

Nothing Higher to Live For
A Buddhist View of Romantic Love

by

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IF IT IS possible to live with a purpose, what should that purpose be? A purpose might be a guiding principle, a philosophy, or a value of sovereign importance that informs and directs our activities and thoughts. To have one is to live seriously—though not necessarily wisely—following some track, believing in a hub to the wheeling universe or a sea toward which we flow or an end before which all the hubbub of civilization subsides. What is your purpose, friend, or what should it be?

Perhaps most of us do not come to a clear conclusion in the matter, but this does not mean we have no purpose, only that we do not recognize it or admit it or even choose it for ourselves. In the unhappiest case nature simply takes its course, which is a turbid meandering through the swamps of desire. If life means nothing then only pleasure is worthwhile; or if life has meaning and we cannot get at it then still only enjoyment matters—such is the view of brutes and some sophisticated philosophers. It slips into the unconscious by default when we hold no other, but we are reluctant to entertain it and will rather, if we think about it, take as our purpose support of family, search for beauty, improvement of society, fame, self-expression, development of talent, and so on. But it might be fair to say that apart from these or beneath these the fundamental purpose of many of us is the search for love, particularly romantic love.

The love of a man for a woman and a woman for a man is often the floor to which people fall after the collapse of other dreams. It is held to be solid when nothing else is, and though it frequently gives way and dumps them into a basement of despair, it still enjoys a reputation of dependability. No matter that this reputation is illogical—it still flourishes and will continue to flourish regardless of what is said in any book. Love, or possibly the myth of love, is the first, last, and sometimes the only refuge of uncomprehending humanity. What else makes our hearts beat so fast? What else makes us swoon with feeling? What else renders us so intensely alive and aching? The search for love—the sublime, the

nebulous, the consuming—remains sacred in a world that increasingly despises the sacred. When the heroic and the transcendental are but memories, when religious institutions fill up with bureaucrats and social scientists, when nobody believes there is a sky beyond the ceiling, then there seems no other escape from the prison of self than the abandon of love. With a gray age of spiritual deadness upon us, we love, or beg for love, or grieve for love. We have nothing higher to live for.

Indeed, many take it on faith that romantic love is the highest thing to live for. Popular literature, movies, art, and music tirelessly celebrate it as the one truth accessible to all. Such love obliterates reason, as poets have long sweetly lamented, and this is part of its charm and power, because we want to be swept up and spirited out of our calculating selves. “Want” is the key word, for in the spiritual void of modern life the wanting of love becomes increasingly indistinguishable from love itself. So powerful, so insistent is it that we seldom notice that the gratification is rare and the craving relentless. Love is mostly in anticipation; it is an agony of anticipation; it is an ache for a completion not found in the dreary round of mundane routine. That we never seem to possess it in its imagined fullness does not deter us. It hurts so bad that it must be good.

Practically nobody questions the supremacy of romantic love, which is good enough reason to do a little poking around the foundations of its pedestal. Who is entirely satisfied with the romance in his or her life? Who has found the sublime rapture previously imagined? And if one has actually found such a thing, does it last, or does it not rather change and decline from the peak of ecstasy? And if it declines what becomes of one’s purpose in life? If a purpose is achieved it is no longer a purpose; it can no longer guide or sustain us. Does one taste of nectar satisfy us forever?

When we tire of crass, material goals we may go searching for love instead of, say, religious insight, because love seems both more accessible and more urgent, and because so much of institutional religion in our time has degenerated into insipid humanism. Some claim refuge here but many more, longing for authentic and moving experience, turn to the vision of the “lover,” that source of wonder, joy, and transcendence, who, it is

thought, must be pursued and if captured perfected and if perfected then enjoyed forever—or until some other lover lights up the horizon. Love is its own justification, especially for the young who have no other inspiration or no career or responsibilities to dull themselves with as their plodding elders do. Longing bursts through this one channel that seems open, dizzily insisting that the life of unreflecting passion is the highest they can aspire to. They do not reason, but fall. Their elders do reason—obsessively—but fall all the same, thereby admitting that, with all their thought and experience, they find, when driven to extremity, they have nothing but love to live for.

This is not to say that such a surrender must be bad, only that it happens out of instinct and uninformed passion. Love is sweet and it is our nature to give way. But why do we worship it so ardently and why do we break off our search for fulfillment here?. Perhaps because we see no other gods. Yet if love is the highest thing to live for then this is a hopeless universe, because we should see in a calm hour that Cupid's arrows not only thrill us but make us bleed.

“Man Kills Estranged Lover, Then Self.” “Wife Stabs Husband in Domestic Quarrel.” “Love Triangle Leads To Shooting.” So read the headlines with depressing regularity. The stories behind these are only the most shocking of countless tales of passion, but they do forcefully suggest that romantic love is not always a blessing. One might object that hate, not love, spawns such tragedies, but where has such hate come from if not from a prior attachment now broken? We should know from experience how easily what we call love can turn to bitterness, jealousy, and malice, and though we protest that this is not the fault of love, we ought to notice that where one passion arises another is likely to follow. Passions are unreliable, volatile, dangerous, and a poor foundation for happiness.

Divorces, suicides, dissipation, violence, depravity, fanaticism, and other miseries great and small follow from passion, and yet passion is still, in the public mind, considered commendable, a mark of vigor and liveliness. Though everybody will admit that passion gone awry is dangerous, few realize that passion is by its nature likely to go awry.

Romantic love is a chancy passion that may result in the opposite of what is desired. It may have happy consequences, too—else it would not have so many votaries—but it raises the stakes in the gamble of life and makes us more vulnerable both to our own weaknesses and to unpredictable fortune. As most of us count the joys of successful love (however we define it) worth the pain involved in its pursuit, we must learn to step lightly and with intelligence. We believe, with some reason, that love can ennoble and redeem us, and call forth our purest energies, but we are slower to see that when the lamp of love flickers out, as it tragically tends to do, we might lose our way in a fearful labyrinth of suffering.

Granted that few will shun the pursuit of romance out of fear of unhappy consequences, what can be done to ameliorate those consequences? If we really have nothing higher to live for, nothing to fall back on, the lugubrious truth is that nothing much can be done to ameliorate them, given the volatile nature of human affections, so it would be wise to make sure there really is no superior, sustaining ideal before committing ourselves exclusively to the chase.

Buddhism, of course, teaches such an ideal, which is nothing less than deliverance from all sorrow, called Nibbāna. While worldly joys are mutable and fleeting, Nibbāna is established, sorrowless, stainless, and secure. While worldly pains are piercing, unpredictable, and unavoidable, Nibbāna is altogether free from pain. It is the end of suffering, the supreme refuge, the ultimate emancipation. The Buddha himself applied many terms of praise to it while recognizing their essential inadequacy. Nibbāna cannot be grasped by language or concept, but it can be known and realized by one who makes the right efforts. This is a critical point.

Nibbāna is not something that happens to us through an external agency; rather it is something that we ourselves may achieve. The Buddha certainly never would have troubled himself to teach had he not understood that his own realization was not fortuitous but rightly won and that those who followed his instructions could win realization for themselves. That understanding, passed down, has sustained the

Buddhist religion to the present day. The diligent are not powerless. Suffering can be overcome.

Still, knowing ourselves to be sunk in confusion and beset by myriad defilements, we might regard Nibbāna as too remote to do us much good here and now. We persist in seeing an unbridgeable chasm between saints and ordinary people like ourselves. We think practically everybody is like us (or worse) while maybe there are one or two genuine saints in the world, they presumably having just been born in that condition or with the exceptional good luck to get themselves elevated—who knows how? Yet the human condition is not, according to Buddhism, a fixed sentence to this or that level of wisdom and virtue. Beings are living at all stages of attainment, and they do not stay in the same place. They rise through their own good efforts, and decline through their own negligence in the endless action and reaction of intentional deeds (kamma) and results of deeds (kamma-vipāka).

The Buddha did not teach the Dhamma for the entertainment of those already perfected; he taught it for the benefit of fallible people like us who were struggling to avoid pain and make sense of the world. Even to those who came to him with no intention to scale high spiritual summits he imparted the progressive training of giving, morality and mental development. Why? Because there is always scope for improvement and because the human alternatives are not limited to holy wisdom or cloddish ignorance. Suffering lessens and happiness increases when we make an effort to follow the Noble Eightfold Path, whatever our present condition.

In the classic formula, the Dhamma is “directly visible, timeless, calling one to come and see, leading onwards, to be personally realized by the wise.” Perhaps we cannot see Nibbāna resplendent on the horizon, but we can certainly make out the ground beneath our feet; we can know when we draw a joyful breath or put behind us an old sorrow or refrain from a vicious act or compose an agitated mind. The Dhamma confers benefits here and now as well as in the future. Is there not satisfaction in performing a good deed with a clear mind? Is there not uplift in a moment

of quiet contemplation saved from the tumult of the day? The Dhamma lightens our burdens in the present and gives us grounds for hope.

What then does this have to do with the problems of love? Simply this. The Dhamma puts the delights and torments of love into perspective, so that we can break the illusion of love as the highest of aspirations and most essential of desires. Henry Thoreau wrote (when young): “The only remedy for love is to love more.” We might amend this to say: The only remedy for love is to love better. The understanding and the practice of the Dhamma do not destroy our capacity to love or enjoy love—far from it. The Dhamma purges the grasping, selfish qualities from our love and makes it purer and nobler.

As we come to understand through personal experience the rightness and goodness of the path of Dhamma, we may discover—slowly or suddenly—that the consuming passions we previously thought to be the only reasons for our existence are really not so, and that something of wondrous value overarches them—indistinct as yet but flashing out now and again from the clouds of possibility. What do our heaving emotions matter compared with that? When we lean hard, out of passion, we will fall hard—such is the nature of attachment. But when we do not lean, when instead we stand upright with an eye to the heights, then the love we bestow flows out of us without weakening us, like a superabundance of vigor. This is *mettā*—loving-kindness devoid of selfishness. It becomes purer to the extent we realize it is not the purest; it becomes happier to the extent we realize it is not the happiest. *Nibbāna* surpasses all.

If, through our own ripening knowledge, we appreciate that our ultimate and highest purpose should be *Nibbāna*, the absolute end of sorrow, then all goals beneath that are cast in a new light. When we have something to live for that is higher than fame, honor, friendship, or health—higher even than love—we can never be utterly impoverished or ruined. We are in fact in a much better position to enjoy whatever may be achieved in worldly life, because we no longer depend solely on changeable circumstances for our happiness.

Love cools, friendships wane, calamities carry off the good and the beautiful. Who can deny it? If we are to overcome despair and grief we must not invest ourselves obsessively in what is perishable. We need to keep our minds, and consequently our actions, as free as possible from craving and attendant defilements like covetousness and possessiveness:

Our actions are all led by the mind;
mind is their master, mind is their maker.
If one acts or speaks with a defiled state of mind,
then suffering follows like the cart-wheel
that follows the foot of the ox.

Our actions are all led by the mind;
mind is their master, mind is their maker.
If one acts or speaks with a pure state of mind,
then happiness follows like a shadow
that remains behind without departing.

— Dhammapada vv. 1, 2

While nobody can cut off craving simply by an act of will, we can certainly loosen its frightful grip on us by following the path and paying attention to the ultimate deliverance that shines at its end.

Love is never the poorer for being accompanied by wisdom. It is not harmed by being deprived of a crown. The agonies we endure and inflict in the name of love come from making love bear too heavy a weight. While we are in the world and engaged in the life of a householder we will naturally form attachments to family, job, friends, and lovers, but the suffering produced from these attachments will vary according to our wisdom and maturity. If we see nothing higher at all and abandon ourselves to the lottery of gaining and losing, we will surely suffer great pain, but if we keep the ideals of the Dhamma before us we will gain a measure of insulation against worldly inclemencies.

According to Buddhism, everything that has the nature of arising has the nature of ceasing, so it is well to place our greatest faith in Nibbāna, which, being beyond all concepts and limits, does not “arise,” and thus

does not fluctuate with the teetering universe. An independent mind, intent on deliverance, is not a cold, unfeeling mind, but a mind whose love is uncalculated, beneficent, free—and empty of the furious I want of ego. If we don't live for love we won't die for it either. If the windows of our mind are open to the streaming light of Dhamma then that light will bathe our thoughts and actions and distinguish the skillful from the foolish.

Even without understanding of the Dhamma most of us will distinguish in theory between love and infatuation. We think of infatuation as capricious, irresponsible, and shallow, and true love as mature, serious, and steady—though in practice it is hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. At least we recognize some advantage to clear sight and reflection, and this recognition grows sharper with actual experience of the Dhamma. We become less likely to throw ourselves at the feet of the adored object and more likely to stand erect, honest, and mindful, ready to meet our fortune with bravery. To a world that knows nothing loftier than the convulsions of craving, this may seem a loss, but to one who truly experiences the refreshment of wisdom there comes no narrowness but rather a loosening of the bonds of fear and selfishness. One can love without compulsion, out of free will. How gratifying when affection is given, or received, without a bill for services rendered!

Even under promising circumstances there is no guarantee that love will be returned in equal measure, or that it will last long, or that it will provide unalloyed joy. When we depend on it entirely for our happiness we must dwell in the shadow of pain, however bright our amorous interludes. What if we should lose our heart's support tomorrow? We're okay as long as we have each other, we assure ourselves dreamily. But we will not have each other long. Quarrels, time, distance, changes, or finally death dissolve all unions of friends, lovers, and relatives, plunging the unwary into despair and meaninglessness; and if we have no wisdom we too may go creeping about the lonely streets with our eyes staring hungrily into other eyes and seeing the same hunger there.

But in the way of the Buddha there is relief from distress and exile. In wisdom there is security. Because love is fragile and temporary it cannot protect us forever, but if we relax our grip it may bloom even better, allowing us to give and receive without encumbrance, frenzy, or fear, offering to each other our strength instead of our weakness.

In a sense the practice of Dhamma is like gradually filling the abyss of ignorance with knowledge until that terrible vacuum is appeased and neutralized and the heart no more cries for unknown succor. The perfected one, clinging to nothing here or hereafter, asks nothing and requires nothing, so he is wholly free. His loving-kindness is just the overmeasure, the overflowing of his goodness quite purified of the need, the visceral wanting and the vacillation of ordinary attachment.

While we cannot all at once purify our sentiments of their dross, we can raise the aim of our thought and conduct, and reflect on—indeed, contemplate—the virtues of the Buddha and the noble ones who are free from taint. Their achievement is an image to set before our inner eye, something higher to live for, within and beyond the motions of our conventional life. No good thing prospers in ignorance. The more we understand this flawed universe the more skillfully we can live, and the happier we will be. We love best when we do not love out of desperation.



About the Author

Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano (Leonard Price) is an American Buddhist monk from Louisville, Kentucky. In lay life a writer and an actor, he was ordained as a Buddhist monk at Wat Mahadhatu in Bangkok in early 1987. He has spent time in Thailand and Sri Lanka, and currently resides in the United States.

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