

Week 8 – Open to Love

So far we have talked about anger, attachment, developing equanimity, compassion and happiness. This week we are going to talk about the most powerful force in the Universe, and that is Love. Love makes the impossible, possible, and the unbearable, bearable. But love is scary, and for most of us, we spend a good amount of our lives avoiding it while decrying our lack of it.

This week we are going to look at meditations on Love. In this we are leaving any hint of Vedic traditions, and diving headfirst into Christian, specifically Carmelite, spirituality. Now in venturing into this we need to say that here we see a difference between theistic (God-centred) and non-theistic belief systems. Christians argue that God is the origin and source of Love – in fact the bible is absolutely full of reference to God as the source of love

1 John 4:7-12

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

It is perhaps not helpful that in English we only have this one word 'Love'. The ancient Greeks gave us eight types:

Eros – erotic love. Considered dangerous by the Greeks as it means a loss of control.

Philia – affection – what we call 'friendship'

Agape – selfless universal love

Storge – love between family members

Mania – obsessive love

Ludus – playful love – like the infatuation of young lovers

Pragma – Love built on commitment, built over time and matured, showing patience and tolerance

Philautia – Self-love. The Greeks understood that in order to care for others, we must first learn to care for ourselves. As Aristotle said "All friendly feelings for others are an extension of a man's feelings for himself."

In Carmelite spirituality the ultimate blessing is 'mystical union' – quite literally the direct experience of God's love. So they use concepts of romantic and erotic love, to unlock our own inner wellspring of love. It is a very systematic and guided process, designed for more monastic circumstances, but we can have a little taste of the process. Similarly to what we have discussed in this course the first stages of this path are based on identifying and removing barriers to union with God – our own imperfections, which we need to address honestly. There are five stages of this path before she starts to explicitly address spiritual union. In the sixth stage, this union is experienced fleetingly, which makes it hard to bear – is the same way that young lovers find separation unbearable. The seventh, and final stage, is when this sense of union stabilised and is constant. This is the stage of 'spiritual bliss'. The language she uses is robust and to most post-reformation protestants a bit over-the-top.

She advises us that while few of us have a continuing experience of god's love, we all have love for family and those dear to us. She advises to extend that feeling into prayer – that in

pray we should both pray to and about something, but at the same time develop this positive feeling of love. As she says “Pray a little, but Love a lot”.

So what use is this for us? We can't drop everything and live in a monastery. This is how I think of it:

1. Love is more powerful than hate or fear or any negative emotion. Throughout history 'Love for others' i.e. Altruism has overcome all sorts of Evil and negativity. We should examine this idea and satisfy ourselves of its correctness.
2. We, however, have obscurations, emotional deficits and scars, that close doors to our hearts and make it difficult to really open ourselves to the possibility of Love. So we need to work on these, and one way to do this is to meditate on this point.
3. Love is not an intellectual exercise – it must be practiced and experienced. Our own experiences of Love provide a means of understanding the essence of Love. If we start here, and then expand this Love to the people around us, to the universe, we come closer to experiencing Agape.
4. To take a chance on Love opens ourselves, at the very least, to experiencing the loss of Love. We need to acknowledge this is intrinsic to Love, and decide that the potential benefits of Love outweighs the negative experience of losing Love.
5. Love (Agape) is extrinsic – it comes from outside. We amplify it, but we didn't originate it in our life. We can call the ultimate origin of this 'God' or 'The Universe' – they are words really, and this is not a theology or religion class. We need to understand that Love is fundamentally relational – we learnt it from our parents, friends, and lovers and we give love to others, in an eternal amplification system.
6. Love is Powerful. The Beatles were right when they said “All you need is Love”. So many of our problems as a society can be solved via skilful application and development of Love to the rest of humanity. In fact Christianity's entire moral philosophy is based on this idea.

MEDITATION

Part 1 By Bob Sharples

Don't meditate to fix yourself, to improve yourself, to redeem yourself; rather, do it as an act of love, of deep warm friendship to yourself. In this way there is no longer any need for the subtle aggression of self-improvement, for the endless guilt of not doing enough. It offers the possibility of an end to the ceaseless round of trying so hard that wraps so many people's lives in a knot. Instead there is now meditation as an act of love. How endlessly delightful and encouraging.

Part 2

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—
for your love is more delightful than wine.

³ Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes;
your name is like perfume poured out.
No wonder the young women love you!

⁴ Take me away with you—let us hurry!
Let the king bring me into his chambers.

Song of Songs is a strange book to find in the 'Bible', but has been consistently popular with spiritual seekers from the time it was written (Late 6th C BCE), through the middle ages, with the Puritans and to this day. Why?

Part 3

Consider: When I think about Love, what defence barriers do I throw up? Try to think of them? Ask yourself: Why do I do this? What is it about the experience of Love that I find difficult?

Part 4

If I could amplify the Love that I have in my life, what change could it make in my life, in terms of my immediate happiness?

If I can extend and amplify the Love that I experience, back to people and to strangers as well, what impact would this have?

If everyone did the same, what would happen? In terms of natural phenomenon, how does Love rate? For example would Universal Love be more powerful than drought or floods?

So what sort of Love 'Action Plan' might I consider?