



What is Universal Love?

By Swami Jyotirmayananda

The practice of universal love is the foundation for all religious movements, and one who is truly religious emanates the fragrance of that love. Before you can love on such a scale, however, you have to understand what love really is.

In Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Sage Yajnavalkya, while teaching philosophy to his wife, Maitreyi, says, “*Atmanastu kamaya sarvam priyam bhavati*”—“For the sake of the Self, all becomes dear.” But Self in this context does not mean the little self; the great Sage was referring to the Universal Self.

Deep within your heart lies your true identity. What you think you are is not really who you are. In the Old Testament of the Bible, Moses asked God, “What is your name?” And God answered, “I am That am I.” That “I am” is an internal awareness of God’s presence in your heart. In other words, your real identity is the Self—you are essentially One with God.

This truth pressures everyone, and deep down inside, we all have an innate urge to discover our unity with God. No matter how long it takes, no matter how many embodiments you may have to go through, the final destination for the soul is the discovery that “I am one with the Divine Self.” Like rivers flowing into the ocean, all souls flow into God.

But because of the mind’s limitations, the pressure of truth is refracted. The urge to be united with God is misdirected into the pursuit of finite

perceptions of love. In other words, your mind goes after various things of the world with a sense of leaning upon them for fulfillment. If you investigate this process carefully, you will realize that through immeasurable time you have incarnated countless times and that in each embodiment you have found objects and people to love: yet there has never been, nor can there ever be, any fulfillment in such love.

To capture universal love, you must first outstep the concept of love held by the vast majority of people in the world. When people are told that universal love is good, they usually misunderstand.

They think of that practice as giving license for uncontrolled displays of passion. But this is not love at all. Even if you are not religious or philosophical, common sense dictates that in the pursuit of love there must be a sense of responsibility. You must harmonize with the people you love, and adapt and adjust. It isn’t all just “fun.”



An Evolving Concept of Love

When you see things from a spiritual point of view, you begin to understand the deeper love that you feel in your heart and you want to fulfill it. Your concept of love evolves as you become more integrated and mature. Here is a simple outline of this process:

A person in the process of evolving first discovers his love for his family. He showers tenderness and kindness on his family members, but he cares for no one outside the family circle. Such a person may even hurt, cheat, and be cruel to others in the name of securing wealth and prosperity for his family. He never thinks of such behavior as being contrary to reason. Rather, he finds it perfectly rational that everything ought to be solely for his family's benefit. This is the most limited concept of love there is.

But then as you become a more cultured person spiritually, you begin to understand that to secure family harmony and also get deeper fulfillment for yourself you must reach out to people beyond the family circle and be of use to your community. So your mind tells you that you ought to love your neighbors and show goodwill towards the people around you. This is a good development because it means that your mind is getting a little more ventilation: at least you've managed to open a tiny window to the Absolute.

But here again the mind gets cramped and thinks, "I don't care what happens to other neighborhoods in other cities, as long as my neighborhood here in Miami is kept safe. If criminals come around here, send them to California!" And this is what people call love. True, it's grown a little—you're not as narrow as you were before—but your view of love is still cramped.

The next stage of love involves the feelings you have for your country and homeland. A kind of national pride arises. You're always excited when some thing good happens to your country and it enjoys prosperity. But once again there is limitation. If something bad happens to another country, what do you care?

But as you grow further, you realize that all nations are interlinked. The world has shrunk and nations depend on each other a great deal more than they did in the past. This means that to promote happiness, harmony and economic security in your country, you must promote happiness, harmony and economic security all over the world.

So now you are growing in love. You realize that you belong to the world-family, but again there is a limitation. Your mind says, "Human beings are the only creatures I should care about." But if you analyze love more deeply at this point, you will realize that even animals are expressions of God; God is working through them, too. All living things constitute your family, your inner being, just as countless cells constitute your body.

If you stretch your imagination further, the entire universe becomes an expression of God; therefore, love cannot be confined just to this planet and all the creatures that exist on it. Actually the entire universe is the body of the great Universal Self. There are undoubtedly countless world systems in the universe. If aliens from another planet visited Earth, would you hate them, knowing that God abides in all? The ideal is to love all life forms, no matter how unfamiliar they may be.

According to karmic law, through countless embodiments you have found yourself in different relationships. Everyone has had millions of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and so forth. In fact, as you look about you, you are seeing your relatives everywhere. Why should you at this moment feel that your relatives are confined to just one little house, or that they belong to just one little family circle? Everybody has been related to you in some way or another. The reason that you come into closer relationships with people like your parents and siblings is because of the interplay of karma. Through the karmic process, souls come together in different relationships and then separate. If you adopt this form of thinking, you realize that love can never be confined to just one family, society, nation, or planet. It cannot be confined at all.



Rise above attachment and hatred

Universal love cannot be kindled through a sentimental process. If, in trying to love everyone,

you become so agitated that you forget about doing your duties at home or even about going to work, that isn't universal love; it's just sentimentality.

You can love on a universal basis if you discover God within yourself and understand God to be the underlying Reality behind the world. Therefore, when you do your duties to human beings, you are loving God in them. When you serve your family, friends, and society at large, you are loving God in them. When you view your actions in this light, impressions of attachment and hatred do not arise. As you push away attachment and hatred and transcend your ego, you discover universal love. So, before you can love one and all with a depth of wisdom and compassion, you have to rise beyond attachment and hatred.



The Lady and the Hawk

Attachment is not love—as this parable from the Middle East illustrates:

There was once a king who was fond of hawking. He would take his favorite hawk with him on his hunting expeditions to the forest, release it, and then wait while it hunted. Sometimes prey was scarce, so the hawk would soar high in the sky, looking down on the forest below. Now deep in this forest an old woman lived all alone in a hut. The hawk would fly down and land on the windowsill of the old woman's hut and peer through the tiny window. Everything in the hut looked so cozy and comfortable to the hawk. Usually the old woman had a nice fire going, and he always could smell wonderful things cooking. Each time he stopped by, the hawk thought how wonderful it would be to go inside.

Soon the hawk was taking every opportunity he could get to come and gaze through the little window. The old woman also became drawn to the hawk and one day asked, "Why don't you come inside, my dear?" This invitation was just what the hawk wished for.

"Yes, yes," his wings fluttered! So the old woman unlatched the window and let him in. "I'm so glad you're here," she exclaimed. "You're my beautiful little baby. I'm going to take good care of you. You won't have to fly around anymore looking for food; you won't have to work for someone. From now on you'll be with me. Now let's see. First I'll clip your wings. Then I'll tie your legs with this pretty silken thread. And look, here's your cage. Isn't it roomy? Now you'll always be here with your mommy!"

The first day was wonderful for the hawk. He felt better than he had ever felt in his life. No one had ever treated him as tenderly as had the old woman. But by the next day the hawk had already started missing the freedom of flight and the challenges to be met in the open sky, and he soon felt miserable. By this time the king was worried about him, so the next day he organized a search party. The hawk was finally found and taken back to the palace. It gradually recovered from the trauma of captivity, but not before the king had scolded him severely for his stupidity.

The idea behind the parable is that every soul is a hawk. It belongs to the open sky of eternity, but because of ignorance, it looks through the little window of the ego into a narrow sphere of the sense-world. The world of senses seems so alluring; every thing is so clear and concise. But there is so much entanglement waiting. The unwitting soul becomes enmeshed until God, the King, showers His grace upon it and frees it.



Serve Without Expectation

To develop universal love, one must turn to good association and learn the art of loving God in humanity. As you learn the art of loving God, you automatically become inclined toward serving others selflessly without expecting anything in return.

As long as you expect something in return for your meritorious actions, you are not a selfless person, you are not practicing universal love. As long as you jot down all the good deeds you do for other people, enter them into your computer, and then wait to see what sort of response will be forthcoming as a result of them, you are not practicing universal love. You have missed the spirit of this great practice. And when people don't respond to you the way you would like them to, you get angry and dislike them! This is not how universal love should be practiced.



Seeing God in All

When you practice universal love, you don't have to bother about people's identity, or their religious beliefs. You are actually helping yourself when you help other people because your own self encompasses all. You please God, Who becomes your central target.

You begin to realize that all human beings are expressions of God; all are media for God's presence. God comes to you through your enemies and your friends. If He comes to you as an enemy, it is a greater challenge to love Him. The challenge is not to hate your enemies, but at the same time, to do your best to protect yourself from harm. Seeing the Self in all does not mean that practical realities should be ignored.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa gave a humorous example of this. There was once a guru who taught his disciples that they should see God everywhere. One young man left the *satsanga* profoundly inspired; he had made up his mind that he was going to practice universal love. On his way home he saw an elephant trotting down the road. The elephant had gotten loose and was not in its right mind. Seconds later the elephant's keeper came running after him and shouted, "Get out of the road quick!" But the aspirant said, "No!"

He thought to himself, "All is God. Why should I get out of the way? I am a practitioner of universal love. God is approaching me in the form of an elephant. I shall not be daunted."

So he remained in the middle of the road. The elephant bore down on him and in one great sweep knocked him aside with its trunk. Fortunately, the aspirant wasn't crushed, but he did receive some nasty cuts and bruises. Later that day he went to see his guru and said, "Guruji, I was practicing universal love, and look how I was rewarded."

The guru told him, "Yes, my son, I did tell you to see God in all. But you started seeing God only in the elephant and not in the man who warned you to get out of the road. There was your error."

The moral of Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa's story is that one cannot ignore the practical realities in one's life. Handle your practical realities intelligently, but inwardly promote the understanding that God operates through every individual.

For this you should harbor no ill will towards anyone; you should not create karmic entanglements of any kind. You must embark on a project in which you continually renounce the sense of I-ness and mine-ness until they are eliminated from your personality. I-ness and mine-ness cloud one's intellect. As soon as this happens, delusion develops; you grope in semi-darkness, where every glow-worm gives you a sense of joy.

This kind of love that people talk about at the mass level is just like searching for tiny glow-worms in the darkness. At times it may seem exciting, but for the most part it is like running after smoke. Real love is like going after the sun. Such is the contrast between love of God and the human mind's conception of love based on ego.

All this does not mean, however, that you should just shun your realities. A mother must love her child. What she needs to do, though, is to remember that what makes her child so adorable is the Divine Presence in the child—as well as in all her dear relatives.

Once you do this you will no longer be frustrated. You become immune to frustrations

because you are constantly loving God. But when you love a human being, as a human being, you will have expectations. Due to expectations, you are bound to develop attachment one day and hatred the next. So you must strive to engender the kind of philosophy that allows your mind to rise above attachment and hatred and the very sense of ego.

You have to have a constant awareness that God is the innermost reality in you. He is the embodiment of infinite love. And you do not have to go somewhere to find that infinite love; it's right inside of you. It is the ego that creates separation.

Your project as a spiritual aspirant is to allow the ego to dissolve through meditation, devotion, selfless service and wisdom. Constant meditation allows you to push yourself beyond your ego. *Bhakti*, or devotion, is practiced by repetition of mantra, prayer, study of devotional works, and devout meditation. You also develop love of God by serving Him in others selflessly. In Jnana Yoga you constantly enquire, "Who am I?" You attempt to discover that the real "you" is not your ego. You gradually begin to look at your ego with a sense of detachment.

An uncontrolled ego is like a monkey in a circus. One minute the monkey screams with joy, the next

it kicks its legs with great sorrow. And you are so amused by the sight. You don't realize that's how your own ego behaves. The ego is prone to jump and dance when someone praises you, or roll on the ground in humiliation if someone ignores or censures you.

With this in mind, you should take a good hard look at your ego and detach yourself from it. If you can do this, you will discover the majesty of universal love. Your heart will begin to pulsate with the heart of all, and your compassion will flow without restriction.

In the words of the great prayer for universal welfare: "*Sarvesham swastir bhavatu; Sarvesham shantir bhavatu; Sarvesham purnam bhavatu; Sarvesham mangalam bhavatu*"—"May there be auspiciousness for all; May there be peace for all; May there be fullness for all; May there be prosperity for all."

This is the kind of heart that Saints and Sages like Buddha and Christ possessed. And you yourself are a potential Buddha and Christ. You have the kind of heart that can flow with feeling for all, a heart that does not harbor hatred, anger, greed, or anything gross. Such a heart is the residence of universal love, and may it unfold within you by the blessings of God!



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