

“I Just Called to Say I Love You”

Reflections on the Multiple Meanings of Love



by Andrew Cohen

“I Just Called to Say I Love You”

Reflections on the Multiple Meanings of Love

by Andrew Cohen

LOVE IS A VERY DIFFICULT THING TO TALK ABOUT. And that is because it's a word that means many different things to many different people. In my work as a spiritual teacher, this subject arises constantly. And one thing is for sure: love is an important word, because what it signifies is always what we claim to care most about. This is why it is such a challenging topic to discuss. Who am I, or anyone else, to comment on that which another holds most dear? How we feel about things is an inner matter that is very personal indeed. When we use the word “love,” it always refers to something we feel very strongly about. It may be an object, like a new car; it may be our own image when we look in the mirror; it may be Mother Nature; it may be our notion of God.

Speaking personally, I can honestly say: I love coffee. I love Chinese food. I really love corn on the cob. I love my new hybrid SUV. I love New York City, my place of birth. I love India, that land of magic and mystery. I love the Berkshire Mountains in Western Massachusetts, where I live, especially in the Fall when the leaves turn incandescent gold, orange, purple, and red. I love to travel and experience the freshness of impermanence and the freedom of movement. I love surrendering to overwhelming exhaustion and falling into deep

sleep after returning home from long plane flights. I love my little dog and being woken up in the morning by his insistent affectionate kisses. I love my wife of twenty-five years and the deep and unconditional trust born over time that we share. I love the powerful memory of my first serious romance when I was sixteen years old. I love music. I love jazz and fusion and blues. I love to play the drums.

I love my students from all over the world, with whom I share a love for Spirit and for that which is higher that enlivens, empowers, and inspires us all. I love my closest students, those who are the most spiritually evolved, because we share not only a profound commitment to that which is sacred but also a deep and abiding friendship that makes all things possible. I love Spirit, because I discovered its ungraspable nature to be my own True Face, the source of my freedom and all that I do. I love my Teacher, because he gave me everything. I love to teach, because it is then that I am most free. I love the life that I live, because I have been given an opportunity to make a contribution to the evolution of consciousness and culture.

So when we use the word “love,” what exactly are we talking about? Are we referring merely to personal tastes and preferences? Are we referring to our experience of deep emotional

bonds and attachments? Or are we referring to our connection to a higher spiritual Truth? Maybe we are referring to all three. This is complex and confusing territory, for sure. And it is that much more challenging because human beings experience strong passions about that which they claim to love. In fact, too often, we assume something is inherently good and right, simply because we feel passionately about it. This is another reason why love is such a difficult subject to speak about. It is a dimension of human experience that tends to be pregnant with vagueness, ambiguity, and confusion, and is fueled by powerful feelings! So before we can really begin this discussion, we have to make the effort to clarify what it is that we are talking about.

One fundamental distinction that I have found helpful for navigating this challenging territory is this: some forms of love are relative, and others are not. Spiritual love, for example, is non-relative, impersonal, and absolute. It is permanent, unwavering, and always vibrates with the infinite. Love that is relative or non-absolute is impermanent and changing; it is always connected to that which is personal or unique to the individual and his or her culture.

In order to understand what love really is, we need to be able to place its various forms and expressions within a hierarchy of values. Spiritual love, the nature of which is non-relative or absolute, is at the top of the hierarchy. Non-spiritual love, the nature of which is always relative (no matter how powerful the emotional experience of it may be), always comes second in this hierarchy. And within that category, some forms of non-spiritual or relative love have greater value or importance than others. For example, my love of my wife obviously has greater value than my love of my little Yorkshire Terrier; my love of music has greater value than my love for corn on the cob; and so on. These simple value distinctions are ones we can probably all agree on.

However, the larger distinction I am making, between relative and absolute love, is not always so easy to discern. It's important to point out here that before we have personally had a life-changing experience of spiritual, or absolute, love, what I'm calling relative, or non-spiritual forms of love can *appear* to be spiritual. This means that they may, at times, seem to evoke the same qualities as love that is absolute. For example, when we fall romantically in love with someone, it can *feel* like an experience that is infinite, unchanging, and non-relative. "I love you for eternity," we declare. But inevitably, sooner or later, we always find that this kind of love was not what it appeared to be. Why? *Because it wasn't eternal.* It was subject to change.

The nature of spiritual love, on the other hand, is always forever. It is always eternal and it never changes. But before we

discover that eternity which exists beyond time and form for ourselves, we can easily be fooled. We can easily be deluded and believe that the *appearance* of eternity in time and form is the same as that eternity *beyond* time and form.

Spiritual awakening, the discovery of enlightened awareness, changes everything. Before this, we can only *imagine* what eternity is. After this, we know what it is, because we have directly experienced it for ourselves. Before awakening to the absolute dimension of existence and non-existence, it's understandable that we would believe that that which is merely personal and relative is actually more than that. Only when we taste the absolute nature of Spirit for ourselves can we truly grasp this all-important distinction.

Mystical insight and revelation alone reveal the absolute, non-relative dimension of reality. We have all heard the powerful statement, "God is love." But what does it really mean? I have had two initiations into the answer to this question that have changed my life forever. The first was a spontaneous experience of what's traditionally called *cosmic consciousness*, when I was sixteen years old. The second occurred three weeks after I met my guru, when I was thirty.

I have no idea what the catalyst for my first initiation was, but I do know that at the time my teacher at school had us reading William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. I also remember seeing a documentary about Buddhism, and in one scene there was a striking image of an enormous Buddha statue somewhere in Southeast Asia with hundreds of monks prostrating before it. I could not for the life of me figure out why these men were bowing down in front of a stone statue. I was dumbfounded. But I was about to find out what was inspiring their acts of devotion.

It happened very late one night when I was sitting up having a conversation with my mother about something I do not now remember. How to describe the indescribable? For no apparent reason, the doors of perception opened wide and suddenly I lost any and all sense of boundaries. My experience of awareness grew and grew to such a profound degree that I quickly found myself drowning in an infinite ocean of love and bliss that seemed to be absolute in its nature. In it, I could see no beginning and no end. It was as if the entire universe and everything beyond it had awakened to itself in an instant, and my experience was of being not separate from the ground of that consciousness that was making it possible for me to behold the enormity of what I was bearing witness to. It was like the infinite nature of the creative process was already self-aware and I had suddenly woken up to that dimension of reality. In this higher state, the very center of that awareness expanded in all directions. The center was where I was and paradoxically it was also everywhere else at the very

same time. There was awe and wonder at the majesty of the entire panoramic display that was physically overpowering. It's almost as if the very nature of who we are at the deepest level is too big for our mortal self to contain. It was simply too much. And what felt most unbearable was the ecstasy of it all.

Tears were streaming down my cheeks, but I wasn't crying. My throat was opening and closing uncontrollably. I was aware of my mother sitting across the room but I was unable to convey the magnitude of what was occurring. She was in one world and I was in another. In that exalted state, it became clearer than clear that there never has been nor ever could be such a thing as death. There is only infinite becoming. And not only that, but it was obvious that there was absolutely nowhere that one could really go in space or time. That was because any place, anywhere, that one could conceive of going could always only be that same one place that one could never leave. We are all always in the very same place, no matter where we go or what we do. The most significant gift that this unexpected visitation from the unknown bestowed upon me was the clear and tangible recognition that there was a miraculous and seemingly self-conscious intelligence that is inherent in the entire process. The love and ecstasy that was surging through me felt like pain because it was just too much to bear. Under the weight of this kind of intensity, one feels like one is on the verge of dying.

Towards the end of this initiation, at least from the flawed perspective of memory, it seemed like I received a message. It was simple and uncompromising, "If you devote your life to me and me alone, you will have nothing to fear. But if you don't . . ."

When I was twenty-two, I heeded that message from the Unknown and became more or less a full-time seeker. Eight years later, after spending two and a half years in India, I met my guru H.W.L. Poonja, a disciple of the great Ramana Maharshi. I spent three magical weeks with him in Lucknow, Northern India. Morning and evening, I would go to his house, where we would talk, eat meals, go for walks, or simply sit in silence together. During that time I had many deep experiences and profound insights. Sometimes the entire world seemed to become utterly transparent to me in ways that were truly mesmerizing. In spite of this, I was not convinced that any deep and profound shift had occurred at the core of my being. But just before I left him to return to Delhi, he declared, with utter confidence, that now "something big is going to happen."

The truth of his words began to dawn on me shortly after I sat down on the train, waiting for it to depart. My eyes suddenly closed, and I was drawn inward by an energetic presence that was compelling me towards itself. During those weeks

with my teacher, I had ceased to practice meditation, but now meditation was suddenly overtaking me. Since then my life has never been the same.

Shortly after my arrival in Delhi, I met up with a young Israeli woman I had befriended months earlier. Before I knew it, I was describing to her, with what felt like uncontrollable passion, the last few weeks of my life. I was stunned to discover that within minutes, she was as intoxicated as I was by a powerful presence that began emanating from me. Suddenly we were both sharing a higher state of consciousness. And before long, she experienced a Zen-like *satori* recognition of timelessness, and saw into the illusory nature of life and death, in the very same way that I had experienced at the feet of the Master. She started laughing uncontrollably. I was wondering, how did this happen? And this same kind of event occurred whenever I would talk to someone about what was welling up within me.

It was during those few days that I let go of my past unconditionally. One morning, when I woke up and opened my eyes, I saw water spiraling downward in a whirlpool. I knew that my life, Andrew's life, was no longer my own. It was as if Andrew's "plans" were all falling down and away, consumed by that whirlpool. Now I no longer knew what the future would hold. In that same instant, I saw and heard myself say out loud, as if from a distance, "I surrender my life to you. Do with me what you will." I was stunned and amazed. On and off during those days, and in the weeks that followed, I became aware of an unseen presence that, in one moment, seemed to be emanating from my solar plexus, and yet, in another, seemed to be following me everywhere. I literally felt like I was being consumed, almost physically, by that presence and at times it became so intense that I felt that if it didn't stop, there would be nothing left of me. My experience would shift constantly from terror and confusion to exhilaration and excitement to doubt as to whether any of this was real.

After a few days in Delhi, I took the overnight train to Bombay to visit my future wife. During the entire trip I was listening to Stevie Wonder's "I Just Called to Say I Love You" over and over on my Walkman. The reason I did this had nothing to do with any anticipation of seeing my lover. It was because each time I heard the irresistibly sweet chord changes, waves of ecstasy would bubble up from the center of my being to the surface of my awareness. I was overwhelmed and in a state of rapture, experiencing a kind of impersonal, absolute Love that I had not known since my spiritual initiation as a teenager. When I got to Bombay, my partner said she could see, when she looked into my eyes, that something had changed. But all I wanted to do was keep listening to that song. And when I played it for her, she too was catapulted into the same ecstatic state that I was in.

Having the direct experience of the absolute nature of spiritual love, or, to put it in theological language, the love of God, changes our understanding of what love is and what it means, *forever*. Now we can no longer mistake that which is merely personal and relative for that which is always impersonal and absolute. Once again, this is a significant distinction that a lot of spiritually minded people miss: the all-important difference between spiritual love, which is absolute, and non-spiritual or personal love, which is relative. And as I have explained, within these two categories, there are further important distinctions that need to be considered in our investigation of what love is. With regards to relative or personal love, I have touched on some of the most common ways it manifests in the first part of this chapter. Now I want to speak about some of the most important distinctions with regards to love that is absolute. In order to do this, I need to take you on a journey, all the way back to before the beginning of time . . .

Before the Big Bang, before the universe was born, there was no time and no space. Impersonal, absolute, always overwhelming love is the nature of that timeless, formless, unmanifest realm from whence we all came. Anyone who enters into a very deep state of meditation will discover this for themselves. Meditation means going beyond the mind. When we go beyond the mind, time disappears. When time disappears, the world disappears. When the world disappears, all that is left is awareness—awareness with no center whatsoever. A great Tibetan Buddhist master once called it “empty cognizance without an object.” This empty cognizance is timeless, formless Being. There is no-thing whatsoever in formless Being. But as this unmanifest domain awakens to and experiences the friction of contact with the manifest world of time and space, that very friction causes the simultaneous arising of that love which is absolute. Absolute or non-relative love is the manifest expression of that infinite eternal ground as it encounters the world of form and time. This love is the experience of consciousness as it perceives the world of time and form from the perspective of its own eternal nature. This is what we, human beings, experience as the love of God. The experience of this love is beginningless, endless, and ever-new. Because of its infinite nature, it always transcends any notion of individuality, any feeling of uniqueness, or any separate sense of identity whatsoever. It is the perennial, mystical awakening to “One without a Second.” In that love without another, there is only THAT.

The experience of absolute love as infinite, timeless Being is the discovery of the nature of God *at rest*. But God is not only at rest. God, I have come to understand, is also *Eros*, the creative impulse. When that primordial leap took place—from timelessness to time, from Being to Becoming, from nothing

to something—the manifestation and expression of the infinite nature of the Absolute changed *dramatically*. If Being is the nature of God at rest, Becoming is the nature of God in action—God as *Eros* or the *desire to exist* in time and form. What is the defining quality of the absolute desire to exist? Urgency. *Ecstatic* urgency. The creator God is experienced by human beings as simultaneous ecstasy and urgency. *Eros* is the experience of that ecstatic urgency. When do we experience it? First and foremost, we experience it as the desire to procreate, the sexual impulse. But we also experience *Eros* in more profound and significant ways, at higher levels of our own being. Human beings are the only life form that is compelled by an inner impulse to innovate and give rise to that which is new. The creative impulse is the pulsation of that original desire to exist, experienced within human consciousness as the drive towards innovation. Finally, at the highest level of development, the same drive is experienced as a spiritual impulse, the urge to evolve at the level of consciousness itself: “I *must* become more conscious.” Where does this spiritual aspiration come from? It comes from *Eros*, the Creator God, the source of our very existence.

So God is indeed Love Absolute! God is both timeless formless Being *and* the evolutionary impulse of ecstatic Becoming. God at rest is peace and desirelessness; but God as the Creator is ceaseless activity. Therefore, God as absolute love is both Timeless Being *and* ecstatic urgency. Appreciating these profound distinctions has significant implications in understanding how the love of God manifests in our world.

The love of God that emanates directly from the Ground of Being is the source of what is commonly referred to as “unconditional love.” This love recognizes no differences and makes no distinctions. It is the spiritual wellspring of all true healing, both of individuals and also of the entire world. The love of God that is *Eros*, however, has a different quality. It only ever seeks to create and give rise to that which is new, at any cost. And the more we awaken to it, the more we experience its powerful *demand* to give wholeheartedly to the evolutionary process. It is a force of nature, a vertical impulse in consciousness that creates new ideas, new inventions, and new worlds. It perpetually gives rise to higher potentials. Our understanding of what absolute love is must always contain both dimensions of this ultimate paradox.

So love is, indeed, a very difficult thing to talk about. And it is difficult because it is such a complex and multidimensional aspect of the human experience. What complicates the picture even more is that different individuals, at different levels of cultural, cognitive, moral, and spiritual development have very different capacities for love. Some are only able, at this point in time, to experience the most meager forms of personal

love, which may amount to little more than selfishness and greed. Others may be capable of deep love and affection for their fellow human beings, but have not yet stumbled upon the miraculous and life-transforming nature of absolute love. Some of those rare souls who have drunk deep from the source of the Absolute can literally no longer even relate to any dimension of personal or relative love, while others are able to embrace both dimensions simultaneously.

It is only highly evolved human beings who are capable of knowing what love is in all its multifaceted manifestations. And in the end, it is up to each and every one of us to heroically aspire to become a powerful expression of our own highest recognition of what love truly is.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Cohen, founder of EnlightenNext, is an internationally respected spiritual teacher, cultural critic, and evolutionary philosopher widely recognized as a defining voice in the emerging field of evolutionary spirituality. A life-changing awakening in 1986 brought Cohen to the end of his own search for liberation while simultaneously starting him on an exploration of the meaning and significance of enlightenment for our time. In 1992, Cohen released the first issue of the award-winning magazine *EnlightenNext* (formerly *What Is Enlightenment?*). Together with a growing network of “evolutionaries” and integral visionaries, he is helping to define a culture of thought that places spiritual transformation at the center of any vision of transforming the world. In 2009, Cohen launched the EnlightenNext Discovery Cycle, an integrated program of spiritual retreats, conferences, and forums for individual and collective evolution. Find out more at www.andrewcohen.org