

Relationships - The Yoga of the West

by Peter Russell

*The only person who behaves sensibly is my tailor.
He takes my measure anew every time he sees me.
All the rest go on with their old measurements.*

George Bernard Shaw

The contemporary sage Ram Dass once remarked that "Relationships are the yoga of the West." This does not mean our relationships should have us sitting or standing in strange positions; physical yoga is just one kind of yoga. The word yoga means "union", and "a yoga" is any path that leads to union -- a union with the cosmos, and with one's own inner essence. In other words, a path to spiritual awakening.

Our personal relationships offer us such a path because they can bring into focus our various short-comings in thinking and behavior. Most of us have at one time or another experienced some of the rather unloving behavior to which our relationships can lead.

- Hiding our thoughts and feelings as well as our past actions.
- Trying to prove we are better in some way.
- Fighting to prove some belief or point of view.
- Manipulating others so they will behave as we want.
- Not being ourselves, but how our partner would like us to be.
- Saying things we do not believe in order to win approval.

Such patterns stem from the conditional nature of our love. We saw earlier how we create anger, resentment and stress for ourselves when we think someone is preventing us from finding peace or joy in life. With conditional love, the same process operates in reverse. When we judge that someone may help us in our search for fulfillment we feel good about them. When they appear to match our picture of the perfect person -- the person who will make us wonderfully happy -- we love them. But such love is highly conditional.

It is conditional upon the way a person behaves, the way they look, the values they profess, and perhaps the feelings they have for us. We love them for their appearance, their manner, their mind, their body, their talents, their smell, their dress, and, should they agree with our own, their beliefs and values. The more they match our expectations of the perfect person, the more we love them.

Such love turns the other person into someone special -- someone who in our eyes shines out above the others. We have judged them as fascinating, sensitive, wise, kind, honest, good-looking, fashionable, sexy, humorous, selfless, artistic, intelligent,

understanding, or whatever else appeals to our ego-mind. We have judged them as someone who will satisfy our needs and desires.

Then, in order that the one we "love" stays around and delivers the fulfillment we seek, we play the same game in reverse. We try to match their needs and expectations. We do and say the right things and try to be the right sort of person -- clever, witty, sincere, strong, caring, or whatever else we think they want. We want to be their special person. The one they want to be with.

Such love is very fragile. Should our partner not do as we would wish, or otherwise fail to meet some dream we have of them, we can easily find ourselves slipping into the opposite reaction. Fear raises its head once again and we find ourselves becoming upset with them and falling out of love.

If we are not very careful -- and usually most of us are not -- our partner's failure to meet our expectations is interpreted as an unjustified attack. And a too hasty response on our part can lead us into unnecessary and frequently disruptive behaviors. We may try to defend ourselves -- perhaps by returning an attack or criticizing them in some way. We may withdraw our affection, withholding what they need. Or we try to make them feel guilty, in the hope that they will change and once more satisfy our needs. We may even wonder what we saw in them in the first place.

But if they are as inwardly vulnerable as we are (which is very likely), they may well perceive our reaction as an equally unjustified attack on them. And, if not careful, they are likely to find themselves responding in similar ways. All too easily we become caught in a vicious circle of resentment and blame.

Little wonder that many such relationships break down.

Damaging as such reactions may be, we can also turn them to good effect. Our disagreeable responses and less-welcome behaviors can -- if we care to look -- reveal our inner vulnerabilities. They can help us become aware of our hidden fears; and by exploring what is going on we can begin to see some of the psychological attachments we have formed. Each hurtful reaction becomes an opportunity to grow and mature.

Seen in this light our personal relationships can become our yoga -- a path from self-centeredness toward self-liberation.

Judgment

If our thinking is ruled by the belief that inner peace, joy and contentment come from what we have or do in the world, then we may find ourselves treating other people as we do material things. We look to them for satisfaction of our inner needs, and thus judge them according to whether we think they may help or hinder us in our search for personal fulfillment. I might judge an inflexible bureaucrat who causes me considerable inconvenience and stands in the way of my getting what I want as "selfish" or "uncaring." Conversely, one who goes out of his way to be of assistance I might judge as "kind" and "friendly."

In general terms, if we like the person and think they are on our side, we categorize them as a "good" person. Conversely, if we dislike them or think they stand in the way of our fulfillment, we are liable to put them in the category of "bad" -- someone who needs improvement.

Such judgments are a projection of our own mind; our own hopes and fears. Someone else, with different hopes and different fears, might see the same person in another light. How many times have we been surprised to find someone dislikes a person we think highly of; or conversely, likes a person we have judged a waste of time?

Since they are of our own making, such judgments may bear no relation to the truth. For all I know, the inflexible bureaucrat may have been preoccupied with a domestic crisis and later have regretted the way he treated me. Conversely, the more amenable person may have been trying to manipulate me for his own ends.

There is a big difference between this sort of judgment and the evaluations we might make of a person's skills, character, behavior, or other personal attributes. If you are interviewing someone for a position in a company you need to judge whether they are suitable. Do they have the necessary skills and experience? How will they respond under pressure? Are they trustworthy? Will they fit in with the culture? Such judgments are very valuable. We need to be a good judge of character, or to weigh up a situation and judge the best course of action. Judgment in the sense of discrimination is most important.

But to judge another person's worth as a human being is never justified. We may like or dislike another's appearance, personality, and beliefs but this has no bearing on their value as a being. And we have no right to make such judgments. No person has any greater or lesser value than any other person.

Not only are such judgments not justified, they are not that helpful. They keep us from seeing the other person in the present moment. Instead we see them through the eyes of the past and our concerns for the future. We do not see them as they really are.

Letting Go of Judgment

Think of a friend. Anyone will do; either gender, any age. The first person who comes into your mind will serve perfectly well.

Pause for a moment and consider the thoughts you have about them. Consider their looks. . . . The way they dress. . . . Their habits. . . . The way they speak. . . . And anything else that comes to mind about them.

Notice the feelings you have towards them.

Consider the various things that you like about this person. What makes them a friend?

Notice those things that you do not appreciate so much. The changes that would improve them in your eyes.

Then pause to remember that all these thoughts are based on past experience. You are projecting the past on to that person. You are not actually appreciating them as they are.

Now -- and this may take a little more time -- take one of these thoughts, recognize that it has been derived from past impressions, and ask: Is that how this person really is? Is that how they experience themselves? Or is it simply a picture I have made of them -- a picture I have projected onto them?

Ask this about the various other thoughts you have about that person, trying each time to step beyond your interpretations and really see them as they are.

You will probably discover that the more you let go of your projections and perceive the other person with a more open mind, the more you begin to understand them. As you understand them and accept them as they are, you may notice a deeper sense of closeness. You are beginning to perceive them with a more open heart -- with more empathy and compassion.

You can do the same exercise focusing on someone that you do not know so well. As you let go of preconceptions about who and how they might be, a new degree of openness can emerge. You begin to understand what it really means to love a stranger -- or even to love an enemy. It is not a romantic love or a love full of infatuation; it is a love of compassion based on the simple acceptance of another being just as they are.

Love and Judgment

We have already seen two ways in which the materialist meme -- the belief that inner peace, joy, and fulfillment depends upon what we have or do in the external world -- can limit us. First, it prevents us from being at peace. Second, it takes our attention away from the present moment. We are now seeing a third way in which it can be a handicap. It can stand in the way of love.

Love, whether it be the love of a child for its mother, of two lovers for each other, or a love for Nature, is born of a sense of oneness. It is an expression of a deeper sense of connection. And its goal is unity -- to be one with that which one loves.

When we judge another person we see the ways in which their thoughts, words, and deeds -- and by implication their feelings, desires, and goals -- differ from our own. In our minds we see separation rather than oneness. Such separation is the opposite of love.

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