

Dharmette: Being Somebody & Nobody (5 of 5): Love without Selfing

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So this week we've been exploring the art of being somebody and nobody. We've been looking at selfing, the mind's constant activity of creating me, mine, my story, my meditation. We explored comparing mind, the healthy self, the useful and unneeded extra self, and responsibility without burden. So today I'd like to explore the role of love in relation to these teachings.

Now many years ago, one morning I was feeling deeply unhappy. I don't remember why anymore, but as was the habit at that time, regardless of how I felt, I still went to the gym, dragging myself through the morning. The equipment I liked to use was upstairs, and as I was walking up the stairs, a young man was walking down. I had never seen him before. I didn't know him. But as we passed each other, he gave me this huge, warm, radiant smile.

It was so genuine, so open, so unexpectedly kind, that even through the haze of contraction and self-concern I was so wrapped up in, something in me responded immediately, and my whole mood lifted. It only lasted a moment. He kept walking, I kept walking, but that moment stayed with me. It became a reference point for me for the power of even a brief moment of human kindness, whether it's kindness that comes from me or from someone else.

One of the really beautiful things we begin to discover on this path is that whenever selfing softens, love expands, because love is very natural. It just expresses itself differently in different situations. For instance, if the checker at the market smiles warmly at us, friendliness naturally arises. We smile back. We call this *mettā*, or loving-kindness. It's very simple. Friendliness of the heart, goodwill of the heart.

If someone's hurting, our heart responds with compassion, what we call *karuṇā*. We wouldn't cheerfully say to them, "Oh, isn't it a beautiful day?" while ignoring their pain. Instead, we

acknowledge it. We let them know we care. If someone we care about succeeds, we may genuinely delight in their happiness, what we call *muditā*, or appreciative joy, taking joy in someone else's good fortune.

And at other times, if the mind is quiet, perhaps we are walking in nature or meditating, sometimes love doesn't have an object at all. It just simply radiates like the warmth of the sun, spacious, open-hearted, what we call *upekkhā*, or equanimity. And the heart knows how to do this naturally. But the habits of self-thinking can arise at any point, tightening around I, me, and mine.

An example: we may feel genuine happiness that our child is doing well in school. It's simply joy, their joy. But then the self quietly appears and says, my child is doing well. And suddenly the experience changes. You know, in the 1980s and '90s there were bumper stickers everywhere saying, "My child is an honor student." And of course, as people will do, they started making parody bumper stickers in response.

One of them said, "My child sold drugs to your honor student." It was just terrible, but also pretty funny, because it exposes something very human. The self wants ownership. It wants credit. It wants identity. It wants to turn simple love into self-enhancement, into conceit.

And sometimes what we call love becomes mixed with fear, fear of loss, of rejection, of not being enough. We cling tightly to someone because we're afraid. We want reassurance, possession, certainty. We've even romanticized it. You see these old romances: "I can't live without you," or love becomes transactional, conditional. I'll love you if you love me. I'll pay attention to you if you pay attention to me.

A sincere practice can help us untangle wholesome, uncomplicated love from the fear and selfing that we might wrap around it. And we can easily feel how different those energies are, the lightness of an open-hearted love and the contractedness we feel with "I can't live without you." One simply delights in another's happiness. The other immediately organizes reality around me and mine.

The teachings don't negate personal love. It doesn't mean we stop loving our spouse or child or dog or friends. Those forms of love are beautiful. But practice begins to reveal that beneath personal love is something larger, a love not dependent on special circumstances, special people, a love that doesn't ask who deserves this, what do I get back, is this my person? A love that's more like the sun. It doesn't shine selectively. It radiates because radiating is its nature.

And it's a little short poem that Hafiz wrote that I love:

Even after all this time,
The sun never says to the earth,
"You owe me."
Look what happens with a love like that.
It lights the whole sky.

So through years of *Dharma* practice, as we gradually lessen our clinging, this unconditional love becomes more available. But we can also consciously strengthen the helpful habits of mind, strengthen the healthy self. And kindness itself is an expression of love. And kindness is never very far away. Unconditional love at times might feel just so far away, but kindness is right there.

Often we can suddenly notice a harsh inner voice criticizing ourselves. And instead of trying to manufacture some grand spiritual love, we simply remember little kindnesses, just basic friendliness toward ourselves. Every time we remember to be kind, even briefly, like that moment in the staircase with me and that young man, every time we remember kindness briefly, the contraction of self eases a little bit.

The same is true if ill will or judgment toward others arises. We don't need to manufacture some extraordinary state. Sometimes just an intention to not support anger might be enough, or if available, a simple intention of goodwill. We cultivate the loving heart with simple acts of patience, listening carefully to someone, speaking gently. These are ordinary expressions of love. And these small habits, these wonderful small habits, loosen our clinging.

The self never stops clinging through hostility toward itself. We can't shame ourselves into freedom. Clinging softens through understanding, through kindness, through non-clinging. We can lovingly allow the clinging to unwind on its own. And when something quiets, it becomes less someone loving someone, and more simply love happening, caring happening, connection happening.

Sometimes it becomes very obvious in ordinary moments. Maybe you're helping someone carry some groceries, or sitting quietly with a sick friend, or watching a child sleep, looking out at the ocean at sunset. In those moments maybe the usual self-concern gets quiet. There isn't so much "what about me?" There's just simple, unhurried presence, just easy intimacy with life as it is.

And those moments matter. Practice helps us recognize that these moments are not accidents. They reveal something about the natural capacity of the heart when it's less entan-

gled in selfing, and it makes us more deeply human, more intimate with life. The healthy self still functions quite well, perhaps even better as clinging lessens. We still pay our taxes, feed the dog, call our friends, care for families, but there's just less contraction around identity. Less ownership, less burden. We stop carrying ourselves quite so heavily.

And maybe this is part of the art of being somebody and nobody. To be a functional, caring human being while holding the self lightly enough that love can move freely through us.

I'd like to end with a quote from the Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donoghue:

When love flows in the tiniest of details,
the mundane becomes holy.
Suddenly everything matters
because everything can evoke the sacred.

I'm going to read it one more time.

When love flows in the tiniest of details,
the mundane becomes holy.
Suddenly, everything matters
because everything can evoke the sacred.

Thank you all. Thank you for sharing this wonderful week together. Have wonderful day and evenings. And may the *Dharma* just grow in you, continue to grow in you. Thank you.