

“What is Love?”

An interview with James Low

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Guido Ferrari: Mr. Low, what is love?

James Low: Well of course there are many many ways of approaching this question. But in general, love, we can say, is an availability which takes us out towards the world; maybe towards a specific person, our beloved; maybe towards a general principle like the goodness in all beings; maybe a more metaphysical feeling – love of god, love of nature – but it’s a way of opening ourselves to what is here in front of us.

Guido Ferrari: But now love between two persons – a man and a woman. What is this?

James Low: Well again, that can be many things. It can be lust. It can be dependency. It can be like two people falling together so that they are both off balance. They lose their own ground. And this keeps them potentially quite stable but afraid to lose each other; so there is a gain – which is somebody is there for me – but there is a loss of freedom.

Guido Ferrari: So we need to have our own ground..

James Low: We need to have our own ground.

Guido Ferrari: But what is this?

James Low: Well, in couple therapy they talk of an “H-frame relationship“ where you have two people, each standing on their own feet, and they turn to face each other. So they are connecting, but it’s like a letter H. Or you can have an “A-frame“ where you have to collapse, or you can even have one person propping up the other, and this is also a kind of love, where somebody becomes very supportive of their partner but they’re now very in prison because they can’t move.

So love as the situation where two people find their fulfillment through being close to each other and yet being returned to themselves through the closeness: that’s more difficult to achieve.

Guido Ferrari: Yes. How can we achieve this?

James Low: I think by being aware of the regressive edge which is often embedded in love, like wanting to be rescued, wanting to be taken care of. Very often people when they got out to work in the day, they come home tired and they want someone to take care of them. So „You need to make me feel OK!“ – but that’s quite a demand. Because what am I actually asking the person to do? To suck the poison of the day out of me. But why is the day so poisonous? Maybe I have lost my balance through being overinvolved in office politics or not having worked out how to deal with colleagues, and so I am cooking inside and I want the other to extract the poison and the difficulty, like a dialysis machine to clean me out. But that’s a terrible burden on them. So they are placed on the position of the mother or the father, rather than the equal partner.

Guido Ferrari: Equal partner, this is the key of this relation.

James Low: Mmh.

Guido Ferrari: I think we should have a center in ourself to make a correct exchange and we have not to search outside to have a solution for our own problems.

James Low: Indeed. So if we move towards the other from the position „There is a lack, a deficit inside myself and you are the missing part of myself; I feel complete when I am with you!“ Embedded in this is a huge demand. Now if you ever leave me, I will be incomplete again. Therefore you must stay with me in order to fill up the gap which I have. But what is the nature of that gap? From the point of view of western psychology we can think „Oh, in childhood I didn’t get enough love, or I was hurt or bullied at school, and so I’ve collapsed into myself and have not been able to relate in a free open way with the world.“ But maybe the lack goes deeper.

From the spiritual point of view, the lack is the absence of the direct experience of our own ground. Whether we see this as primordial enlightenment, our Buddha nature, the true nature of our being – in being alienated from ourselves, we then seek another person to provide a home. But how can it be our real home? Because it’s a

home away from home, rather than helping us to get back home again to where we are really settled and at ease in ourself.

Guido Ferrari: In this case the danger is to manipulate.

James Low: Indeed.

Guido Ferrari: And then the problem is more and more complicated. But another factor of complication is the sexuality and the attachment. How can we solve this problem with the sexuality?

James Low:: There are many kinds of problems that arise in sexuality. But of course a major one is finding the way of being in the drive of sexual desire, of wanting something, wanting a release, wanting to get something from the other – and at the same time being with the other. Because sexual desire can easily turn the other into an object and we see that nowadays there is a huge use of pornography and that young people have an ever increasing sexualisation of the way to behave. School children sending each other sexual messages on their mobile phones, taking sexual photographs of themselves. It's a kind of objectification. „I exist as an object. I hope you like me as an object.“ But no matter how beautiful or tantalizing or exciting an object you become..... how is that going to help you to be a subject? How would you find the way of being at home in yourself if you have turned yourself into the object of someone else's fantasy? So to be loved as a person is very different from being loved as an object. Of course some degree of objectification is going to come in to it because we like the person's body in terms of body parts; the shape of the breasts or the back or whatever it would be. But that can be held together with the heartfelt appreciation of the person. Sexuality becomes, I think, problematic when these two start to go apart. And there is love which is of the heart but not full of the erotic feeling, and then an erotic feeling which becomes increasingly devoid of love. And that parallel path is not uncommon.

Guido Ferrari: I think it is very important for our own liberation to develop this distinction of the sexuality with another person. This is fundamental.

James Low: Okay. So, one way to think of this is that all the time we are in interaction with our environment. That the fundamental sphere of sexuality is not between a man and a woman or same sex couples in an environment which is just about bodily contact. But we are in intercourse with the environment all the time. The light of the world is coming in our eyes, sounds and so on. As these experiences of the senses come to us, we are touched and moved. We find ourselves responding. We respond to the beauty of the sky, we respond to the hardness of the pavement. We are adapting and changing all the time. This is an intercourse. So if you are at home in the sense of the ceaseless ways of interpenetration of subject and object, then the joy of the senses can be extended, so that in eating food the world is coming into your mouth, the delicious tastes are there and dissolving. The object is dissolving into the subject, the subject is dissolving into the object. When this is extended through the various experiences, like hearing music, listening to

someone talking, the dissolving opens up the space of non-resistance. So with this as the wider field, then the actual sexual encounter between two people becomes simply a more intense form of the freedom to offer oneself and to receive; this ever changing wave-like pulsation of sensory experience. But if you don't have a feeling of being connected with the world, if you feel alienated and cut off, and you feel that the world is something other, within which you are so lucky that you found this wonderful person that you want to be with and to be sexual with. This is an incredible burden and is put onto them.

So of course Sex can have a lot of pleasure in it. But there's a kind of desperation and appropriation of the other. Which makes them very very special and can easily create a folie-a-deux – because if I lose you, where will I be? It's an over-investment. So that rather than openness being extended out into the world, there is a disinterest in others, and often a fear, a jealous fear someone else will take you away, and therefore I have to hang onto you and then I'm wrapping you in my thoughts, my plans. „You are my future. You are my world. You are my everything.“ Pop songs are full of these kind of lyrics. So the overinvested other – it's a very fragile position.

Guido Ferrari: This is a big problem for many many people today: To be alone..... and to search outside the solution and not inside.

James Low: Because nobody can save us from ourselves. Nobody can give that we need to find in our own nature. And to project out my longing into another person and say „Now you must make me happy.“ How can that make the heart soft?

Guido Ferrari: But our education, our culture has a goal in outside world and not an inside world.

James Low: One thing we might need to consider, from the European point of view, given the importance of love in the Christian tradition, and the importance of romantic love in our culture, given that the romantic love tradition comes from the Troubadours, returning from the crusades where the songs of the Sufis were translated and moved from being the love of God to the love of the unattainable woman to finally the love of the attainable woman. In which we have an, perhaps, an over-investment in the beloved who is an ordinary human being. Perhaps we ask too much of lovers to fulfill the fantasy that they're somehow divine. All of that tradition represents an energized longing as a key mark of an elevation of ourselves. By finding this one true love outside ourselves, we will be returned to ourselves. Whether it's receiving the love of Jesus Christ into your heart, the sense that I am loved and I can love. We might need to think how does this stand in relation to Buddhist practice? Buddhism talks of compassion, or essentially two propositions: May all sentient beings be happy and have the causes of happiness. May all sentient beings be free from sorrow and the causes of sorrow. Wanting human beings to be happy is called love. This is very different from a romantic love. It's not about a special love object, it's about a quality of the heart that opens to embrace all beings. It's not about saying „I love you.“ It's not propositional. It's not dogmatic. It's not

seeking to establish something by an assertion but rather it's a tenderness which allows what is around us, what we encounter in our experiences of other people, to have unlimited access to our heart. We are touched and moved by the sufferings of others. We are touched and moved by the happiness of others. We rejoice in their happiness and virtue. We feel sorrow at their suffering and in that way the self is gradually freed from the prison of its quasi-autonomous existence, into being part of an ongoing pulsation of subject and subject in the general field of the emergence of our shared environment of existence. So from the Buddhist point of view, it's not that we should love the Buddha or love one another in the sense of „You're very special to me. I need to be with you because you are different from everyone else.“ The practice of devotion in Buddhism is to focus the mind into the particular qualities of the Buddha, of deities which are visualized; and by entering into their world, to merge in their world and to bring them into our world, so that we realize that what we call „Samsara“, the realm of suffering, of separation, of isolated ego determinism is in fact not fundamentally different from the realm of „Nirvana“, of peace, of liberation. So „Love“ in the Buddhist tradition means finding peace through reintegration in the ground of our own existence and offering that pathway to all beings who are ready to open to it.

Guido Ferrari: The body can be a source of happiness but also of big suffering.

James Low: Well, again, we have many different kinds of bodies. We have our medical, anatomical body; the body of bones and kidneys and liver and so on. This is not the normal way we experience ourselves. We have a body of sickness which is invisible to us when we are healthy. We have a body of health which is invisible to us when we are sick.

So it's not as if we have just one body. But our body manifests according to internal and external causes and conditions. One of these conditions, of course, is being in the company of somebody for whom we have sexual desire. This brings about physiological changes, whether it's moisture in the vagina, or the erection in the penis. There is a response which is manifest in the colour of the face, the rate of breathing, the pulse rate and so on; because arousal shows itself. This can be wonderful if the other person wants to receive it. It can be very saddening if it's not wanted to receive.

Now, desire is like the wind, it's not predictable. You can't guarantee to always fancy someone or want to be sexual with them. You can guarantee if you like to always go to work and put food on the table for someone because in a sense that's unless you fall sick that's in your power. But desire.. How can we say „I will always want you“? So. We find ourselves at the mercy of moods which take us over, lift us up and then can suddenly cast us out and we don't know why.

„Oh, but I thought you loved me.“ – „Well, I do love you. I just don't fancy you.“ – „Why don't you fancy me? I haven't changed so much.“ These are very very tragic, painful moments in life. „Because I thought you wanted me. Something has happened.“ – „But I didn't mean it to happen.“ You can see how „I felt I was safe

because I could see in your eyes that you wanted me. And now I see you don't. What does that mean? Will you leave me?"

So in a sense, desire is kind of a seal which can make a person feel safe within a particular bubble. But as long as the desire is there it's a kind of a proof that I'm wanted and that I'm unlikely to be left. But if the desire diminishes because of changes in the body, for health reasons, or emotional reasons, then „What does this mean?“ But because it's not a rational response it's very difficult to say what it means.

So two people are often left perplexed. „When we first met, we were having sex every night. And even over a year ago it was twice a week and now, we haven't touched each other for months. What's happened? Somehow there's been a falling away. Where has it gone? Why has it gone?“

These are very painful and difficult issues because we often feel that our desire should be available to us in the way that we can mobilize our hands to perform tasks, we should mobilize our desire. But it's not in the palm of our hand. In English we say „I fancy him, I fancy her.“ And a fancy is a, is like a flight of fancy, it's something that takes us. It's not volitional but we are carried into it or out of it by forces that are not our own.

Guido Ferrari: But what can we do in these cases?

James Low: Clearly, the main thing is to be kind to each other. And not to build too much of a prediction or a system of interpretation based on what is not necessarily going to last forever.

Guido Ferrari: What is an addiction?

James Low: Addiction?

Guido Ferrari: Sexual addiction.

James Low: Sexual addiction is the sense of not getting enough. Wanting more. More of what? When people start to masturbate looking at pornography and they can masturbate for hour after hour after hour or image after image after image, there is a lack of satisfaction. So instead of having a completed circle in which you start with arousal, you move towards a peak and then there is a relaxation out of that and you're back to a stasis, there is a permanent „I need more“. More of what? More of an empty image? More of a fantasy, more of a thought? It's the concrete meeting with the other person which can end that kind of addiction. Because sexual addiction is based on using the other as an object, or on they're being dead objects. The best antidote is to be with the person who is a subject. Because intersubjectivity allows the heart to meet the heart. And without that, the heart would remain empty even though the genitals are engorged with blood. And so the yearning to get the fulfillment cannot be achieved simply by lust.

Guido Ferrari: What is the nature of fusion?

James Low: When we have two people getting close to each other physically, first of all through the gaze, through the meeting of the eyes, where the eye is both going out to see the other but also receiving the gaze of the other. It opens up pathways of generosity and reception on both sides. Then there is kissing, in which the lips go out to extend into the mouth of the other and to receive the other's tongue. So again there is starting to be a to-ing and fro-ing, an exchange of sensation and energy. Then there is touching. Touching the general parts of the body, touching the erogenous zones in which there is increasing sensation. And with that an awakening of a sense of longing and demand, of really wanting, which creates a loss of interest in the wider world. There is a forgetfulness of the environment and it's almost like a meditation practice of mindfulness. One starts to develop a one-pointed focus into the arising of sensation. The colours changing in the person's face, the tension in the hardening of the nipples, the pulsation of the breath in the chest and so on, the sweating, the hearing the sound of the arousal in the short gasps of breathing, all of this creates a movement into the full stage which is penetrative rhythms with alternations of fast and slow, there is a build up and a recession and a build up and a recession until a moment of orgasm. And in the orgasm there is a forgetfulness both of oneself and of the other. In that state there is nothing at all. And that state is made use of in meditation because when thought ceases, when there is a suffusion just with sensation, because sensation is so ungraspable, it's insistent, it's powerful, but you can't hold onto it in the way that you might hold onto a thought and elaborate other thoughts around it. The sensation is just very intense and vanishing. So there is a releasing into nothing at all. From a Buddhist point of view, this is an experience of emptiness. And from this state of open emptiness, again, we have more sense of our body, of the other person. We turn into the world of duality but these dual point of self and other is arising out of the infinity of emptiness. So to go into the heart of the merging, and to be present in the moment of the absence of content in experience – so there is just an experiencer ... shocked open – gives the taste of the infinite awareness which is the ground out of which all other experiences arise.

Guido Ferrari: What about the sexuality in the practice of the meditation?

James Low: Well, there are two aspects of this. One is, meditation as a support for the experience of sexuality which is seen as the relation between two people. So through general meditation, you can become more calm, more at peace with yourself, more spacious, more attentive to detail, less driven by habitual impulses, less caught up in neurotic thought formation. „AAh.“ So now there is some space in which to be available to receive the other. So from that point of view, meditation can help us to feel more available to connect with another person. We can also incorporate sexual arousal as part of mediation in which the movement of the breath through the body through the channels which are revealed in the practise of yoga, the in-breath moving round and through the channels and out again, can be linked with the movement of the breath in the other person. And by the two bodies coming together in the state of arousal, the energy of both can be brought into a state of

openness. That is to say there is a movement but it is a movement in space. So rather than „I am getting aroused and want to have you“ there is no appropriation but simply an opening to the experience of the movement of energy and this allows the wide range of experiences to arise and pass. So rather than feeling „This is good, this is bad, I need to sort this out“, rather than trying to control experience, to make it the way you want, however our experiences are arising: by being held inside emptiness with this intense arousal, we become able to feel deeply, outside the practice, experiences of anger, desire, jealousy and pride, with the full intensity which would normally lead us off into tracks of thought perplexity and bodily arousal, wanting to fight someone or chase after them, a feeling that something must be done. Now we start to have the experience that these intense feelings can be allowed to be there in space without any necessary implication for action. So this allows the vivid sense of contact with the world in all its richness and complexity as being something which is self-liberating, self-manifesting. It is what it is. And I don't need to protect myself against it, I don't need to try to grasp it and hang on to it, but I can start to have a pure aesthetic appreciation which is fully energized, using the power of the genital arousal and yet it's not pushing towards the release in orgasm. So it can stay in the state of arousal linked with empty openness as a way of having the full vitality of all the aspects of the body. All the pores of the body fully awake. And just awake. And just awake. That it's not something which has to be resolved, something which has to be removed. So heightened presence, heightened vitality can become a way of life. More experience of all the beauty of the world, of all the pain of the world; not rejecting what's going on, not trying to fit it in to our image of how it should be – but an open enjoyment of everything, including pleasure, including pain.

Guido Ferrari: And what do you think about chastity?

James Low: Chastity can be very helpful of course. It requires discipline. And discipline is based, in this sense, on renunciation. It depends of course how you support the renunciation. If you say „Oh, alcohol is very bad, very dangerous, it makes you crazy. I mustn't drink.“ Or „Women are very dangerous, very bad; men are very dangerous, very bad. I must leave them aside.“ You use the power of rejection to simplify your world, which can be helpful for meditation practice, but you're also investing a very dualistic reading. „Spiritual practice is good, engagement with the world is dangerous and bad.“ So in the very moment where you deepen your spiritual practice to understand non-duality, you're doing it on the basis of making a dualistic split. And in that way it can be a bit problematic. However, it does have the advantage that if you're living in a monastic community, you have more time for practice, you're not called into the business of everyday life. But, why is everyday life problematic? Having to get the kids to school, having to make sure you don't lose your job because you have worldly responsibilities, can be a way of bringing meditation into daily life, so that you learn to be with the nuances of the changes in the topology of your existence. Sometimes expansive, sometimes contracting. And to work with circumstances. Circumstances which are not in your hands, you're not in charge, you're not in control, and especially you're not in a

world where you know what to do. The basis of being a monk or a nun, I think in all the traditions, is that you submit to many rules. There are many regulations – when you get up, what you wear, what you eat, which you can do, which you can't do. These provide a structure whereby you can always know what's the right thing to do. In ordinary life as a lay person, you don't have that. You have to find your own way. Which means that you have to center yourself, find a balance and integrate your personal balance, in the middle way.

So there are advantages on either side. But generally speaking, given the richness of the possibilities in the Western world, the life of the lay person, enriched through mediation, is probably going to be more attractive, to most people.

Guido Ferrari: What is happiness?

James Low: Well, that's a very interesting question. We might need to separate it out into various strands. On the one hand, we have joy – a kind of exuberance – which can be leading us to bliss. A state of, usually, bodily involved heightened sensation which is entirely pleasurable. And that makes us feel expansive, glorious, warm, free, and so on.

But then we also have enjoyment which is a quality of pleasure through engaging with the senses to the objects of the senses in the world. That enjoyment is generated by the qualities of the object. The more we develop meditation practice, we can start to enjoy objects which would ordinarily be considered unpleasant, because now the enjoyment is not seen as what is given to us by the quality of the object, but by the quality of presence, which is generated by being aware and available.

Then we have a state of satisfaction, of being contented. This is not a peak experience but a very calm, simple „Oh, this is OK. This is OK, this is OK. I don't need to desperately look for something extra, I don't need to be afraid of losing aspects of my world as it's constructed now. Because.... it's OK. If it changes, that's OK. If it doesn't change, that's OK.“

Contentment is a quality of awareness, when it's present in itself, and is not being tangled in the movement of its own energy.

Of course, awareness itself doesn't get lost or tangled, but it appears to us. When we're busy, chasing dreams, being frightened of shadows on the wall, that „Oh, this must happen!“ or „This mustn't happen!“, this agitation forces us towards a direction of activity, of control, of managing a situation, whereas contentment is being at home in life as it arises. This is not a helpless passivity, it doesn't mean that one has no capacity to influence events, but influencing is a quality of participation, of being in the situation, being part of the situation, and bringing some energy, some arousal to bear on the situation. It's not being outside and trying to control it to get my agenda met. I think of all the many different flavours of happiness, perhaps

contentment is the most important. Because with it, we start to get a freedom from desperation, a freedom from fundamental anxiety.

When we really start to experience „Basically, everything is OK.“ , then from that, we can bring a mood of peace and calm to our interactions with other people. And without preaching or being dogmatic, we can exude a mood of hope. Not a hope for something in specific, but just a relaxed faith that everything will be fine. That doesn't mean bad things, as we might describe them, won't happen. But rather, whatever comes, is arising and passing. Whatever goes, is arising and passing. Having seen many things come and go, we realize that there is a continuity to our being, which is not determined by the immediate content of our experience. That being, being in itself, presence, awareness, whatever we call it, is naturally satisfied. Is naturally complete. This is the meaning of Dzogchen. And within that state, we are free to be at home in the world as it shows itself, including being with other people, in all the various states they're in; sometimes distressed, sometimes erotic, sometimes angry, sometimes happy, sometimes as colleagues..... all the richness of the world is the friend of basic satisfaction.

Guido Ferrari: Thank you very much.

James Low: My pleasure.

Guido Ferrari: Thank you.