essentially pure and that mud settles out by itself. In trying to prove that we are good, we struggle against the dirt, but that only stirs up more mud. Taking up self-improvement programs out of self-doubt is like adding bleach to the water. By contrast, relaxing into the basic goodness we begin to feel when we just let ourselves be awakens the natural warmth of the heart.

As this warmth of the heart radiates outward, it soon meets its first challenge: the tight, constricted, closed-off parts of ourselves and others. Although we may be tempted to fight against these tight places in a struggle to get rid of them, this only stirs up more mud. Even if we could get rid of the mud, we would lose many of the essential minerals and nutrients it contains. What allows the dirt to settle, so that the basic goodness hidden within neurotic patterns can emerge, is the attitude of *maitri*—unconditionally opening to and "being-with" those parts of ourselves that seem most unlovable (our fear, anger, self-doubt, etc.).

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These parts of us that give us the most trouble are like children in need of our attention. whom we have cut off from our unconditional love. Having internalized certain conditions our parents placed on their love, we say to ourselves, in effect, "I can only love me *if*. I don't have this fear, this need, this temper, or *if* I measure up to these standards." These internalized conditions become an elaborate system of dams, checks and blockages, armoring and tensions in the body that constrict the free flow of warmth and openness toward all aspects of our experience. However, any part of us that is cut off from our love eventually becomes sick, for it is the circulation of the heart's energy that keeps us healthy.

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Circulation is an essential principle of health throughout the natural world, as we can see in the constant cycling and flow of water, which is the cradle of life and the predominant element in the human body. To remain clean and life-giving, it must circulate, rising to the heavens from the ocean, then falling on the mountains and rushing in clear streams back to the sea. The sea itself circulates around the globe, its ebb and flow renewing the shores of the earth it touches. The circulation of blood in the body removes toxins and brings new life in the form of oxygen to the cells. Eastern medicine emphasizes a subtle stream of life energy-sometimes called *chi* or prono-whose circulation throughout the body and between body and world maintains physical health.

Psychologically. it is the circulation of unconditional love that keeps us healthy. Every child intuitively knows this. As children internalize the conditions placed on love by their parents and the world around them, withholding love from certain parts of themselves, these parts get cut off from the stream of life-enhancing awareness and caring, leading to various states of dis-ease. **In** mythological terms, the parts that are cut off turn into dragons and demons. As Rilke (1984, p. 92) writes, "Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us *is*, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love." In certain spiritual traditions, the alchemy of turning dragons into princesses is called *transmutation*. The Tantric Buddhist tradition, for instance, considers every neurotic pattern to have an enlightened energy-some quality of basic goodness-locked up in it. just as muddy water already contains pure water within it.

BREAKING OPEN THE HEART

Intimate relationships offer a promise of healing and transmu-

tation insofar as they have potential to free up the flow of unconditional love to those parts of us that are wounded, cut off, or deprived of caring. However, the very promise of exchanging unconditional love often stirs up unrealistic hopes of realizing perfect love and union. Insofar as we are creatures of this earth, with all the limitations and imperfections that entails, human relationships can never completely or perfectly manifest the unconditional love we may know and feel in our heart.

The pain of this contradiction between the perfect love in our hearts and the obstacles to its realization in ongoing relationships often breaks the heart-open. As the Sufi master, Hazrat Inayat Khan (1962, p, 164), wrote, "The pain of love is the dynamite that breaks open the heart. even if it be as hard as a rock." More precisely, the heart itself cannot break, or break open, in that its essential nature is already soft and receptive. What *can* actually break open is the wall around the heart, the defensive shield we have constructed to try to protect our soft spot. It seems that the only way to move through the disappointments of relationships without harming ourselves and others is actually to open up the heart *more* at the very moments we would most like to close it off. Just as dams in a stream accentuate the force of the water rushing against them, so the obstacles to perfect expression of love, both in ourselves and others, can actually help us feel the force of our love more strongly. By opening up the floodgates of the heart at this point, we prevent the resistances in the stream of love from blocking its flow and forming a stagnant swamp.

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So, in contacting what is most alive in us when we feel the obstacles to love-the rawness and tenderness of the "broken" heart-we actually open the heart wider. By opening our heart to the pain of love-r-being-with that pain and letting it be-we are manifesting gentleness and caring toward ourselves. **In** this experience of *maitri*. we discover that we can in fact give to ourselves the unconditional love we most hunger for. The painful truth is that probably no one else can ever give us all that we need in just the way we want. When we use that pain to help us touch what is most tender and alive in us, we begin to wake up from the poverty of depending on others to the majesty and richness we carry inside.

Touching the depth of feeling in our heart also helps us see through others' imperfections, allowing us to touch their hearts more readily. Breaking open the heart awakens us to the mystery of love-that we can't help loving others, in spite of and including all the things we don't like about them, for no other reason than that they move and touch us in ways that we

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can never fully understand. What we love, it seems, is not just their heart, but also their heart's struggle with all the obstacles in the way of its full, radiant expression. It's as though our heart wants to ally itself with their heart and lend them strength in their struggle to realize their unconditional goodness, beyond all their perceived shortcomings. **In** fact, if those we love were perfect embodiments of what we desire, they might not touch us so deeply. Their imperfection seems to give our love a purchase, a foothold, something to work on. The obstacles to love are what force our heart to break open, to stretch and expand to embrace all of what we are in our humanness. In this way, unconditional love becomes a deepening realization and an ongoing practice, beyond its initial spontaneous appearance in the first flash of falling in love.

This breaking open of the heart is the transmuting force in the alchemy of love that allows us to see the unconditional goodness of people in and through all the limitations of their conditioned self. It helps us to recover the beauty in the dragon and to realize how the unconditioned and conditioned sides of human nature are always intertwined, making up one whole cloth. The overflow of the broken-open heart starts as *maitri*, then radiates outward as compassion toward all other beings who have a tender heart, who hide their tenderness out of fear of being hurt, and who need our unconditional love to help awaken their hearts as well.

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