

Brother Vijayananda
What is Love?
Lake Shrine Temple
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Brother started off by sharing that it had been awhile, several months, since he'd given a talk at the Lake Shrine and it was nice to be there. Also, that he'd taken some time off and had also been on tour visiting some of the meditation centers in Australia, New Zealand and Thailand. That it was very interesting and inspiring to see how people all over the world are becoming more interested in meditation and the spiritual aspects or teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda. He went on to say that people take up meditation for a variety of different reasons. Some enjoy the health benefits because it helps to reduce stress and tension, other people just want a tool to help them relax and for others meditation helps them to focus, become centered, and improve their concentration so they can be more effective in meeting the challenges of daily life or engaging in sports or whatever. All these different purposes are good for meditation and they do enhance the quality of our lives but in the highest sense, the best and highest purpose of meditation, is to use it as tool for self-discovery. To explore the deeper recesses of our minds and consciousness and to find out who we really are. Are we just mortal, physical beings or is there more to it? By turning our attention within, going within, we are trying to realize our true identity.

There is that old fable about a king out hunting alone who stumbles, falls, hits his head and loses his memory. He forgets who he is because he is suffering from amnesia. He wandered around the forest for many days trying to rediscover who he really is and where his home is. After several days he comes to a lake. He kneels down to have a drink and sees his own reflection in the still clear waters of the lake. Upon seeing his own image, he remembers who he is. He recalls that he's a king and returns home.

Our situation is very similar. Like the king suffering from amnesia we have lost our memory. We have forgotten that we have a spiritual dimension to our nature and not just physical, limited mortal beings. Our greatest need, one might say, is to remember who and what we truly are...our spiritual identity. This is why meditation is so helpful to us because in the big picture of things, it helps us to remember who we really are.

When we meditate we calm the restless movements of our lives; still the ceaseless flow of thoughts in our minds and then the lake of our consciousness becomes still, becomes calm. In that inner stillness we are able to see the reflection of our soul, the spiritual essence of our nature. Jesus said: *“Be still and know that I am God.”*

Stillness is the altar of God. When we meditate and are able to feel that inner stillness we begin to perceive the essential nature of the soul; the qualities of love, joy, peace, calmness and so forth. The deeper we are able to go into that inner stillness, into that inner calmness, then the more profound is our realization of our true nature of those qualities of love and joy of the soul.

Paramahansa Yogananda said: *“Unending joy awaits the sincere truth seeker, who conscientiously meditates each day. Through the grace of God; through the blessings of the Masters and through your own devotional effort, you can achieve the state of divine joy experienced by all saints that have become established in the Lord; those who have become consciously aware of their soul union in Spirit.”* So this is what we are all really seeking...this contact with our soul inward. This joy that is within each one of us.

The subject this morning is entitled: “What is Love?” It is a somewhat difficult subject to speak about because we all know what love is or at least, we think we do and the difficulties primarily are when we try to define it. When we try to put the experience of love into words it doesn't really fully capture the actual experience. There is always something missing. The definition or description is incomplete. Just as we can't fully describe the flavor of a fruit in words; we have to taste the fruit in order to know its flavor. It is the same with the experience in love. We have to taste it; we have to experience it in order to really know what it is and what it feels like.

Because we've all had some experience of love at some point in our lives, we all know, to a certain degree, what love is. However, that doesn't mean that we know how to cultivate love; that we know how to purify or expand it until it reaches it's highest expression as Divine Love, the love of God.

The spark of Divine Love resides in the hearts of most people in the beginning of life but as we get older we tend to lose it because we don't quite know how to cultivate it. Part of the problem, Brother thinks, is because we use the word love pretty broadly, pretty casually, in our

society. If you ask most people they would say that it isn't really necessary to analyze what love is at all. They simply recognize it as a feeling of caring and of affection that they have for their family, their close relations, friends and so forth. This is fine as far as it goes but when true love is present it is something much, much more. It is a divine quality. It is something that transcends just mere human attachments or affection.

Paramahansa Yogananda said, *“The only way I can describe real love to you is to tell you its effect. If you could feel even only a particle of divine love, so great would be your joy, so overpowering, you could not contain it.”*

Joy is such a vital component or aspect of love because if we analyze it we find that the satisfaction, the fulfillment of love is not so much in the feeling itself but in the joy that feeling brings or elicits in us. Love gives us joy; it makes us happy...more joy, more happiness than anything else in the world. That is why it is such a powerful force, a powerful influence, in all of our lives. That is why we are so preoccupied with it as a culture. That is why so many books and poems are written about; so many songs are sung about it; and so many movies are made about it.

That is why we all seek it and need it so much because the joy of love nourishes us; it sustains us; it rejuvenates us and, in some cases, it even heals us. In its highest form, real love, divine love, brings us into the presence of God. The scriptures say that God's nature is ever-existing, ever-new joy and our nature as soul is the same. We are individualized existence, consciousness in joy. Happiness, joy, bliss, love are qualities that are already present within each one of us. They're essentially what we are, our soul nature.

Although, we may experience love or joy in conjunction with certain outer experiences, the joy itself is native to the soul. It is already present within us. It is not created by those experience. We can wake up in the morning walking on air, so to speak, feeling on top of the world for no apparent outer reason, or we may be sitting quietly in contemplation or perhaps in meditation, and joy can come bubbling up into our awareness from deep within ourselves without any outer stimulus, without any cause.

The truth is that joy expresses itself under certain conditions but it's not created by those outer conditions. If we fulfill a certain desire or fall in love or if we receive a million dollars or whatever it is, it is something of a

misnomer or a little bit inaccurate, to say that those things give us love or give us joy. It is more correct to say that they open a channel for the joy of the soul to come into our conscious awareness.

In human experiences certain events are usually required to bring forth joy but the joy itself is the perennial native state of the soul that we all are. In the universal or macrocosmic sense, love is the divine power of attraction present in all creation. That permanence that unites, that brings together. In the grand scheme of things it's opposed by the force of repulsion, which is the outgoing cosmic energy that materializes creation out of the cosmic consciousness of God. The repulsive force keeps all things manifested. Its roll is to differentiate, to separate, to disharmonies but because the attractive force of love is more powerful, all things in creation eventually harmonize and go back to God. Those who live in tune with the attractive force of love, achieve harmony with all nature and their fellow beings. Men are attracted to the blissful reunion with God.

Anyone who has ever fallen in love has experienced this attractive power of love. Two people who deeply love each other want to be together and the pull can be very strong, even painful, if they're separated, isn't it? In a very real sense it seems that love creates this invisible tie that link us together whenever we're apart. In some cases, if love is strong enough, by the power of attraction, people who are separated by life's circumstances or events, that love has the potential to bring them back together again.

Brother related a story that he read many years ago about a woman in New York City who got on the subway one evening after dark and the car she entered was virtually empty; only one or two other people in the car. She sat in her seat and the train moved on. At the next stop only one man got on and after looking around decided to sit in the seat adjacent to her. In her mind it seemed rather odd since he had the whole car to choose from but she didn't say anything. The train moved on and at the next stop, again, only one person, a middle-aged woman, entered that particular car. She, too, looked around and decided to sit right next to the man in the almost empty car. The first woman wondered what's going on but, again, didn't say anything. The train moved on and after a while she noticed that the woman was staring at the man. The man was trying to read a newspaper and the woman was kind of looking over his shoulder reading.

Then she started talking to him, almost grilling him, like where he was from originally? What was his profession? What city did he live in? Things like that. The man was trying to read the newspaper and he only half answered her questions. He was not giving her his undivided attention. After a few more questions the lady said: "Look at me! Look at me! Don't you recognize me?" Well, it turned out they were husband and wife! They had lived in Europe during World War II; each had been 'captured' and taken to different concentration camps; each had survived the war. They had looked for each other after the war but were not being able to find one another, thinking the other was dead.

They separately immigrated to America. They separately settled in New York City and each was attracted that particular subway, that car, on that particular evening, at a time when the car was virtually empty. [Brother interjected saying from experience that New York subways can be very crowded and that it's almost impossible to see other people.] Each decided to sit in those particular seats next to other. This was after nine years of not seeing one another and thinking the other had not survived the war. The story created somewhat of a sensation in the papers, in the media, at the time because it was so unusual. The first woman said that her role was just to serve as a kind of a witness that this really did happen, this amazing so-called coincidence.

It is really a wonderful example of the attractive power of love. Love is not just a mere feeling or emotion. It is not just about glands and hormones; that's infatuation. Real love is a tangible power, a tangible force, like magnetism, and has the ability to bring people together. As human beings we all have a great deal of conscious self-determination in expressing our love, meaning that in the various relationships we have with one another we express love in different ways, don't we?

There is the love expressed between spouses, between husband and wife; the love expressed between parent and child; the love that we express between siblings; and, of course, the love that we express as friends in friendship. Paramahansa Yogananda would say that in all of our relationships, the greatest expression of love is between two friends because there is no sense of obligation; there is no requirement. We are more or less born into our families and it is almost instinctive, natural, for us to love our family but we freely choose our friends. So it is the highest expression of friendship. There is no thought of personal gain; there is no thought of self. It is not really influenced by physical attraction either. When

we have pure friendship, we want the best for the other person. We want their highest good; we just want them to be happy. As someone said: "In real love you want the other person's good. In romantic love you want the other person." There is a real difference there.

Another example of the power of love is a story that took place during one of the wars. A young soldier went up to his commanding officer asking for permission to go out into no man's land, the area between the two armies, to look for his friend who was missing. The commander sympathized with the young man and told him he could go but that it was not worth it and that his friend had most likely been killed and in the process you may be killed himself. The young man decided to go anyway, he didn't hesitate. He went out and after a few hours he came back carrying his friend. The commander goes over and very tenderly looked over at the soldier and said: "I told you it wasn't worth it. Your friend is dead and now you yourself are mortally wounded." The young soldier looked at him and said: "No! It was worth it because when I reached him he was still alive. With his last words he squeezed my hand and said: 'I knew you would come.'"

That's the unconditional love of pure friendship. Love that is freely given without thought of personal gain or anything. The story is moving because it displays that nobility of character, that nobility of heart. It is really a spiritual quality and it is also characteristic of the unconditional love that God gives to each one of us. No matter how much we have gone astray; no matter how naughty or bad we think we are, God's love is unconditional and seeks us out trying to draw us back to him. As Christ said to his disciples: "*Greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his life for a friend.*" This is the love of a pure friendship.

Paramahansa Yogananda said: "*Love cannot be had for the asking. It comes only as a gift from the heart of another. Be certain of your feelings before you say to anyone, 'I love you.'* Once you give your love it must be forever, not because you want to be near that person but because you want perfection for that soul. To wish for perfection for the loved one and to feel pure joy in thinking of that soul is divine love and that is the love of true friendship."

Of course, this ideal of divine love and pure friendship, is ideally the basis or essential in any marriage relationship if it is to be successful and happy. If a relationship between spouses is based on true friendship it has the potential to become one of the greatest expressions of human love.

However, as we know, all too often, love is supplanted by physical attraction. When physical attraction or other factors become supreme or the main primary aspect of a relationship, usually what happens is that love declines, it decreases, it flies out the window. In its place comes over familiarity, discourtesy, sarcasm, possessiveness and all these qualities that can not only destroy a friendship but an ideal marriage.

Paramahansa Yogananda said: *“Sex and love are as far apart as the sun and moon. It is only when the transmuting quality of true love is uppermost in a relationship, that sex becomes a means of expressing it.”*

A man and a woman were corresponding with each other for months. Eventually, through their correspondence, they fell in love. Finally they decided the time had come to meet. So they arranged that he would fly into the city where she was living and she would be wearing a green hat, a green scarf and a green carnation. [Brother interjected that maybe if they were Irish.] The man arrived and looked around for the woman. He noticed a woman standing to the side wearing these things and he's disappointed because she's very plain, even homely looking. His first reaction, his first thought, was to get right back on the plane and go back home. Then he reminded himself that this was the person from whom he'd received beautiful expressions and noble thoughts and qualities. So he went over and introduced himself. The woman standing there looked at him and said: “Look! I don't know what this is all about but the lady over there gave me five dollars to wear these things.”

So we can guess. The man turned around to see the most gorgeous, beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He went to her and they talk. She said, “I just wanted to know that you loved me for who I am and not for my appearance but for the true love that comes from within, from the heart.”

This is what we all want. This is what we all hope for; that we are loved, we are valued, not for our appearance or what we can do for another person or for what we own, but for who we are; these qualities that we have within that we express without. It is only when two people feel an unconditional attraction for one another and are ready to sacrifice for one another based on a relationship of true friendship, then they are truly in love and ready for marriage.

Ultimately, we should not limit our love and friendship to those who are near and dear to us; our small circle of family and friends. We have to learn to expand our love to include all people, to include all creation, all creatures, really.

Jesus said: *“A new commandment I give you, that you love one another.”* From Lord Krishna the same thing in a way. He said: *“The best type of yogi is he feels for others, who has compassion and love for people.”* So what we all need to do is expand the circle of our love from the limited sphere of those that we are related to and those we know, to include all. Love is sorely lacking in the world and it is the panacea for many of the problems that we see in the world today. We can only give love outwardly if we feel it within our hearts first, isn't it?

This is why in Self-Realization Fellowship we say that meditation is so helpful because when we meditate love grows. As was said in the beginning, if we turn our consciousness within we are able to feel our soul...the qualities of love and joy that are within us and it becomes very easy to express that joy and love outwardly. Most people in life look for that one perfect love...their soul mate...in another person. Even though this is a great expression of love, the greatest love we can know is in communion with God in meditation. We might say that God is the ultimate soul because that perfection, that perfect love we are all seeking, can only be found, ultimately, in God. The soul within each one of us is seeking love; is seeking that perfect love, because it knows that it's connection is with divine love.

God is the lover and our souls are the beloved and when the soul meets the Greatest Lover of the universe the eternal romance begins. Of course, this is the testimony of all the saints who have known communion with God. That is the greatest form of love that we can know and experience.

So what is love in the last analyzes? God is love; love is God. It is not just a noble sentiment of the heart; it is not just a poetic expression. It a real statement or aphorism of truth about the nature of life. Whenever we have the feeling of genuine love in our hearts, then we are actually in the presence of God. We should remind ourselves of that; it is a very sacred, special experience, not just a human emotion.

It doesn't matter what religion a person belongs to; it doesn't matter what their station in life may be. Anyone who takes the time to cultivate love as the ruling principle of life will find their state of inner realization constantly growing and, also, their happiness and joy steadily increasing because this is the law, the basic universal principle.

“God is love and love is the panacea for human suffering. There is nothing greater than love. God’s quality of attraction and unity that is manifest in the soul of every being. This love when expressed under all circumstances, in family, social and national life, expands to embrace the whole world. Such universal love is the pure love of God.”