

Question 27:

I have a difficult question: What is the difference between love and knowledge? When you fall in love with someone is it real love or is it actually suffering because the thoughts of that person is haunting you? What should people do when they feel this way?

*From Henrik Hagnell*

Answer:

Romantic love, one of life's most delightful experiences, can lead to a very wholesome spiritual partnership in which each partner supports, balances and nourishes the other in spiritual practice, and is a context for practicing compassion, tolerance, patience, selflessness, and many other good values.

However, the lustful and possessive aspects of romantic love create such a powerful and delusive force on the mind that it can cause an intelligent, disciplined person to make poor judgments, take undue risks and neglect duties, and may lead to jealousy, rage, and even self-destruction. If lust is too strong, the Buddha recommends the antidote of regularly contemplating the impurities and repulsiveness of the body (types of bodily tissues, fluids, and other components, and stages of bodily decay).

At the very least, romantic love causes obsessive thoughts - the mind dwells intensely and repeatedly on pleasant memories, hopes and plans, drawing the mind away from the present moment. Mindfulness in those circumstances is difficult, so the monastic life, for those who are suited to it, is recommended to purify the mind. But for the majority of us, who are not suited to monastic life, romantic love can be taken as a great opportunity to practice mindfulness and self-discipline in the face of such a powerful force. And, watching the course of the emotional thoughts as they gain and wane in strength, observing and labeling the types of thoughts that arise, can buffer the intensity and pain of the emotions.

You can contemplate the truths of dukkha (suffering, dissatisfaction, stress), anicca (impermanence) and anatma (selflessness) in the context of a romance. Such contemplation not only helps to develop insight, but can help you determine whether to continue the relationship.

With regard to dukkha, you can observe any experiences of worry, anxiety, disappointment, possessiveness, insecurity, frustration, or other negative emotions in connection with the love relationship. Even a relationship which is full of happiness includes the dissatisfaction of being apart from the beloved. And at times there is at least a slight shadow of fear of losing him or her through breakup or death. The Buddha teaches this in Chapter 16 of the Dhammapada, in warning his monks that affection leads to fear and grief. Affection is, of course, part of a normal balanced non-monastic life, and you can practice Buddhism in this context by being your own witness to the emotions involved with affection, so that you can control them, disciplining the mind.

Regarding anicca, you can observe the durations and fluctuations of feelings of happiness, noting your happiest moments and what caused them to arise and to fade away. Some of the happiest moments may be the anticipation of spending time with your partner. Remember that the

thrilling “honeymoon” phase is temporary, that at some point you both will see the weaknesses and flaws of each other, and disagreeable habits, irritability, criticism, impatience, or lack of reciprocation of your affection. Do you have the patience, tolerance, forbearance and understanding to continue a relationship when these are seen in the person? Can your relationship survive based on being best friends, rather than on the passion that initiates the relationship but that will subside over time?

As to *anatma*, explore your mind for exactly *what* about the person you love. Is it an illusion of an ideal person that you love, merely projected by your mind on a regular person with his or her share of flaws? Is it the wonderful form and sensory experiences of that form that attracts you, that is the object of your desire? What if your loved one, through terrible accident or illness, loses his or her attractive appearance, pleasant words, and pleasing fragrance - would that powerful love be maintained? Is it the person’s personality and mind that you love? The mind is a bundle of thoughts that changes constantly, albeit there are habits, memories, attachments, knowledge, skills, tendencies, etc. which have continuity in the mind. Are those mental continuities what attract you? Is it the person’s reactions to you, such as a smile, that you crave? Is it your own pleasant mental and sensual reactions to the person that you crave? Is it the interchange of energies, a pleasant flow and exchange of feeling, that you cling to? The feeling of romantic love, like the desire, clinging and craving that it is based on, is stimulated by the other person, as transmitted by your senses, but is generated from your own mind. If you have no desire in your own mind, then there is no attraction or attachment to the person, no romantic feeling.

This can be illustrated by the analogy of a dog chewing on a bone. The dog’s desire for nourishment causes him to chew vigorously on a bone, and he delights in the taste and feeling of the saliva and blood flowing from his own gums, thinking that it is the flesh and blood of another animal, but really he is just enjoying what is generated from his own body and mind.

The experience of romantic love, which even at its best is never fully satisfying for long, can also serve as a lesson that human life is ultimately unfulfilling and therefore it is worthwhile to seek the never-ending bliss of Nirvana.