

Bhakti – unconditional Love

At the last Kirtan, Swami told us that there isn't enough unconditional love; we do not act with bhakti, and in this year of lockdown, we have forgotten unconditional love. As the chanting resumed, my mind drifted (even though it shouldn't) and I remembered what I had learnt about unconditional love at the beginning of that year. I remembered my dad, and of course, the tears came out.

I haven't really known my dad. I didn't know who he was as a person. My parents separated when I was 7, and I never got a chance to have a relationship with him. I knew he was struggling, that life had not been easy on him, and that he could not be there for us. And as I grew up and started traveling overseas, I eventually gave up on the possibility of getting to know him – I left him too. My dad's throat cancer 10 years ago finally gave him a chance to stop hiding, and us to find each other. We didn't try to make up for the lost time, we didn't try to revive old memories, we simply shared moments. Talking a little, laughing softly, and sitting together.

One day last year, as I was sitting for meditation, I realised I had learnt to love unconditionally from my dad. Because I never got to know him, because I never expected anything from him, my love for him – which in spite of it all was very intense – was unconditional. I loved him for no reason, just out of love. That love was pure, untouched. I loved him like kids do – naturally and without ever questioning it. So I sent him flowers for the 1st of May, “the day of happiness” in France, and on the card thanked him for what he had taught me. Even if it meant that we didn't get to be with each other, that lesson was the most beautiful gift, and I wouldn't have wanted to do without. He died 7 weeks later, on the 21st of June, the first day of Spring, the “day of music”, and in that year, Fathers' Day.

I would not have known any of this without Swami's teachings, guidance, and LOVE; and without sharing my life with Kabir. At the beginning of last year, Kabir was going through a very rough time; in the space of six months, he had been hit, not by one, but two, road trains... The figurative version was not less painful than a physical one. So we talked a lot about love, and unconditional love. And as we went through that process, as we interrogated the past with deep emotions, and looked within ourselves and into each other, we experienced unconditional love, and learned to recognise it.

I realised it wasn't the first time I experienced it, but I had never been aware of it before, or I didn't know what it was. That love that surges, from within, without you initiating it or controlling it, and that you cannot explain with reasoning. I had felt it for our friend Pragya, as she was leaving this world. I felt her sorrow even though I knew nothing about her life. It felt like I *was* Pragya. I did not spend hours with her, I only wrote to her. It felt like I *had to* tell her something, even though I did not really know her. And as I was trying to hear that message and write to her, as I was “being with her” at night only in my mind, the concept of “me” did not exist; I could not be both her and me at the same time, even though there was still an aspect of myself that had to be there to transform that experience into words. Unconditional Love dissolves the barrier between ourselves and others. We can cease to be ourselves as an ego, and only use the skills, mind and body that our character happens to have, to express that love and be carried by it. That's when we become an instrument;

that's when we are real-ised, as in, made real; that's when our soul – or the Universe – creates something physical, through us.

I did not initiate any of this experience with Pragma, I was in someone else's hands, I only let it happen. My ego stopped being in control; I did not force it to, I wouldn't have known then I was even supposed to. Perhaps it happened by compassion. My ego receded naturally because there was something far more important than myself to attend. Bhakti, absolute devotion, is unconditional love.

Loving – loving unconditionally – is the closest we can be to “being a soul”. Raja Yoga teaches us that our soul is made of Love, presence and knowledge. “Our soul does not love, it is Love itself”. As everyday people, we can be a soul, by loving.

A little girl once asked me what love was. How do we love? I had no prepared answer. But as I had spent the day with her parents, some good friends who I only get to see rarely, I told her loving is being fully present, and opened. It is being there with that person, that bird or that tree, and being completely with them, without any thought going through your mind or any distraction. Simply being with them, fully, with all your attention.

Young children actually do this by default, they have no other way of being. They love unconditionally always. The only unusual part in the experience with my dad, was that my unconditional love for him was carried over to adulthood; it never became conditioned. As we grow up, we are trained to condition our love for others on our likes and dislikes, without knowing it's happening. We can forget even the love for our parents, because we do not like what they did or do, or who they are. But that love does not go away, it's only hidden – by our ego, our judgment. Unconditional love is also the love some can feel for their children, particularly the little ones whose lives depend on you; you love them immensely and unquestionably, regardless of what they are, do or look like. We all have experienced unconditional love; the only difference is that, as yogi, we need to live it constantly – and consciously. Transforming these instants of love into a way-of-life. Turning minutes into hours, hours into days, and days into years, through constant practice – Abhyasa.

When I went back to the field in inland Australia after last month Kirtan, my student welcome me with a big tantrum before she left. I'm not sure what her real annoyance and motivation were, but that really upset me; I am not used to such conflicting interactions. I knew it may be my last visit to the desert, and I was alone, so I did not want to spoil the experience. I had to fight my mind and ego telling me how she did me wrong, I just did not want to have these thoughts. And after a week, I wondered why I was loving so much that little bird that I was observing that day. And as, before leaving, I was releasing the praying mantis that had been sharing the house with me for a few days, I became for a moment a little praying mantis, cleaning her tiny feet, after I had carried her in the dustpan...

We can be a soul if we choose to, it all depends on where we put our attention. Anything that we experience that isn't love, any bad thought, takes us away from our soul. That “punishment” is immediate and inescapable, even when we are alone, in the middle of the desert, with no one else to witness. We can force ourselves to BE different.
