

Love is Not a Feeling

By Doug McGill

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"The One Reality is Love: Six Evenings Exploring a Miracle")*

We've been exploring and set as our goal to investigate the question of what is our true nature. I almost said our true nature as human beings. But even to say that is to say too much because what if our true nature is not human?

What if our true nature is something else. What if our true nature was the same as a cat or a dog or a fox or a flower? That's what we are doing and more specifically we are explicitly testing, in our own experience, an answer that's been given to this question by mystics and contemplatives for thousands of years from all traditions, including Buddhism and the inner traditions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

The answer that is given by these mystical traditions is that our true nature is love. That sounds pretty good, but can we be more specific? What more did the sages say, especially along the lines of what exactly does that mean and how can we do it? How can we do it? How can we in very practical terms accomplish this knowing of our true nature as love?

The sages are forthcoming on that answer, which is that love is the felt experience of non-separateness. Not the idea of non-separateness, not the aspiration or the ambition to feel not separate from other other beings, but the actual felt experience of non-separateness right now, in this moment and every moment. To feel not separate from not just other people but animals, plants, and everything including objects—to know that concretely in our experience. To know it not only as concretely, but far more concretely and certainly than we know this (raps knuckles on the wood floor).

Can we know non-separateness with even more certainty and clarity than we know this table is solid, which by the way it really isn't? The sages answer yes. We're testing that hypothesis, by checking it over and over again in our own experience, because we recognize that if we were able to know the feeling of non-separateness with this kind of clarity and certainty, then conflict would vanish from our lives.

Because what possible good would ever come from harming any other being, human or otherwise, if we recognize that we are them, and they are us, and we are one?

So this is a very practical investigation we are doing, with potentially world-changing results.

We read a poem last week written by the Buddha, probably shortly after his enlightenment while he was still in his 30s, still a young man. In the poem he talked

about how he'd felt desperate when he looked over the human landscape and saw people fighting all the time. Fearful, arming themselves against attacks real and imagined, and he wondered if there was a way out of this for human beings.

The Buddha told how he struggled and searched and finally did find what he called a thorn in the heart that was the cause of all unnecessary suffering. Just one single thorn in the heart that caused human beings to be fearful and separate from one another.

He identified this single thorn, this one single cause of all conflict at all levels, as what he called "I making." The making of an I. He said that it is because of "I making" that we see ourselves as separate. It makes sense, doesn't it? Because if I see myself as an I, and we can each check in our own experience, the moment I feel like I am separate being from other beings, it hurts, there is tension in the body and mind.

Like I could think about myself as Doug McGill with a story and a gender and a nationality. You can really feel the tension with nationality, patriotism. We feel the armor go up around us. We see the walls go up around our borders, both around our hearts and literally between us and Mexico, our army and navy, our nuclear defense shield.

"Fear is born from arming oneself," was the first line of the Buddha's poem. And the reason we put up those defenses, he explains later in the poem, are the thoughts "this is mine" and "that is theirs."

The moment we start to engage in the making of that I, that's the thorn in the heart, that's the cause of all conflict. The feeling that we are separate.

The remedy for that would be to know ourselves as something different, not separate from other beings. And also, interestingly enough, not even connected with other beings. Because connected means there are two things that are connected. So no, not seeing ourselves as connected with other beings, but being essentially the same as other beings. Made of the same stuff, all a part of the same reality.

Seeing ourselves this way naturally, as our default mentality, that would be the remedy, and that was the dharma that the Buddha went on to teach for the rest of his life.

The Dhamma is a teaching in non-separateness. It's a set of teachings on how to not make an "I," how to not hold yourself as an "I." The dharma was the Buddha's thorn removal system, where the thorn was the thought of ourselves as a separate "I."

So what we are doing in these weeks is within that overall view we are going to see if we can find some practices to do that allow us to understand ourselves in this very tangible and direct way, as being non-separate from others. That means working with the nitty-gritty of our experience. The real experience that we are having right now.

Last week we started to get into the nitty-gritty. Last week was knowing the body.

When we start to do the work of understanding, I-making, thorn removal, we want to see how do we make the I, how do we do it. The way to start is to ask, what do we normally take ourselves to be? what do we normally take to be our true nature?

What we normally take ourselves to be is a collection of thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions. If you look at thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions, that's the totality of our lived experience and that is what we normally take ourselves to be: a kind of grab-bag of all those things.

Sometimes we think we are the body, sometimes we think we are thoughts, a lot of times we think we are our emotions especially when we are having strong emotions.

Like in a heavy love affair, we look each other in the eye and say "You make me feel so alive!" Like bungee jumping or riding a unicycle on the cliff's edge. All thoughts, feelings, sensation and perceptions go to a high level in such activities and when we feel all of these really intensely in our body in mind, we think that is something solid and real and we say: "That's me." "I am feeling my emotions intensely. I am alive!"

But this approach gets us into trouble because what is the nature of every single experience we have in life? It's impermanent. It comes and it goes. And so that gives us the feeling that we, our true nature, comes and goes and so we get stuck in an endless cycle of trying to feel things intensely in order to feel alive, to feel like what we think of as ourselves. It doesn't even matter if the feeling are pleasant or unpleasant, they just need to be intense to satisfy the need to feel like the emotions make an "I."

All the time we are grabbing after emptiness because everything—all thoughts, emotions, sensations and perception—are fleeting. Good luck capturing even a single thought it is so fast-moving. Emotions, you feel really strong and pumped either negatively or positively for a while and then later its like, how come I ever felt that way?

Body sensations, my hip and my knee are hurting, within a few days the pain will be gone. Even within one minute, the pain changes around, it is never in the same place.

All body sensations are like that and in the end, the body itself completely disappears.

Perceptions—sights, sounds, tastes, touch, smells—all the same thing, all impermanent. We pin our sense of self on all of these impermanent things, we make the "I" out of these things.

If we identify ourselves with something that is impermanent that will naturally create fear. Because if I am my body, I'm going to be fearful because my body isn't going to make it out of this world alive. It is impermanent. So if I think I'm my body or in my body, I'm fearful because I think if my body ceases to exist then I will cease to exist.

A lot of us as we get older we get afraid of dementia. If we think we are our mind we get fearful because what happens to me if I lose my mind, then I will lose myself—I will no longer be me. I will lose me. It is very frightening.

There are many people who have lost one or more of their perceptions and they are living examples that their essence isn't in the least bit hurt by becoming, for example, deaf or blind. We should take a huge amount of wisdom from that, nevertheless we tend to think if I lose my sight or hearing I would somehow become less of a person.

Helen Keller didn't have sight or hearing or speech and yet she was a giant of a person. Her lack of sight and hearing didn't make her one whit less of a person, didn't even make the slightest dent or crack in her true nature as a giant of a being.

So we look around for what is our true nature and now that we are starting our third week, we reflect that in our second and third weeks we noticed that in the totality of our life there is one thing that is different from all the other things. There is one thing in our experience which turns out not to be impermanent but on the contrary is always and everywhere present, and never harmed or perturbed at all by what happens.

I'm trying to avoid calling this one thing an experience because its not really an experience. I'm talking about our awareness. Its not an experience because it's what knows all experience. Is what all experience arises within, and is known within.

Awareness is that in which all other experiences arise. Like right now, check your experience, you hear my voice, you hear the chair or the cushion, you are having thoughts, you're having feelings, you are flashing into the past or the future possibly.

But there is something that knows all those things, that is aware of all those things.

Let's for now call it a space in which all those things are appearing and being known.

And so that catches our attention. Now we are curious. Could that be it? Could this thing which for now we are calling awareness or consciousness be what we truly are?

Is his glimmer of understanding starting to pull us towards what our true nature really is? Could it be awareness itself? Could our true nature be consciousness itself.

It seems like an hypothesis worth exploring. That's what we are doing in these weeks.

So we start to do tests and explorations, investigations in our direct experience.

For example, we want to test whether awareness is always present. So throughout the day, from the moment we wake up until the moment we fall asleep, we start to ask ourselves: "Am I aware?" And very soon we are able to confirm that indeed, no one ever notices a time when they are not aware. Awareness is indeed always present. Another word for "always present" would be eternal. Awareness appears to be eternal.

Having got this far we notice a couple of other qualities and then a lightbulb goes on.

We notice that awareness never resists anything. It allows everything. Now there is something in us that might not like a certain thing that is coming up but awareness itself will be there to notice and register it and hold it, no matter what our thinking mind is saying we should or shouldn't be doing in response to the thing.

Thus awareness seems to be very allowing, very generous, very capacious. And there are times that we notice in our life and last Thursday night two or three of these actual instances came up, we've noticed that when a situation arises when there is tension, difficulty, impatience, or anything that might fall into the category of suffering or unhappiness, if we shift our attention or identity away from the sticky situation, towards the awareness that knows that situation, we become non-reactive, non-judgmental, extremely patient, not attached but ready to act when a good possibility pops up.

All that by simply identifying ourselves as the awareness of whats going on as opposed to the particulars or the content of what appears to be going on.

Now if we put all of those qualities together, we notice something.

We notice that the qualities of awareness that we are noticing, sound a lot like what we would hope that love itself would have and be: always there, always on, totally allowing, non-reactive and seems to open possibilities for healthy, helpful, caring, wise action to arise. Doesn't this sound like awareness is a pretty good candidate for love?

This is where our investigations are pointing: that awareness is love and that we may know ourselves as love by knowing ourselves as awareness, in any moment.

This appears to give us a very specific "place" to go to know and be love. Yet it is specific in an odd way because awareness is not an object. It is that within which all objects—thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions—arise and disappear. It is that from which all objects are made and by which all objects are known. In this way it could not possibly have any objective qualities of its own. And yet there does seem to be this mysteriously specific quality to awareness that draws our attention towards it, like the attraction of a magnet or love itself, that is noticeable and undeniable.

We begin to feel, after investigating this pull towards awareness after a while, that we could continue to get to know awareness better, and that we could perhaps eventually shift our sense of self away from thoughts, sensations, feelings and perceptions and towards the awareness in which all of those appear and disappear. Finally perhaps we could explore the possibility in our own direct experience of settling our attention in awareness and abide as the always open, empty, allowing space of awareness.

We could try living a life from that standpoint. As awareness. And if we did that and if we thought of awareness as love in that way, that would not be any kind of wishy

washy or vague sense of love, it would be a very practical thing. I wrote down four words I thought it would be: practical, workable, accessible and reliable.

Like a swiss army knife. Infinite numbers of blades coming out of that thing. Great for thorn removal under all conditions. And you can open a wine bottle too. You would always be able to spiral your way into and out of hard situations and remove obstacles.

That's what we are doing these weeks, seeing if it might be possible to understand our true nature as awareness. We are exploring whether awareness is a good candidate for love. Love being the highest thing we value—the living from non-separateness.

So let me give a little intro to a guided meditation.

There will be two parts and the first part will be an invitation to abide as awareness, to see if we could for this period of time, maybe longer, shift our sense of identity away from thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions, and to awareness.

The second part of the guided meditation will be applying ourselves as awareness to the experience that we call emotions. Emotions being a part of life that delivers a lot of what we consider to be the best things, but also many of the most difficult things. So we might ask when awareness touches emotions what happens?

As we segue into the guided meditation, recalling that we have been training ourselves to know the body as a body, as a sensation. Putting aside thoughts and memories about the body and to just know the body as sensation, so we will draw on that skill.

The other thing to keep in mind as we do this experiment of awareness in relation to emotions, to pause and get clear in our minds what an emotion really is. In this meditation we will look right at emotions. We can use a Buddhist definition of emotions here which is helpful which is emotions are the body's reactions to thoughts. It's very helpful to come back to that idea over and over. Emotions are the body's reactions to thoughts. That means that every emotion has two component, one is a feeling in the body and the other is a story in the mind. A series of thoughts. The story part of an emotion can have a lot of different thoughts going in many directions. If we try to look at our emotions trying to sort them out it can get confusing because emotions are confusing. What we want to keep in mind as we go into this practice is there's a way to cut through all of that confusion really efficiently and cleanly. That is to remember the Buddha's instruction that what we are talking about a single thorn. That goes for all emotions no matter how big and hairy and difficult. That means when we look at the story part of an emotion we can forget everything except one thing, which is how the story is making an "I." How there is something in us that is trying to make an "I" out of all the many other things. The story part of an emotion is all about an "I." What we want to train ourselves to do is that at any time, with any emotion, we want to be able to go right to that part of the emotion, see it clearly, and let it go by not getting attached.

See the thorn of “I-making” in this way. You don't have to try to pull it out, because simply to see it is to pull it out. That's what awareness does. To be tested of course.

With any emotion, just keep an eye on how all the stories that proliferate out of the emotion all are connected to the story of “I” and don't do any with it except to open to it and be aware of it ...

(Guided Meditation from 30:26 to 58:00)

It's good to look at the doubts in the mind that come up in meditations like these. Those doubts are beautiful because they are illusions of separateness that are stepping forward and asking to be seen through. We are all here because we want to see all the way through our doubts to experience love as our true nature. We want to see through any obstacles, any veils, any hindrances to love. Sometimes they come up as tensions in the body. Sometimes they come up as thoughts like "No this can't be. The body can't be a cloud. Give me a break!" That kind of thing.

That would be a good thought to notice and question, among others.

Q: In the past when we did meditation I would think of "Karen awareness," that piece of awareness that is aware of what Karen's movie is about, what Karen's story is about. Which is still attaching myself to a self. So what we were thinking about tonight and talking I was stretching myself to think of Karen awareness, which is a term I've used with myself, how I distance myself from myself by calling it Karen awareness. There really is no Karen awareness there is just awareness. That is the “Aha!” for me that I'm trying to articulate. But if there's no Karen awareness and there is only awareness, this is where you can make the leap of faith that we are all one. And there must be no impermanence to this awareness. If the Karen body is going to be gone, Karen awareness didn't exist in the first place, so it can't be impermanent. So there's just this overriding awareness that is permanent. It's always there. It's eternal.

A. Beautiful. That's a description of experience and not of thought. Does it feel a little bit tentative? The reason I ask that is, my experience is that in the early going we push ourselves to language that's in accord with our new experience and because it's the first time we are feeling and experiencing and saying it, it can feel like we are talking a new language. Is this right?

Q: I think that's why I wanted trying to say it out loud.

A: If you feel like you're at a point where you want to language it, it's important to do that. Because we think largely in language and a part of what we are doing here is laying down new tracks. A lot of what goes on in our mind in the way of thoughts is, we are not thinking any new thoughts, we are just saying the same old thoughts over and over. Because we've heard them so often over the years. We know them well. The people in advertising know this well. You just say something over and over enough times and pretty soon everyone is saying it. Our minds are doing that all the time,

repeating the same thoughts over and over until we accept them not because we recognize their truth, but because belief becomes a habit. It's important for us to listen to the language of truth, which is wisdom, when it starts to pop up. Wisdom is language that is describing actual reality. It usually is fairly quiet and subtle at the beginning and a big hard to hear. It's good to hear those words spoken out loud.

Q: One thing I've found in my my sitting is that there's a little spot between breaths, there's no word thought in that one little spot. If a person were to focus on that spot, which I've tried, one can become more aware of awareness. I've found that word thought does not exist in that particular little spot for me anyway. Is that true for you?

A: For me, I'm not sure when gaps will appear between thoughts, it could be between breaths or it could be during the breaths. In my experience, the gaps between thoughts don't only occur in the intervals between breathing. But sometimes it seems to me that the gap of no-thought is perhaps a little more likely to occur during the interval at the bottom of the out breath and before the in-breath. As one is watching to notice exactly when the in-breath begins, waiting and watching, the mind can become very quiet.

Q: When you said that we think in words, we also think in images.

A: Absolutely. Thoughts appear in two forms, as words and as images.

Q: What helps me is if I just keep in mind and be aware that there is a true "I" and there is my perception of "I." By being aware of that I go to that, the true "I." And with that comes love.

Q: That sounds a little similar to an experience I had which is if I try to abide in awareness, the big awareness, my Rick awareness can claim it as "his" awareness. Then I find myself being Rick-aware and it's very subtle. Perhaps it's the same experience you are having Riki. Then I can kind of notice, "Oh, Rick's there now!" Rick is saying it's his awareness but I can see that, that it's in a larger awareness.

A: How do you notice Rick awareness? What is noticed?

Q: It comes with verbalizations or it comes with ... When you said "Karen-awareness" I said yes, "Rick awareness." Because Rick knows how to sit here and be quiet there is a certain awareness that Rick has but then there is the deep background awareness, something like that. When you asked us to tap into emotion, Rick was very present with that. So I could feel a little bit of a yuck underneath, I recall that emotion, a little of a 'yuck," in here ... (points to chest). That can be "Rick awareness" claiming that as his.

A: Interesting that you called that feeling yuck. Inwardly, how many of you, in noticing your "self" in that conventional way, would it feel yucky? I would put my hand up on that one. The feeling of Doug is yucky. In the conventional way of trying to be somebody, or to achieve something, even something like peace or happiness, the

striving for that and for identity, all of that hurts. It's felt as a pattern of tensions throughout the body, stomach, heart, chest and throat. It feels yucky. What a burden.

Q: I wasn't attaching yuck to the feeling of yuck but a feeling of yuck that "Rick was against." Aversion towards the yuck, kind of pushing it away. Then it was also possible to watch that and see that Rick was within the larger awareness as was this mini-dissatisfaction with the yuck. So I was going back and forth between a deeper awareness and a Rick awareness.

A: I've noticed a tendency of the mind to think, for example, that "Rick awareness" is a thing, like the Rick that was experiencing could be found. The feeling of yuckiness suggests there is a person, an actual identity, that is feeling that feeling, but can that person be found? Can that "I" be found? When we look into our experience, did anyone run across anything that remotely resembled an "I" during the half you spent earnestly continuously looking within awareness. Did any actual person show up? Did "I" show up? The activity of feeling bad was noticed, but was there a person found to whom the feeling was happening? Or was it more like everything was a flow, an activity, things were happening but there was no "I" to be found to whom it was happening, or who was making it happen. I mean this quite literally. In life, we usually assume that if we talk about something that's real, that we should be able to see it directly, know it. If we can't find in our own experience something we could call an "I," why do we say that it exists? If all we can find is the activity of suffering but not the being or person to whom it is suffering, why don't we accept that the activity is happening and that identifying with that suffering, that "yuckiness," is creating an illusion of an "I" but that no such independent and separate "I" really exists? Why don't we believe our experience? Part of this practice is to honestly look around and say do we find anything in our experience that we could accept as being an "I." We check our thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions—that's the totality of experience. What I noticed is that thoughts are coming and going, feelings are coming and going, sensations are coming and going, perceptions are coming and going, and they are all being known. But no "knower" is ever found. I have never run across a knower. I have only noticed knowing, without a knower. I never run across the Doug that I have been carrying around, building and trying to build for 59 years. I do notice a continuous awareness of things that are happening that's much looser and lighter than the Doug I thought I was. A continual noticing of the activities of seeing, sensing, perceiving and feeling. And lo and behold, life goes on and decisions continue to be made and better decisions tend to get made. I would call that the action of love because love is wise.

Q: On the question of I, there is definitely a feeling of I. If I feel embarrassed, and I blush, is there a feeling of I? Yes, and I feel it right here, huge. Or if I'm angry, does Rick exist? In a certain sense yes because it's filling me up. It comes and goes and in the subtleness of the meditation the feeling is there and then the feeling is abandoned. So in that sense it's intangible or ephemeral. But I wouldn't want to say that Rick doesn't exist. That is very important.

A: The Buddha would say that I-making exists and it hurts. It's also impermanent from the standpoint of awareness. The illusion of the continuous Rick exists, but it's an illusion. It's temporary and will be over soon. It's a good idea to hang out in awareness so you don't make decisions based on that temporary hurt and structure your life around that. But rather from awareness you can just notice it arise and pass.

Q: Can you elaborate on decisions being made? That seems I-ish to me. It's hard to imagine of we are all one, and yet we are all making decisions. It seems that decisions cause conflict. How would it be that there would be a harmony across all these decision points?

A: I want to answer that by weaving in answers to some of the other questions that came up. Referencing what is consistent on awareness teachings throughout all these traditions. Which is that the position of identifying as awareness, which is what Karen called Karen Awareness—that you are no longer Karen, yet you find that being Karen Awareness works better for a while because there is more of a looseness to it. This position of being a Karen Awareness is like a halfway point between being totally identified as your suffering self, on the one hand, and not identifying with anything, not even awareness itself, on the other, which is true freedom and liberation. In this halfway-stage, you identify as the witness of things that are happening. The thing to realize at this point is that you are still identifying as something. What you are identifying with is a lot subtler than the suffering mind or the body, and you have achieved some amount of distance from suffering in this position. But identifying as the witness is still an identification and in that sense a kind of grasping or clutching. There's still some duality left because awareness is here, A, and there is something happening over there, B, and A is aware of B. There's still a subject and an object, a duality. It's better than being a tight little contraction called "me." Because there is at least some space between the A and the B which is a kind of freedom and non-attachment. Identifying as awareness, that's the second position, and you make better decisions then, but it's not the whole way. There is a third position, and you make the best decisions from the third step. We are working our way towards the third step in these six weeks. In the third step you release identification from anything, including from the witnessing presence of awareness. In this step you rest as awareness and you start to notice that everything is happening within this one awareness. In this position, there is not space, because all things are happening in the same spaceless space of awareness, and there is no time, because all things are happening right now. Space and time are clearly seen as thoughts, as concepts artificially superimposed onto the present where everything is happening, without separation in space of time. So for example from the perspective of me-as-awareness, not identifying a "me" there but just being there, there is no difference between me and you, Randy, because you are happening in me, within my awareness. When you speak and I hear your thoughts, there is no difference between me-as-awareness listening to your thoughts as you verbalize them, and me-as-awareness listening to my own thoughts being spoken silently and yet in their own way quite loudly in my head. You see? They are both equal, arising and passing away in dimensionless awareness. Also I see you, I sense your energy, your posture, to some degree your intentions, your mood and whatever else,

and I hold all of that within awareness and I try to offer back to you, or notice what naturally arises in response to you, something that makes sense out of that wholeness. It's like my own mind is asking the question you just asked me because it was asked within me, me-as-awareness. And it's an important question to me because it's an important question to you, because it arose in my awareness. It just so happened that it seemed to come out of an apparent body six feet away from me. That's what my senses and perceptions are telling me—that's what my conceptual mind is telling me. But my direct awareness is telling me that a question arose within me, I want to answer it for my self. My big self not my small self. Because it arose in me. There's no difference. Do you see what I mean? So right now we are just talking about the level, you asked a good question and I'm trying to give you a good answer. But you were talking about how conflict often comes up in decision making. Conflict will arise if I see you as different from me. But if I see you as the same as me I will hang in there, be patient, listen forever, notice when tension seems to come up, try to keep in dialog. Out of that, over time, a resolution will arise because that's the way things work, an answer or an action will emerge will emerge out of the singleness of us. There would be no possibility of conflict because we are working as one. I'm not responding to you out of any defensiveness, as an "I" that I need to need to defend. I just respond to you as authentically and directly as I would to anything that arose within awareness, and you do the same. We are working as one, on our own behalf, always. The best decisions and actions come out of that, happening naturally, as water flowing over a rock.

Q: When you say you are letting go of the I you are letting go of the ego?

A: Yes. The ego is the small I, the defensive I.

Q: And there's no conflict because?

A: Because I have no position to defend. I'm as interested in the thoughts that arise in Randy's mind, or in your mind that you then describe to me, as I am in those that arise in my own mind. Because there is no distance between them. Between the thoughts that arise in my head, and the sounds in my head that represent your thoughts. My perception says there is six feet of distance and a different body and mind "over there," but from awareness' perspective—which is my actual experience as opposed to how my mind conceives of it at thought—it's all in the same dimensionless place.

Q: It was beautiful in the guided meditation, you said "thoughts come, thoughts go, feelings come, feelings go," and awareness. Just awareness. And so I've been struggling, I've been hearing this all day, how to tell somebody how much I love them. And all the ways that I love them. Because there is so much joy and so much happiness and so much laughter. I was trying to figure out out how to say this. Then when you said about awareness, okay, I don't have to figure out how to say it, I can just be awareness of all this marvelousness. So, awareness, be in awareness and then you'll now how I feel. That's not a question that was just the experience that I had.

A: Beautiful, thank you.