

Lead story



Loving without conditions

The language of the soul begins with love. In a world besieged with violence, discrimination and hate, unconditional love alone can heal and make it a better place, says **Jamuna Rangachari**

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Saint Haridas was known for never losing his temper. Once, two young men from his village were talking about this quality of his. As the talks proceeded, one of them took it as a challenge to provoke him and make him lose it. He stood on the river bank where the saint used to go to take bath before offering prayers to his deity. As soon as the saint came out of the river the man spat at him. Haridas simply turned back and went to the river to clean himself. While he was returning the miscreant spat at him again. The saint turned back again and silently went to wash himself in the river. This activity continued for many hours but the saint never once rebuked the young man or lost his cool at him.

Finally, the man's mouth began to ache with too much spitting. He also began to feel ashamed of himself. He gave up and begged the saint for forgiveness, asking him how was it possible for him to not get angry despite being provoked to such an extent. The saint replied, "Son, I offer my pure love to the deity in the temple. How could I contaminate it with anger or hatred for one of his children?"

The young man felt deeply ashamed of himself. His heart changed and he fell at Haridas' feet, asking to be taken as his disciple. Haridas forgave him and accepted him open-heartedly. Had he retaliated or opposed him virulently, it would only have given power to his attacker, and expressed the saint's sense of helplessness.

Only love can redeem this world, but for that to happen humans need to excavate the flow of unconditional love buried deep in their hearts. The love which doesn't cease to exist or flow when met with cruelty, rejection, betrayal or hurt. Unconditional love not only salvages the victimiser but also the victim. It liberates a person from the sense of victimhood, and hands him immeasurable power to not let the vagaries of life affect his blissful, joyful state. It makes a person rise beyond his circumstances and stubbornly refuses to give anybody the power to affect him adversely. Unconditional love gives us the strength to view life and people correctly; unhindered by the cobwebs of judgement, fear, grudges, dislike and their consequent harmful actions. Unconditional love is deeply linked with our ability to forgive our perpetrators.

And at the base of every conditional love lies a part of ourselves which we haven't healed or brought to the disinfecting light of the Divine vibrating within us.

The most natural, unconditional love that we all experience is of a mother for her child. Miracles are created through this love. But the situation changes as we grow up. In most of our relationships we find ourselves bound by expectations, and frustrations of them not being fulfilled by the other. It teaches us that we must earn or deserve love before we can have it, and that others too must deserve our love. This is

conditional love which is nothing but a business transaction.

This is why our well-meaning but unskilled attempts to love usually end up in separation and alienation. My friend, Anita's (name changed) son was told endlessly that he should aim to become a doctor as there were successful doctors on both sides of his family. He tried his best but could not succeed. They kept pushing and prodding him. His self-esteem plummeted to the lowest level since he kept trying hard to succeed at a subject he was unable to relate to. Seeing his poor performance when his lecturers threatened him with rustication, he took the dreadful step of committing suicide. Although the above mentioned is an extreme case, depression and stress abound in a world which is craving for true love. But the problem is that we are unaware of what love is.

What really is love?

There is no phrase as badly interpreted as 'unconditional love'. People use it as an excuse to stay in bad relationships or to shame someone into staying in one. But the fact is that we cannot know what unconditional love is until we love and accept ourselves totally and unconditionally.

On looking deeply, we would find that people in abusive relationships continue to be in them, not out of love for their abusive partners but because of their own fear of walking out and facing the unknown. And same is true of domineering people who curtail the freedom of others on the pretext of loving and caring for them. They too come from the fear of losing control over others. They do not know how to define themselves with no one to tell what they should do with their life. Unconditional love cares, but does not hold love back if the other does not fulfill his promises or chooses to walk a different path.

On introspecting, we will find that most of us have deep seated unresolved issues. We are angry, bitter, hurt or guilt-ridden, and somewhere do not like or accept ourselves the way we are. How often we have wished that we looked like someone else, or possessed the qualities displayed by others. We rarely look at ourselves as unique creations of the Divine, meant to fill a certain place and offer to the world our unique talent. We get bogged down by judgements passed on us by others and try hard to fit in the groove to gain approval. And from here



Photo: Thinkstock

Compassion towards animals resembles the uncomplicated love that we naturally feel towards pets

begins a life of inner conflict and turmoil. The unhappier we are with ourselves, the more critical our worldview and more conditional our love. Because what we could not get from ourselves or others, we begin to expect from those we have power over. It takes courage and deep self-inquiry to know ourselves and start walking the path unique to us. And from here springs the fount of unconditional love.

The king and his son

I remember having read a story of a powerful monarch who yearned to have an heir for his kingdom. After many years and prayers his queen conceived. She was essentially a meditator who loved silence and being in nature. In due course, she delivered a healthy baby boy. The king was overjoyed. But it soon turned out that the boy could neither talk nor walk. The king took help of the best doctors and therapists but nothing changed. The queen, however, continued to love her child unconditionally. The king's hopes and dreams crashed. He became bitter and angry. By the time the prince turned

14, the king had developed virulent hatred for him because he was incapable of inheriting the throne. One fine day he ordered his soldiers to take the prince to the forest and bury him alive. As the soldiers were digging his grave, the mute prince spoke for the first time. They were startled and began begging for forgiveness. The prince asked them to convey a message to his father – that he would act normally for the rest of his life if he granted him just one wish. Excited, the soldiers ran to the king to give him the good news. The king was overjoyed and immediately consented to grant the son his wish. He was confident that his son wanted riches, power and luxuries and was too eager to give them all to him. The young prince walked all his way back to the kingdom. Upon seeing him, his father hugged him with joy and asked him what he wanted. The prince paused and then said imperturbably, “I want to become a monk and lead the life of an ascetic.” The king was devastated to hear this. His heart burst with pain. He turned to his wife for solace. She held him with care, looked deep into his eyes and lovingly

whispered, “Love is freedom, my lord. Let your son go.” The placidity and calmness with which she spoke entered a deep recess of the King’s mind. He finally understood what loving meant. He let him go.

This story clearly depicts the unconditional manner in which the king’s son loved himself. A child prodigy, he deeply knew what he wanted to do in order to be true to himself. He accepted himself unconditionally and stood his ground, without caving into the pressure of becoming someone he didn’t want to be. And with this inner knowing he was able to chalk not only his path but also shine light on the life of others. Not only that, he had no anger against his father for plotting to kill him. His mother too knew that loving meant loving someone for his or her own sake, and not because they could be used to fulfill one’s own needs and desires. She deeply understood her son’s yearning for freedom and would have been pained to see him invest his time in running a kingdom against his soul-call of pursuing monkhood. This is true and unconditional love which can happen only if we are in touch with ourselves and are not viewing others from the prism of our ego-self.

Only when we are free of our fixation with our ego, which includes our need to prove a point, our fears,

desires, personal stories of victimhood, and can speak our inner truth, we can open our eyes to being present to others and loving them without conditions.

When we are able to live upto our own self, love and accept ourselves with all our shadow parts – good, bad and ugly – we are able to extend the same love to others too. If we judge or dislike ourselves, or are obsessed insanely with something, then we would find it hard to accept others who do not think or behave like us, or do not share our worldview.

In my own life, the people who showed the power of unconditional love are Promila and Atul Gurtu and later, Atul and his second wife Suhasini Mulay.

I was a close friend of Promila. She was my first mentor and guru who taught me all about chakras. She led a complete life without ever mentioning that she was grappling with cancer. In fact, none of us ever thought there was anything seriously wrong with her. Atul, too, was a good friend of mine. After she passed away, I asked Atul to share his experience of handling Promila's condition so wonderfully. He wrote an article which was published in *Life Positive*. After Promila's demise, he married Suhasini Mulay, the well known actress. I attended their wedding since he had earnestly asked me to be a part of it. When I went for their wedding, I was thrilled to know that *Life Positive* had played a role in bringing them together. Suhasini said, "Atul had written in the article about how he discovered Promila's cancer. After the initial period of depression, rather than crying over it, he decided to make his wife as happy as he could. So, for the next four-five years, they did everything they ever wanted to do. Learning this endeared him to me." When Atul and Suhasini realised that they really enjoyed being together and were unattached, they took the plunge into matrimony.

I am sure Promila would be happy and blessing them from above, as this is what she had wished for her husband even when she was in the last leg of her journey. Their love indeed touched the pinnacle of love as they both truly cared for each other throughout all the seasons of life.

Climbing the ladder of love

Loving selflessly and without conditions is the gradual process of coming of age of a person's soul. When we love to fulfill an inner need or void, we often cause suffering. When we come from a space of sharing what we have in abundance, there is all round happiness.

According to Kashmir Shaivism, in the beginning, there was a being called Purusha. This being was without desire, craving, fear, or the impulse to do anything at all — since the universe was already perfect and complete. But then it was static. To begin its play, it split itself into two. After that, the sky became separate from the earth, darkness from

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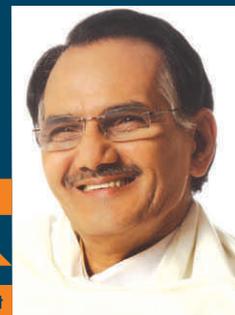
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Atul Gurtu's unconditional love for his late first wife drew Suhasini Muley to him and the couple tied the knot

light, life from death, and male from female. Each of these set off passionately to reunite with its severed half. And this desire for reunion is nothing but our search for pure love which we feel will complete us. This story signifies that even though our essence is unconditionally loving, to experience it, the Divine created the duality of night and day, joy and suffering, male and female, truth and illusion. Trapped in this duality we often experience pain, rejection and conditional love. The joy of discovering, feeling and giving unconditional love can be experienced only against this temporary illusion of separateness. The journey of unconditional love is a remarkable one. We don't live on the summit of universal love. We climb the mountain, and then we descend it in order to share what we've found.

Five stages of love

The space of reaching the stage of unconditional love is a journey with its own crests and troughs. We are conceived in love, born in love and brought up with love. The first sip of milk we take from our mother's breast overflows not only with nourishment but also with boundless love of God, our mother, and mother nature who wants us to live and flourish. Kashmir Shiavism classifies five types of love.

Kama, or sensory craving

As we grow, we go through several stages of love. By the time we reach adolescence, we have experienced parental love, sibling love, and love for our friends. Yet, one of the most powerful experiences of love happens when we 'fall in love' with opposite sex.

The ancient thinkers of India devoted a great deal of attention to this issue, recognising the power of sex and romance to jump-start our flagging emotions.

The seers did not view these stages in love's journey as mutually exclusive. They believed that we do not need to renounce sex

and romance in pursuit of a 'higher love.' All the forms co-exist in a heart that is mature. According to them, the lower stages in love's journey aren't necessarily supposed to go away as one gets more enlightened. However, remaining stuck at the lowest rung can cause a lot of frustration and sadness.

In ancient India, sex was not associated with shame but considered a joyous aspect of human existence, a topic worthy of serious investigation. In fact, though the Kama Sutra is about amorous love, the majority of the text is a philosophy of dealing with questions such as what sparks desire, what maintains it, and how can it be wisely cultivated. Even though this is considered legitimate, Hinduism concedes that one can never achieve wholeness through the act of sex alone.

Shringara, or rapturous intimacy

Ancient philosophers focussed on the emotional content of the romantic experience called *shringara*, and developed a rich vocabulary to express the myriad moods and emotions associated with it.

This imaginative play of love is symbolised by the relationship of the divine couple, Radha and Krishna, whose romantic adventures are celebrated in Indian dance, music, theatre, and poetry.

Yet, the ancients were realistic about the mixed bag of romance. They did not imagine that finding our 'soulmate' would solve our problems, relieve our sense of unworthiness and self-doubt, or satisfy all of our emotional needs.

So, Indian philosophy teaches that we need to move towards something even greater.

Maitri, or generous compassion

“The simplest acts of kindness,” said Mahatma Gandhi, “are by far more powerful than a thousand heads bowing in prayer.”

Compassion resembles the uncomplicated love we naturally feel toward children and pets. It is also associated with *matru-prema*, the Sanskrit term for motherly love, which is said to be love’s most giving and least selfish form. This comes naturally to us for our blood ties but compassion for strangers, however, does not always come naturally. So in Hindu and Buddhist practises, there are loving-kindness meditations in which practitioners develop the ability to wish others well. The idea is that compassion is like a muscle that can become stronger if we use it regularly. The ability to forgive and cultivate the virtues of patience and tolerance are inexorably linked with *maitri*.

I remember listening to an interview of Bill Clinton, former President, USA, in which he was recalling his one question to Nelson Mandela – how he had forgiven those who had unjustly deprived him of his freedom for so long. Mandela had answered, “I didn’t want to be in prison anymore.” Truly, not forgiving is a prison from which only we can release ourselves. Similarly, Kia Scherr overcame the sorrow of losing her daughter and husband in the terror attack that claimed many lives in Mumbai in November, 2008, by forgiving the terrorists. Kia and her family led a quiet life in a meditation centre in Virginia, USA. Her husband and daughter had come to India on a spiritual mission in 2008 when they were gunned down by terrorists in the Trident hotel in Mumbai. Aggrieved, she turned to meditation to handle her profound loss. She decided not to hate the killers of her family. Not just this, she became a peace entrepreneur. Her peace initiatives led her to form the ‘One Life Alliance Trust’ with other people who wish to bring in peace by understanding others. Kia even made a movie called *Letter to a Terrorist*.

“We have to learn to live in peace, compassion and love and we have to slow down our lives. It’s important to listen to other people and your own inner voice. Forgiveness is a bridge to peace,” she says.

Bhakti, or impersonal devotion

While compassion is a wonderful quality, it is not quite the final word. Beyond interpersonal love, the Indian tradition envisioned an impersonal form in which our sympathies gradually expand to embrace the whole of creation.

As a bridge to this, the sages came up with a path called *bhakti* yoga, which can be translated as the cultivation of the self through the love of God. This love can be directed toward whatever higher ideal speaks to us most powerfully, be that kindness, truth, or social justice.

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Kia Scherr forgave the terrorists who gunned down her husband and daughter and focussed her attention towards peace building

Leaders like Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and countless others have a love for the world that is passionate and powerful as any romance. The *bhakti bhava* can inject the tonic of love even in sorrowful situations, like it happened in Sheela's (name changed on request) case. Sheela's son, Aseem, died suddenly in a car accident in 2013. She and her husband were devastated. "Aseem left us suddenly; we could not breathe, eat or sleep for many months," she says. After a while, they picked themselves up and wondered what to do next. "We wanted to keep him with us at any cost. So the next best thing was to keep his books which he loved next only to his life." They had begun to offer food in Aseem's name to children of a nearby orphanage called Ummeed Aman Ghar at Mehrauli. There they saw that the books which children used were torn, dusty, and lying in disarray. It struck them as the perfect place to donate his books.

They arranged for a permission from the NGO that ran the place to start a library. The NGO, however, was a little sceptical about its success since the children were semi-literate. On 17th October, 2011, about six months after losing their son, the couple started Aseem's Library with 300 books and a bookshelf. Sheela worked hard to generate children's interest in reading books which finally paid off. The children made lists, cleaned the place, maintained and read the books and clamoured for more. Enthused, Sheela and her team soon created many

more activities like art and craft, brain teasers, games and sports, dramas and debates, which unearthed the creative side of children and helped keep them away from fights and drugs. It soon became a matter of pride to be called a member of Aseem's library. Today, the library is treated as a place for healing a traumatised child when he enters the facility. It has grown to be a source of recreation, inspiration, learning life skills and supporting academic progress. Sheela truly symbolises *bhakti bhava* or love for the world. She transcended her sorrow and emerged a winner by cultivating this love.

Atma prema, or unconditional self-love

Up until this point, each stage of love has been directed outward into the world. But at its apex it comes

How to become an embodiment of love

- Love everyone and everything, without attachment and judgement. Judgement hampers our viewing others as human beings who have their own journeys in life with their own stories.
- Have personal regard and respect for the people you meet. Treat them as equals and not inferior or superior in any way.
- Work on the principle that everyone is, at heart, good. Assume that although they may do questionable things, the person underneath is fundamentally pure.
- Accept others as they are with no conditions attached. None of us are perfect. We should aim to accept people as they are even if we consider some traits to be flawed.
- Forgive everyone as keeping grudges hampers our ability to love. We need to understand others and forgive them for the wounds they may have inflicted on us. For, we are human and do err, knowingly and many times unknowingly as well.
- Learn to love all beings including your own self. Love is a tonic we need to share with others and give it to ourselves as well. The wonderful thing about love is, the more we share, the more we get and in the process, start becoming embodiments of love ourselves.

full circle back to the self. *Atma prema* can be translated as 'self-love'. This is not the ego-self we usually think of but the essential Self, which exists at the center of all of us. Once a person accesses the real self, he personifies love and each of his actions become an act of love.

People like the late Louise Hay are a shining example of unconditional self-love. She grappled with abuse as a child and teen, became a model, and then had a broken marriage with a businessman. Although it seemed that her life had skydived, it was at that time her healing really began. She became a religious science practitioner and discovered the emotional reasons for illnesses. Then she created affirmations, which she believed would cure the illnesses, and became popular as a workshop leader. When she got diagnosed with cancer in 1978, she did not despair but put her philosophies into practice. She rejected surgery and drugs, and instead developed an intensive programme of affirmations, visualisation, nutritional cleansing, and psychotherapy. Within six months, she was completely healed of cancer. She later created dynamic programmes to help people overcome personal challenges and limiting beliefs to embrace a life of fullness and wholesomeness.

Said the Indian mystic Kabir, "The river that flows in you, also flows in me."

When we achieve *atma prema*, we recognise that

when stripped of the accidents of our genetic heritage and upbringing, we are all expressions of that one life – the one the Indian myth represented as Purusha. *Atma prema* arises from the realisation that beyond our personal faults and foibles, beyond even our name and personal history, we are all children of the highest. When we love ourselves and others in this profound yet impersonal way, our love loses its boundaries and becomes unconditional.

The great Sufi visionary Rumi gave voice to this paradoxical experience by saying,

I, you, he, she, we —

*in the garden of mystic lovers,
these are not true distinctions.*

*By realising this, we all can indeed
remain lovingly wholesome and holistic.*



Jamuna Rangachari is a writer who has authored two books for children, and compiled and interpreted *Teaching Stories-I* and *II* for *Life Positive*.

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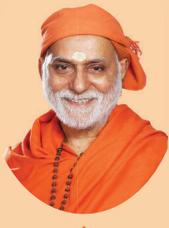


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