



TRUE LOVE

A Practice for Awakening the Heart

THICH NHAT HANH

Translated by

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[*The Four Aspects of Love*](#)

ACCORDING TO BUDDHISM, THERE ARE four elements of true love.

The first is *maitri*, which can be translated as loving-kindness or benevolence.

Loving-kindness is not only the desire to make someone happy, to bring joy to a beloved person; it is the *ability* to bring joy and happiness to the person you love, because even if your intention is to love this person, your love might make him or her suffer.

Training is needed in order to love properly; and to be able to give happiness and joy, you must practice *deep looking* directed toward the person you love.

Because if you do not understand this person, you cannot love properly.

Understanding is the essence of love. If you cannot understand, you cannot love.

That is the message of the Buddha. If a husband, for example, does not understand his wife's deepest troubles, her deepest aspirations, if he does not understand her suffering, he will not be able to love her in the right way.

Without understanding, love is an impossible thing.

What must we do in order to understand a person? We must have time; we must practice looking deeply into this person. We must be there, attentive; we must observe, we must look deeply. And the fruit of this looking deeply is called understanding. Love is a true thing if it is made up of a substance called understanding.

The second element of true love is compassion, *karuna*. This is not only the desire to ease the pain of another person, but the *ability* to do so. You must practice deep looking in order to gain a good understanding of the nature of the suffering of this person, in order to be able to help him or her to change.

Knowledge and understanding are always at the root of the practice. The practice of understanding is the practice of meditation. To meditate is to look deeply into the heart of things.

The third element of true love is joy, *mudita*. If there is no joy in love, it is not true love. If you are suffering all the time, if you cry all the time, and if you make the person you love cry, this is not really love—it is even the opposite. If there is no joy in your love, you can be sure that it is not true love.

The fourth element is *upeksha*, equanimity or freedom. In true love, you attain freedom. When you love, you bring freedom to the person you love.

If the opposite is true, it is not true love. You must love in such a way that the person you love feels free, not only outside but also inside. “Dear one, do you have enough space in your heart and all around you?” This is an intelligent question for testing out whether your love is something real.

Love Is Being There

TO LOVE, IN THE CONTEXT OF BUDDHISM, IS above all to be there. But being there is not an easy thing. Some training is necessary, some practice. If you are not there, how can you love? Being there is very much an art, the art of meditation, because meditating is bringing your true presence to the here and now. The question that arises is: Do you have time to love?

I know a boy of twelve whose father asked him one day: “Son, what would you like for your birthday present?” The boy did not know how to answer his father, who was a very rich man, able to buy anything for his son. But the boy did not want anything except his father’s presence. Because the role the father played kept him very busy, he did not have time to devote to his wife and children. Being rich is an obstacle to loving. When you are rich, you want to continue to be rich, and so you end up devoting all your time, all your energy in your daily life, to staying rich. If this father were to understand what true love is, he would do whatever is necessary to find time for his son and his wife.

The most precious gift you can give to the one you love is your true presence.

What must we do to really be there? Those who have practiced Buddhist meditation know that meditating is above all being present: to yourself, to those you love, to life.

So I would propose a very simple practice to you, the practice of mindful breathing: “Breathing—I know that I am breathing in; breathing—I know that I am breathing out.” If you do that with a little concentration, then you will be able to really be there, because in our daily life our mind and our body are rarely together. Our body might be there, but our mind is somewhere else. Maybe you are lost in regrets about the past, maybe in

worries about the future, or else you are preoccupied with your plans, with anger or with jealousy. And so your mind is not really there with your body.

Between the mind and the body, there is something that can serve as a bridge.

The moment you begin to practice mindful breathing, your body and your mind begin to come together with one another. It takes only ten to twenty seconds to accomplish this miracle called oneness of body and mind. With mindful

breathing, you can bring body and mind together in the present moment, and every one of us can do it, even a child.

The Buddha left us an absolutely essential text, the *Anapanasati Sutta*, or *Discourse on the Practice of Mindful Breathing*. If you really want to practice Buddhist meditation, you must study this text.

If the father I was talking about had known that, he would have begun to breathe in and breathe out mindfully, and then one or two minutes later, he would have approached his son, he would have looked at him with a smile, and he would have said this: “My dear, I am here for you.” This is the greatest gift you can give to someone you love.

In Buddhism we talk about mantras. A mantra is a magic formula that, once it is uttered, can entirely change a situation, our mind, our body, or a person. But this magic formula must be spoken in a state of concentration, that is to say, a state in which body and mind are absolutely in a state of unity. What you say then, in this state of being, becomes a mantra.

So I am going to present to you a very effective mantra, not in Sanskrit or Tibetan, but in English: “Dear one, I am here for you.” Perhaps this evening you will try for a few minutes to practice mindful breathing in order to bring your body and mind together. You will approach the person you love and with this mindfulness, with this concentration, you will look into his or her eyes, and you will begin to utter this formula: “Dear one, I am really here for you.” You must say that with your body and with your mind at the same time, and then you will see the transformation.

Do you have enough time to love? Can you make sure that in your everyday

life you have a little time to love? We do not have much time together; we are too busy. In the morning while eating breakfast, we do not look at the person we love, we do not have enough time for it. We eat very quickly while thinking about other things, and sometimes we even hold a newspaper that hides the face of the person we love. In the evening when we come home, we are too tired to be able to look at the person we love.

We must bring about a revolution in our way of living our everyday lives, because our happiness, our lives, are within ourselves.

Recognizing the Presence of the Other

I WOULD NOW LIKE TO PRESENT A SECOND mantra to you. When you are really there, you have the ability to recognize the presence of the other. To be there is the first step, and recognizing the presence of the other is the second step. To love is to recognize; to be loved is to be recognized by the other. If you love someone and you continue to ignore his or her presence, this is not true love.

Perhaps your intention is not to ignore this person, but the way you act, look, and speak does not manifest the desire to recognize the presence of the other. When we are loved, we wish the other to recognize our presence, and this is a very important practice. You must do whatever is necessary to be able to do this: recognize the presence of the person you love several times each day.

To attain this goal, it is also necessary to practice oneness of body and mind.

Practice an inbreath and an outbreath three times, five times, seven times; then you approach this person, you look at him or her mindfully, with a smile, and you begin to say the second mantra: “Dear one, I know that you are here, and it makes me very happy.” If you practice in this way, with a lot of concentration and mindfulness, you will see that this person will open immediately, like a flower blossoming. To be loved is to be recognized, and

you can do that several times a day. It is not difficult at all, and it is a true meditation.

Whatever you do mindfully is meditation. When you touch a flower, you can touch it with your fingers, but better yet, you can touch it mindfully, with your full awareness. “Breathing in—I know that the flower is there; breathing out—I smile at the flower.” While you are practicing in this way, you are really there and at the same time, the flower is really there. If you are not really there, nothing is there. The sunset is something marvelous and so is the full moon, but since you are not really there, the sunset is not for you. From time to time, I let myself look at the full moon; I take a deep breath in and a deep breath out, and I practice: “I know you are there, and I am very glad about it.” I practice that with the full moon, with the cherry blossoms . . . We are surrounded by miracles, but we have to recognize them; otherwise there is no life.

The Buddha told us this: “The past is no longer there, the future is not here yet; there is only one moment in which life is available and that is the present moment.” To meditate is to bring body and mind back to the present moment so that you do not miss your appointment with life.

Albert Camus wrote a novel, *The Stranger*, in which his character, Meursault, is condemned to death. Three days before his execution, he is able for the first time in his life to touch the blue sky. He is in his cell, he is looking at the ceiling.

He discovers a square of blue sky appearing through the skylight. Strangely enough, a man forty years of age is able to see the blue sky for the first time. Of course, he had looked at the stars and the blue sky more than once before, but this time it was for real. We might not know how to touch the blue sky in such a profound way. The moment of awareness Camus describes is mindfulness: Suddenly you are able to touch life.

In Buddhism, the energy that helps us to touch life deeply is called *smṛti*, the energy of mindfulness. Everyone possesses a seed (*bija*) of this energy. If we practice mindful breathing, we can generate this energy.

When you breathe in, you recognize at that moment that this is an inbreath; when you breathe out, you are aware of the fact that this is an outbreath.

Recognizing what is there in the present moment is attention. That is the energy of mindfulness. So then, with this mantra, you are going to practice recognizing the presence of the person you love: “Dear one, I know that you are there and it makes me very happy.”

This is real meditation. In this particular meditation, all at once there is love, compassion, joy, and freedom—the four constituents of the true love of which the Buddha speaks.

Being There When Someone Is Suffering

THE THIRD MANTRA IS USED IN CIRCUMSTANCES in which the person you love is suffering. When you are living mindfully, you know what is happening in your situation in the present moment. Therefore it is easy for you to notice when the person you love is suffering. At such a time you go to him or her, with your body and mind unified, with concentration, and you utter the third mantra: “Dear one, I know that you are suffering, that is why I am here for you.” Because when we are suffering, we have a strong need for the presence of the person we love.

If we are suffering and the man or woman we love ignores us, then we suffer more. So what we can do—right away—is to manifest our true presence to the beloved person and say the mantra with all our mindfulness: “Dear one, I know that you are suffering, that is why I am here for you.” Even before you actually do something to help, the person you love is relieved. Your presence is a miracle, your understanding of his or her pain is a miracle, and you are able to offer this aspect of your love immediately.

Really try to be there, for yourself, for life, for the people that you love.

Recognize the presence of those who live in the same place as you and try to be there when one of them is suffering, because your presence is so precious for this person. In this way you will be practicing love twenty-four hours a day.