



true love and real life

A gift for you from

Lion's Roar

BUDDHIST WISDOM *for* OUR TIME

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True Love Is Change

By Andrea Miller

OUTSIDE, through the open church doors, I could see our guests, peering in at us. They were dressed in the richly embroidered velvet costume of Adán's region of Mexico and they looked, I thought, like a gorgeous dream I might have after spending a day with peacocks. I glanced at Adán—the smart, sexy man who was now my husband—and I squeezed his arm. Then we stepped across the threshold and into the tropical twilight. Guests threw flower petals at us, blew bubbles.

This moment at our wedding was, for me, one of those rare moments that are as close to perfect as real life will ever allow. Yet it was over in such a quick heartbeat that it made me remember something that my great-aunt said to me after the death of her husband. “We were married for fifty years,” she said. “That sounds like a long time, but it went by faster than you could ever imagine.”

The truth is, I don't really want to imagine the speed with which all my most perfect moments are going to fly away. I don't want to think about how, like my aunt, I will one day lose my husband to death, either mine or his. And I don't want to dwell on what Siddhartha, the future Buddha, learned when he stepped outside his idyllic palace and saw a corpse: death is not just something for Siddhartha and his wife, for my aunt and her husband, for Adán and me. Death, rather, waits for all of us.

And death, unfortunately, is not just physical; relationships frequently die even while both parties keep on breathing. In fact, I find the divorce statistics today rather daunting. I don't want a broken home for us and, to guard against it, I try not to fall prey to romantic illusion. I remind myself regularly that nothing stays the same and that the intense passion that my husband and I currently share won't last—cannot last, biologically. To stay strong as a couple, we will need to gradually replace our ardor with a mellow kind of love. So, for me, our relationship is a bittersweet catch-22. The time we spend together is sadly never long enough, and if we ever feel like it is long enough, that will be even sadder.

Yet I don't mean to put anyone off hearts and flowers or falling headlong in love. On the contrary, I am very much with Norman Fischer,

who in this booklet reminds us that love—the only thing in harmony with change—is a miracle. Indeed, true love is change. It is, every day, seeing the preciousness of the beloved and of the time we have together. That time is brief, as life is brief. And the only adequate response to impermanence is to love as fully as we can in the little time that we have. Life and loved ones, after all, are all the more precious because we can't hold on to them forever.

Another reason to give ourselves over to relationships—to the threat of hearts broken and the daily grind of bickering over whose turn it is to vacuum—is that it offers the opportunity to learn who we are and to grow. Relationship, in fact, can be the ground upon which we place our spiritual practice. In her interview here, Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, asks: “Where better to hone patience, tolerance, kindness, and passion than with a person who knows you well enough to push your buttons?”

And if we need another reason to allow ourselves to engage with others it would have to be that relationships, in one form or another, are unavoidable anyway. In this, Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche is clear: “We don't have independent existence. We cannot exist without depending on others.”

So I am surrendering to the possibility that my marriage might break my heart and I am celebrating the inevitability that, come what may, it will help me grow as a person. Sometimes the largeness and uncertainty of it all scares me, but I think it is natural to be scared. And, at any rate, I feel a lot of hope, too.

A few hours before our 7 p.m. wedding, Adán and I went to the church to see if we needed to buy flowers, or if someone else—for their own ceremony—had already decorated. And someone had. The altar was, in fact, a sea of golden petals. It wasn't until a few days later that I learned why all the flowers were the same sunny color: a couple celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary had, that morning, held a commemorative ceremony in the church.

I take all those yellow blooms as a good omen—an omen that Adán and I will also one day celebrate our golden anniversary. And maybe it will go by in a flash, but in this transient world, fifty years beside the person I love would be a wonderful thing. ♦

ANDREA MILLER is Deputy Editor of *Lion's Roar*



To Have and To Hold

In a world of impermanence, says Norman Fischer, love can be the one constant.

ALL THINGS ARE IMPERMANENT, created fresh each moment, and then gone. This being so, the miracle of love between two people, or within a family, is something precious and brief. In fact any human relationship is brief. We are together for a while and then inevitably we part. To love someone truly is to recognize this every day, to see the preciousness of the beloved and of the time we have together, to renounce any clinging need for or dependency on the other, and to make the effort to open our hands, so that instead of holding on we are nurturing and supporting.

People often wonder how it is possible, in the face of impermanence, to make a commitment to a relationship. It certainly seems logical that we either deny impermanence and assert our undying vow, or accept it and move on as soon as things change. But it is exactly impermanence that inspires commitment. Exactly because things always change, and we cannot prevent that, we give rise to a vow to remain faithful to love, because love is the only thing that is in harmony with change. Love is change; it is the movement and color of the world. Love is a feeling of constancy, openness, and appreciation for the wonder of the world, a feeling that we can be true to, no matter what circumstances may bring.

Although this may sound impossibly idealistic, I believe it is quite practical. To respect the beloved, to give and ask for nothing in return, in faith that what we ourselves need will be provided without our insisting on it too much, may seem like the work of a saint, but I do not think there is any other way. In order to do it we will have to condition our ego, soften its edges, so that it becomes pliable and fearless enough to be open to what comes, and to be permissive, in the best sense of that word, for another. This is the basic spiritual practice.

It seems to me that for most of us, the journey of loving relation-

ship, though quite difficult, is our best chance to develop *bodhicitta*. In Mahayana Buddhism, this seemingly impossible and unlimited aspiration for the enlightenment of all is the heart of the practice, the beginning and end of it. And it seems only logical that in order to develop a love that big and thorough, it is good if we have somewhere to start, someone to practice on. To really love your lover, husband, wife, or child, taking that on as the most challenging and worthwhile of life's projects, is a noble thing and it is possible. We know it is possible because we have all felt the compelling force of love at one time or another, even if we have forgotten it. ♦

A well-known poet and Zen teacher, NORMAN FISCHER is the founder and spiritual director of the Everyday Zen Foundation, an organization dedicated to adapting Zen Buddhist teachings to Western culture. He is also a senior dharma teacher at the San Francisco Zen Center, where has served as co-abbot from 1995-2000. He has written numerous books including, *Sailing Home: Using Homer's Odyssey to Navigate Life's Perils and Pitfalls*.

Eat, Pray, Love—and Marry

Elizabeth Gilbert, the best-selling author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, has made the transition from a dreamy romance in Bali to a committed relationship in New Jersey. She talks with *Lion's Roar* about passion and the spiritual path.

What's the greatest joy of marriage?

It's being known so intimately and being given the option to love and be loved with very few conditions. You're not auditioning, which is how I felt about dating. I remember something my husband said to me early on. We were sitting at dinner eating pizza and I had gorged myself. There was one piece left and I was wavering. I said, "God, I really shouldn't have this because it's not good for me. I don't want to put on weight." He looked at me and said, "I've got a really good idea. Why don't you just be yourself?" It was such a call of liberation to discover there was somebody with whom I could—without consequences—be myself.

What's the most difficult aspect of marriage?

Any thought you have going into marriage that you're not going to sacrifice something is ignorant. Depending on who you are, different things might feel painful. I have a friend who has been happily married for twenty years. She's a terrific mom and she loves this guy but she feels this amputation, as she calls it, of monogamy. She feels there's a part of her that died with the marriage, which isn't to say they don't have a sexual life together. There are just limits on what that is and what that can be. She's willing to make the sacrifice, but it hurts.

Monogamy doesn't strike me as problematic. I'm more likely to think about the loss of independence, which isn't to say I don't have a really supportive and encouraging husband. There are simply restrictions I place on my comings and goings because I'm married—I'm not going to travel around the world by myself for a year—and there are moments when I feel that loss. Yet you can't expect to get anything without giving something up. It's the beginning of maturity to understand that.



How do you view sex?

Many energy sources, including sex and money, are neither good nor bad. They're tofu—they take on whatever flavor you add to them. The important thing to remember is to not make a judgment as to whether sex is good or bad, but to know it's extremely powerful.

How important do you think sex is in a relationship?

It's really important to me. But one dangerous expectation people frequently have going into marriage is that their sex life after twenty years should be what it was after twenty days. That's a huge burden to put on two people. I had somebody ask me recently, "Do you still have hot, animalistic sex with your husband?" And I said, "In New Jersey, animal sex is illegal!" But the bigger point is I won't inflict on him the requirement that he provide that for decades on end. That said, if passion is gone completely, that's a problem, unless it isn't. I have a friend who married a man fifteen years younger than her and they've been married for thirty-five years now. Though it started off as this enormously passionate sexual relationship, she says, "We've kind of dried up in that way, but we've expanded in others." That's fine, as long as it's okay with both parties. The problem is when somebody is filled with longing and the other person has no desire left.

How important is it for a couple to be on the same spiritual path?

It's probably better than them being on radically different spiritual paths. However, I've seen successful marriages where one member of the couple is taking spirituality more seriously. My own husband is supportively uninterested in my spiritual path. If I were younger and had an urge to merge, I doubt that we would have a life together, since he isn't interested in going on meditation retreats. But he doesn't have to be me and, in fact, it's better that he isn't, because it provides a necessary balance. My spiritual growth is my own responsibility. If I told him I had to get up every day at four o'clock and meditate, he wouldn't stop me. I just prefer to stay in bed. That's not something he's doing to me.

In what way is marriage a spiritual union?

Where better to hone patience, tolerance, kindness, and passion than with a person who knows you well enough to push your buttons? That's something that goes missing in spiritual teachings, which call into question whether you can become an enlightened person while in a relationship. Marriage can pull you away from your higher focus, but it can also be the ground upon which to place your spiritual practice. ♦

Love in the Time of Annoyance

Sylvia Boorstein on finding steadfast love—even when your spouse of fifty-four years gets on your nerves.

IT'S VERY EASY TO GET ANNOYED, particularly with our loved ones. I've been married to Seymour for fifty-four years and in a close relationship with him for fifty-seven. Sometimes he makes a thoughtless remark, hurts my feelings, doesn't know he did it, and barrels right on. (Usually over breakfast.)

I, if I am not careful, take umbrage. I feel bad. I try to radiate out a vibe that lets him know what's happened, but mostly he doesn't notice. He just keeps on saying what he's

saying or doing what he's doing. So, I think to myself, "I'm not going to say anything. As a matter of fact, I'll go work in my study now. He'll figure it out." Time passes, but he doesn't figure it out. I have a thought like, "Just for that, I won't cook that dinner I've promised."

At the point where my mind catches on to the fact that it's hatching revenge, it wakes itself up. I learn (yet again!) how a vengeful mind makes a pained mind worse. I remember that Seymour loves me and simply said a ridiculous thing because he wasn't paying attention. (After all, fifty-seven years is a long time to be together. Of course we love each other!) Everything else is editorial chatter. I've manufactured a fable and then frightened myself with it.

I often imagine an amendment to the Buddha's eightfold path, for modern times. It would be the ninefold path, and the ninth practice would be wise relationship. Its principal practice would be *metta*, loving-kindness. I think of metta practice as being a

form of mindfulness, attention to the climate of the mind. It requires telling oneself the truth of what is really happening.

Here is a powerful variation on metta practice that I do to help me stay present to the whole of my experience in an openhearted way. I say a two-sentence intention to myself,



using my breath as a steadier. Inhaling, I say, “May I meet this moment fully,” and exhaling I say, “May I meet it as a friend.” Try that, and see how it feels. When I meet the moment fully, in relationship, as a friend, I stop creating confusing fables and act wisely.

Buddhism is very optimistic about the human capacity for love, and the potential of what we can do with love. We can develop a love that is steadfast and universal. We develop it not because we force ourselves to love so fully. Rather, we discover that loving unconditionally is the greatest source of joy, and that we suffer over any hesitation to love, such as, “I would really love you if you would just do your share of the cooking.”

Buddhism tells us that in spite of all the circumstances we face, we could have steadfast love for all beings. For most meditators I know, realizing how fraught with challenge and suffering everyone’s life is automatically inclines their minds in the direction of love.

The late Nyanaponika Thera, a much-revered teacher, wrote about a “love that embraces all human beings, knowing well that we are all wayfarers through this round of existence and that we all experience the same laws of suffering.”

This is such a moving phrase, because if I can see that the person who has irritated me has, like me, very simple wants, then I can embrace the moment fully and as a friend. This person irritating me really just wants to get through this life without too much suffering. This person, like all people, suffers in the same ways I do: Things don’t happen the way they want. Things that are dear to them don’t last. Things keep changing. They are “wayfarers through this round of existence,” and they suffer just like I do. Whenever I remember this, even the people I think of instinctively as adversaries do not seem so distant.

The Buddha is quoted as saying, “Everything that is dear to me causes pain.” When I first heard that, many years ago, I thought it discouraged intimate relationships. I understand it differently now. Indeed, we take the risk of the pain when we let people become dear to us because lives are finite and affinities change and in close relationships there is always someone bereaved when the relationship ends. But relationships in which there is love support us in what otherwise would be an isolated journey through life. We learn how to love through intimate relationships, and with that capacity we are able to experience the joy of holding all people in careful, calm, warm goodwill.

At the breakfast table, this is what wise relationship requires me to say: “I just felt slighted when you said that. I’m sure it was an accident. Would you like to try again?” ♦

SYLVIA BOORSTEIN is a co-founding teacher at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and a practicing psychotherapist. She is the author of many best-selling books, including *Happiness Is an Inside Job* and *Funny, You Don’t Look Buddhist*.



Heart Connection

To be truly connected, there must be mutual joy and responsibility. Yet, explains Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, there must also be individual space.

Our so-called life, from the Buddhist point of view, is simply experience, and experience is relationship. Put simply, we don't have independent existence. We cannot exist without depending on others. When I go to the grocery store and buy an apple, I might feel very independent. I walk in, grab an apple, pay with my own money, and go home and eat by myself. But in fact I can only enjoy this apple because it is connected to so many people and conditions: the store owner, the shelf stockers, the truckers, the farmers, all the way back to the seed and the Earth. There's so much connection, all the time.

Of all of the relationships we have in this interdependent experience of ours, the most direct, most emotional, and most apt to bring great joy and suffering is a close, intimate relationship with another human being. We give it great, special prominence in our mind, but it helps to remember that it is the same as the apple. It's about interconnection, interdependence.

In our relationship with another, we often misunderstand how we are connected. We

may think we are two made into one, or we may think we are completely independent. My father taught me that a marriage or partnership, an intimate relationship with another human being, is like two rings coming together. You can illustrate it with your fingers. Make a ring with each hand, then join the rings together. There's a common space in the center. There is mutual responsibility, joy, and sharing, yet at the same time, we must understand there are also the two sides. There is not only the middle; individual space is also necessary.

If we try to overlap these two rings totally, we lose balance. There is a common bond, but there are also two individual mind streams. We must respect that and allow the other independence. The common space respects the individual space. We cannot overpower the other or make them just like us. The other not only has needs but also individual, habitual karmic habits that you cannot change. They need to initiate change themselves; you cannot forcibly change them. Buddhism teaches us that you cannot change someone's karma; not even Buddha can do that. He said, "I can only show you the path; to do it is totally up to you."

That's the basic principle in a relationship—we share. We share our wisdom, our knowledge, but it's up to the individual to make the choice. We must respect that. We must know that the other acts out of habit pattern, just as we do. Just as we cannot be forcibly changed from the outside, so too with them.

Problems begin when we lose the balance that comes from understanding the interplay of connection and separateness. We lose the sense of mindfulness when we lose the basic balance of the selfless, egoless teaching, and become selfish, ego-centered, or even ego-maniacal.

Practicing mindfulness and awareness can help us see more clearly. Mindfulness can tame the mental wildness that causes us to go so off balance. Mindfulness puts that wild mind in a corral. Once the wild horse of our mind is a little settled, we can train it by tying it to the post of awareness. Then we can train the horse to do all sorts of things, including to exert itself on the path of relationship and take joy and delight in loving. ♦

DZOGCHEN PONLOP RINPOCHE is a leading scholar and meditation master in the Nyingma and Kagyu schools of Tibetan Buddhism. He is the author of *Rebel Buddha* and *Emotional Rescue*.



Romantic Vision vs. Everyday Disappointment

In meditation we cut through our fantasies and relate with life as it really is. Then something magical can happen. Judith Simmer-Brown says it's exactly the same in our relationships.

WHAT ARE THE QUALITIES of romantic relationships? First of all, romantic love thrives on separation. The unattainable love is the most attractive one—someone who is married to someone else, living in a distant city, or in a nexus of the forbidden. The girl or boy next door is not a good candidate for romantic fantasy, and neither is one's spouse. Separation makes the heart grow fonder and more passionate, because with separation the fantasy of the lover can be kept alive. The reality of the person cannot threaten the fantasy. For this reason, many newlyweds become quickly disillusioned over the mundane realities of married life. The courtship was so exciting, but marriage is too real, too ordinary.

Because romance thrives on separation, it's sexy but never sexually fulfilled. If one were truly satiated sexually, then the romance would be threatened. Often, the lover chooses the

mystical option of desire, giving up the living, breathing sexual partner for the fantasy of the unattainable lover. Illicit love affairs are hot, but rarely resolve through marriage.

Second, romantic love is frightfully impersonal. We are looking for our “type”—an intellectual, a jock, an ethereal blonde. Our typing can become very subtle, including our lover’s taste in clothes or way of walking. But we are in love with a fantasy; the person of the lover is absent. It actually helps not to have the person around too much, because they might destroy the fantasy.

Making the lover into a god, we foster a sense of poverty in ourselves. This is a lack of completion, which manifests as insatiable desire. We feel inadequate and helpless without a lover. When we have made the lover into a god, we can never join our lover. We are stuck in a situation of desperate longing, of neediness and insecurity.

So, what choice do we have? We realize how unhappy romantic love is, but what else is there? All of us have experienced the way the bubble pops in romantic relationships, and the ensuing disappointment and disillusionment. We say we have fallen out of love. We begin to feel the pointlessness of the fantasy and we see the lover as a stranger or even an enemy. We feel so lonely and hurt.

But disappointment could be the beginning of a true relationship. There is a kind of loss of innocence in disappointment, which can lead to the appreciation of the lover for who he is—beyond fantasy.

Staying with disappointment requires a certain amount of bravery, for we find ourselves alone. Often it has been our fear of loneliness that caused us to so earnestly seek out a relationship; we need someone, anyone, to make us feel secure, solid, alive. And here we are again, alone and desolate.

When aloneness and disappointment dawn for us, the relationship might have the space to begin. There is tremendous groundlessness, for we really don’t know where the relationship is going. There may be good times, there may be bad times. What happens, though, is that we begin to have a relationship with a person. We can begin to see the lover as someone separate from us, and we feel aloneness in relationship. Previously, the romance filled up the space in our lives and kept us company. We felt full because our fantasy filled in all our needs, or so we imagined.

But when we begin to really have a relationship with someone, there are gaps, there are needs not met. This is the ground for the relationship. When there is that quality of separateness and sanity, a very magical chemistry can emerge between people. It is unpredictable and unknown, and it does not follow the mythic guidelines for romantic love.

When we begin to see the other person, there is a new opportunity for romance in a

sane sense. The lover's very otherness can attract us. It's fascinating what makes my husband furious, what makes him laugh. He really likes to garden, he really hates to shop. Continual fascination can bloom, because the other person is beyond your boundaries of expectation. That fascination can include moments of depression, discouragement, and resignation. It also includes humor, delight, and wonder. But all of it is tangible, and vivid. Even while we are intoxicated with the continual emergence of the other person, we are haunted and enveloped by our own aloneness.

And, perhaps surprisingly, there is an opportunity for boundless passion when you are not trying to fit someone into a role. This can be happy passion, because it's not trying to manipulate the lover into filling one's needs; it's passion that can include sexuality without fear of intimacy. It is also the vertigo of high-altitude passion, because one's own aloneness remains and the situation is so inescapable.

There is tremendous energy in our passion. Romantic love is the beginning of understanding the nature of relationship. With it we develop the courage to jump in, and once we are in the ocean, we learn to swim. Without romantic love, we might never have jumped. ♦

Author of *Dakini's Warm Breath*, JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN leads workshops across North America on how meditation can help us create more fulfilling and lasting intimate relationships.

Yoga for Two

It's playful and sensual and brings us closer together. Cyndi Lee on sharing hatha yoga.

WHEN WE LET OUR SENSES DOMINATE, we relate to other people in a different way—sensitive, sensuous, physically awake, and alive like an animal. Who doesn't want a little more of that in their relationship?

By contrast, we often find our relationships are dry, conceptual, and theoretical. We're afraid to look into each other eyes and we talk so much we don't even know what it feels like to feel. The habits of a relationship become so stuck that we don't see or hear each other anymore. One partner may have changed and the other one didn't even notice. One partner may have left and the other one didn't even notice. We try to talk with each other but we have the same broken record conversations year in and year out. Communication is no longer two-way, but no-way.

Since our sensory perceptions are our primary and most accurate means of communicating with each other, one of the best ways to get some of that animal nature back into our life is by engaging in mindful physical activity with each other.

My parents, Allan and Mildred, have been married for over fifty years. (Can you imagine how often they have said the same thing to each other?) They are not yoga practitioners,



but when I asked them if they would be willing to try, to my surprise and delight, they agreed without hesitation. Allan and Mildred are both in their mid-seventies and when I told them they would have to sit on the floor, they laughed and said, "We can do that. We might not be able to get back up, but we can get down!"

That playfulness and willingness is all it takes. You might feel awkward or silly or self-conscious, but you will at least feel something. And that something will be shared together and it will be different and immediate every time you do these exercises.



1. Begin with a little bow of respect to each other.
2. Touch your palms together and close your eyes. See if you can feel your breathing moving together in one rhythm.



3. With your palms slightly separated, feel the heat between them.



4. Gently place your hands on each other's knees. Inhale and lift your chests and faces up, opening your hearts to each other.



5. Exhale, and curve your back. You can repeat steps 4 and 5 several times.



6. Place your left hand on your partner's left knee and your own right hand behind you. Inhale, and then as you exhale, twist to the right. Stay here for three breaths. Then reverse the twist.



7. Tree pose. My parents used the wall to help them balance. You can do that or you can try it freestanding. They also told me that when they strongly pressed their front hands together it was easier for them to stay up. This is a great way to explore supporting each other and still carrying your own weight—just what we want to do in relationships anyway.



8. Acknowledge your partner's generosity, patience, and open heart with a bow.



Partner yoga is a way of using your body and your senses to get to know each other, support each other, and get in shape all at the same time. Try this program both when you are feeling close to each other and when you are not feeling close. Let it be a way to open up to your partner, to receive whatever they have to give, and to find out what your energetic circle is together. My dad enjoyed making the close connection with my mom, and my mom exclaimed, "I liked it because I could do it!" ♦

CYNDI LEE, one of America's leading yoga teachers, is founder of the OM yoga center in New York and the author of *Yoga Body, Buddha Mind*.



The Training of Love

The first thing to learn is that you will get your heart broken. The second thing, says Polly Young-Eisendrath, is that there are tools to help you carry on.

IF YOU ENTER THE PATH OF RELATIONSHIPS, you're vowing to take the training of love. It is a training to break your heart. If you're willing to break your heart, you're willing to take the training of love. It's a training of the highest level, requiring an enormous amount of development, because it's not something immediately present at birth. The potential for love is present, but the requirements are demanding.

Love requires knowledge. One must really know the beloved. Sometimes we wonder whether the people who supposedly love us, such as our parents, really know us. We wonder whether we really know the people we supposedly love. You have to have knowledge of the beloved to actually love. The other requirement is equanimity, a friendly, gentle, matter-of-fact awareness that you return to again and again. Combining knowledge of the beloved and the equanimity to accept what is presented by them with a friendly, appreciative attitude is the very stuff of love.

Why would Buddhists have anything particularly special to say about love and relationship? At a basic level, the buddhadharma is about being taught by reality. As long as you can love reality, it will teach you. You will learn that loving is training for a broken heart.

When you feel an enormous connection with someone, when you get to really know someone, then you know that they're going to get ill, grow old, and die. You know that everything is going to change. Of course you don't really like that, but love requires that you continue to cherish them even while those things are taking place. That's the equanimity part.

Broken hearts happen because of impermanence, which in Buddhist teaching is one of the three marks of existence. When we idealize, as we so often do in love, we try to overlook the ups and downs of life, but that means we're avoiding the training that's offered, the training of the broken heart.

Vipassana teaches us the awareness of ever-present expansion and contraction, and having no preference between them. There are good feelings and bad feelings, good days and bad days, expansion and contraction. This is the way it is for all of us. Nobody gets anything better.

But we so often make a steady state our ideal, especially in relationships. When you pick someone, you think you're going to escape suffering, get out of the expansion and contraction. Your ideals for relationship might be so high that you never get into one, because every time you put your toe in, you say, "Ahh! This is falling short." You never even get on the path of love, because you're holding on to your ideal.

Or perhaps you get on the path of love, and then you look for those highs within the ups and downs of life. You put great store in them. Occasionally you have a really good day, or even a peak experience. You recognize that you and the other person are absolutely in tune, totally accepting of each other. You think to yourself, "Now I've got it. In the future I will do exactly this, and I'll get these results again." But of course, it doesn't work, because the waves go up and down, up and down.

Here's the secret: get a surfboard. As the waves go up and down, the surfboard allows you to maintain your balance. When things are going well, you maintain your balance and don't go whole hog into it. When things are going badly, you can see that painful as it is, it's interesting and even fascinating to observe. By surfing the waves and maintaining your balance, it starts to feel less like bouncing up and down all the time.

Meditation practice, mindfulness, psychotherapy, clear observation of your experience—all these will give you this capacity to surf. However, everybody falls off the surfboard at some point, so you need one of those ankle bracelets that keeps you and the surfboard together. Whether it's psychotherapy or meditation, you need to stay with it long enough to get the bracelet that connects you. If you don't, then one day you'll fall off hard and you might say, "I worked hard on that surfboard and it didn't work, so screw it. I won't work on one of those again." That is the worst outcome. The things that could help you have been tossed away.

When the shit hits the fan in your life—and it will—you will need your surfboard and the bracelet that ties you to it. You'll need your training and you'll need a bigger view of love, one that encompasses and accepts a broken heart. You will need something that reminds you of your vow to "take the training" to love. ♦

POLLY YOUNG-EISENDRATH, PH.D. is author of fourteen books, including, *The Self-Esteem Trap: Raising Confident and Compassionate Kids in an Age of Self-Importance*.



My Vows

Love all beings? Love even one? Either way, your heart breaks open. Susan Piver ponders the choiceless choices in relationships.

So far, I've made two vows that have changed my life. One was related to my Buddhist practice—to become a *bodhisattva*. The other was to become a wife.

A bodhisattva is a person who vows to help all beings reach enlightenment, no matter how many lifetimes it might take. This vow is obviously not made lightly; it comes after many hours of meditation practice and a formal commitment to Buddhism. Serious contemplation and study are required to get even a glimmer of the deeper meaning of this vow and its complexities. (For example, you vow to love everyone, even people you don't like.)

A wife's vow is also not made lightly. It comes after having found someone you really, really like to talk to and also to touch. It's made after serious contemplation of the likelihood you'll find anyone better, could might otherwise grow old alone, and how cute you'd look in a bridal gown. A bodhisattva chooses to be of service. A bride picks out china patterns for dinner service.

It so happened that I prepared to take both these vows at around the same time. While bride-me was shopping for dresses, arguing with her parents, and falling prey to panic attacks, bodhisattva-me was studying the six transcendent actions and contemplating the suffering of all sentient beings.

Both are vows to love (all beings in one case and a single being in the other) and it may seem that the bodhisattva vow is the really hard one. But after ten years, I can tell you that the real test of bigheartedness started with the latter proposition.

When my boyfriend asked me to marry him, I didn't exactly gush yes. I sort of tried to break up with him. He wanted to deepen our relationship and I just wasn't sure. Sure I loved Duncan, but my divorced girlfriends had loved their boyfriends too. Clearly love was no basis for marriage. Then what was? It had to be about more than wearing a silly dress, waving a wedding ring around, and being all, "Oh it's my day."

I told him I needed time to think it over and wanted to spend a month apart. I planned to search my soul, ponder the question deeply, and meditate a lot. I didn't really know if I was cut out for marriage. I prized my solitude tremendously, maybe above everything. When I wanted to write, I wrote. When I wanted to meditate, I meditated. When I wanted to pretend to write and meditate, no one was around to bust me. I wasn't sure I wanted to give all this up.

Plus, right now we could easily ignore what drove each of us crazy about the other and, perhaps as a consequence, after five years we were still completely hot for each other. Privacy. Being able to get away from each other on our bad days. These were good things, no? Maybe maintaining some separation was the key to keeping the whole thing going.

By month's end I figured I'd either have come to some sort of brilliant conclusion about how it could all work out OR realized I simply wasn't built for marriage and we should break up. If the latter, I'd already have accumulated separation days, and maybe they could be back-dated to shorten the grieving period.

During all this, I noticed that I was crying a lot. Everything was touching me and it was getting on my nerves: the hopeful look on a colleague's face when he was about to make a presentation; how sorry I felt for the people on the news; how beautiful Marvin Gaye's



voice was when he sang “What’s Going On.” The insulation between me and the world around me was getting thinner and thinner. So I stepped up my meditation practice. I thought this would be the best way to maintain equilibrium during this emotional time. But the more I meditated, the more likely I was to be provoked to tears by the slightest display of fragility. This couldn’t be the intended result. Instead of making me peaceful, meditating was freaking me out. What was I doing wrong?

I made an appointment with my meditation instructor to explore this question, but instead of giving me a strategy for toughening up, he suggested I take the bodhisattva vow. He explained that *bodhi* meant “awake” and *sattva* meant “being,” so an awakened being is what you vow to become.

He told me that the vow was something a Buddhist might consider to deepen her practice after having been a meditator for some years. (Again with the deepening.) Sure, I thought, who wouldn’t want to try to become enlightened? But there was a catch. “The vow is to attain enlightenment for all beings, not just for yourself. You vow to keep taking birth through endless lifetimes and helping out until all beings are enlightened,” he said. No exceptions. You volunteer to take on the pain of all others. Wow, that’s some vow, I thought. But how, I asked him, would this help me stop crying all the time? It sounded like it would make everything worse. The tears are a good sign, he said. It’s good preparation for the path of the bodhisattva. Okay, if you say so, I thought to myself.

I spent a month weighing the pros and cons of getting married, figuring that at some point one would outweigh the other. One problem with my strategy: the more I thought it all over, the more I realized that I totally, completely loved this person Duncan and there was nothing I could do about it. No matter how heavy the con side of the list got with perfectly acceptable reasons not to marry (familiarity kills desire...all that my private time will disappear...I can’t poop when anyone else is in the house), they couldn’t trump the one solitary thing on the pro side: I loved him. (OK, and there would be tax advantages.) I didn’t even know why I loved him so much. I mean, he’s great and cute and funny and all that, but nothing could account for the pleasure I got from his breath on my shoulder as we fell asleep or how upsetting I found it when anyone was mean to him.

When we got back together after our month apart, I told him how much I loved him and gave him a carefully thought-out list of caveats: I’d never be a conventional wife. I’d require time and space to meditate every day. Please don’t talk to me when I’m in the bathroom. And so on. In the midst of my big presentation, he reached into his backpack and retrieved a small package. Oh no, I thought, does he think that giving me a ring will wash away all doubts and common sense?

But there was no ring. Instead, he handed me a little heart-shaped box. Inside was a backyard bird feather and a smooth white stone. “This is us,” he said. “I’m the rock and

you're the feather. Fly all you want. That's just who you are. I'll make our situation stable. That's who I am." I was flabbergasted. What? He saw me this clearly and still wanted to marry me? The gravity of my rules and conditions shifted as suddenly as a flock of birds in the sky. My heart simply melted. I burst into tears. I had no idea there could be a person as wonderful as him. At this point there was no choice. Yes, I said. Yes, yes, yes. Please marry me and I will marry you.

So we began to plan our wedding. I placed the sweet box with the rock and the feather by my bed so I could look at it anytime I wanted. Whenever we would have a fight or my doubts would return, I could lift the top and peek inside. Oh yes, I would remind myself, everything is okay. We love each other so much.

Also during this month, I was studying in preparation for the bodhisattva vow ceremony. I read about how great saints and scholars defined compassion and how they kept it going even under the most difficult circumstances. I learned that compassion is the

sole basis for peace, and that personal happiness can only come from making

the needs of others primary. I once read that the Dalai Lama spends

three hours every morning rousing compassion. How did he then

go out into the world without sobbing all the time? I had no

idea. But just as with marrying Duncan, after thinking it over

I realized that I had to do it. There was simply no choice. Do

you say no when the one you love offers to love you back

for the rest of his life? Do you say no when your meditation

teacher asks if you want to try to become enlightened for the

benefit of others? "Actually, I think I'd rather remain in a self-

absorbed fantasy" didn't seem like a good answer to either of

them. So I said yes. Okay, yes, yes, yes. I'll try.

Within a few months, I took the bodhisattva vow with about ten other

students. We had been told to bring something to place on the altar as an offering during

the ceremony. It didn't have to be the most meaningful thing in our life, but it should be

something that mattered. I thought about offering a ring my mother had given me that

I rarely wore, or books that had been very meaningful to me, or even my favorite dress.

(Look, I really loved that dress.) None of them seemed right. There was only one thing

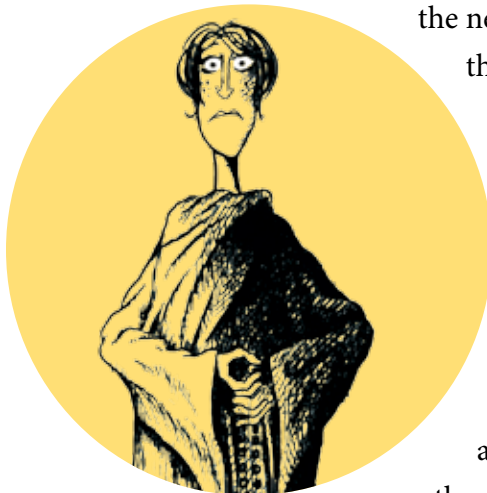
that would cost me to be without: the box with the rock and the feather. I tried to talk

myself out of it. "He said it didn't have to be our most valued possession." "That would hurt

Duncan." "Surely I could hold on to this..."

I didn't know if I was making a generous gesture or a martyr-y one when I offered the box during the vow ceremony. But I did it anyway.

The very next morning, I woke up in a panic. I was bereft. I wanted that box back. I



had never possessed anything so precious. But it was gone and nothing, nothing, nothing could bring it back. Even if I could find it and return it to my bedside table, it would now only be a sad reminder of how selfish I was, not how beloved. I was stuck. I saw just how unlikely a candidate for bodhisattva-hood I was. I couldn't even graciously give up a cardboard box for the benefit of others, to say nothing of my "personal space" for my boyfriend. Could I change my mind about these vows or was it too late?

Too late. I had already gotten my first lesson. You can't give to get. Opening yourself to another isn't as simple as acting nice or giving up what you value even though you really, really don't want to. It's actually heartbreaking. I started to cry for the zillionth time since I had been contemplating all these vows. I knew I had no idea how to be a bodhisattva—or a wife, for that matter. Nor could I pretend these were stupid ideas and go back to living the way I had before. Anything I gained for myself alone would be a reminder of my lack of loving-kindness. I couldn't be bodhisattva Susan but I couldn't be regular Susan either. Bastards! I was trapped. So, of course, I burst into tears.

Instead of making it safe, love—whether for all beings or for one—actually breaks your heart. Being loved is uncomfortable and the more I love, the more uncomfortable it is. In the end, I'm still not quite sure what I've vowed to do either as a wife or a bodhisattva, except to break my own heart, over and over And see what happens next. ♦

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