

Good morning and welcome to Tricycle Online Retreats. I’m delighted to host you today. I am Judith Simmer-Brown, an acharya with the Shambhala tradition, recording this retreat here in Boulder, Colorado on a chilly morning. I hope you all are cozy and warm, wherever you’re listening. The topic of our retreat is “Romantic Fantasy, Everyday Disappointment.” This really falls under the category of retreat topics for the householder—for people leading an ordinary life with relationships, jobs, families and all of those kinds of concerns. We too often hear only about practice topics specifically, and not about how these topics relate to our everyday lives.

Today we’re going to talk about romantic relationships. I’d like you to begin by closing your eyes. I’d like you to go back to the first time you fell in love. I don’t know how old you were, but spend a few moments identifying when you knew you were in love. In your mind’s eyes, see where you were physically. What physical location were you in? Picture your lover there. Call back to mind your embodied experience—how it felt. What happened? What did the world feel like? Feel the excitement, pleasure and the quality of danger, even, or perhaps a little foreboding; but mostly just the incredible power and importance of falling in love.

Okay, you may want to keep with that fantasy and please keep with that fantasy as we go this morning, because there’s nothing quite as amazing as falling in love. You think about yours and I’ll tell you mine, all right?

For me, I was 19, just about 20 years old—about a week before my 20th birthday. I was on a study abroad program in India in the state of Gujarat. I was with a small group of students. There were only five of us altogether for a semester study abroad program. There was one particular strikingly handsome young man in the program, but he was very haughty and aloof—brilliant, creative but very aloof and cold. I took a tremendous dislike to him. He took a tremendous dislike to me, at least so I thought. For the first month and a half of our program, we barely spoke. Whatever speaking we did was sparring and arguing; disagreeing with each other. There was one particular day, as we went to our classes in Gandhi Ashram College, where I was feeling particularly raw and homesick; feeling a lot of culture shock. I was very teary and broken hearted—missing my home, family and all of that. In a very short time I basically saw him and began to talk to him about how I was feeling. Everything completely melted. I fell into his arms and we were—we suddenly realized that we were completely attracted to each other and fell very deeply in love. This was a relationship that went on for about a year. It was quite an amazing relationship. Everyone who knew us thought we were bitter enemies, but secretly we were madly in love. It was a very powerful time in my experience.

I assume you have an experience like this as well; at least in your fantasy life, even if it didn’t actually happen for you. In your fantasies you’ve fallen in love. You probably wouldn’t have come to this retreat if you had not fallen in love.

How does it feel to fall in love? What are some of the characteristics of the experience of falling in love? There are lots and lots. We could go to the romantic songs, contemporary songs, 50's, 60's, 70's, 80's, 90's and into the 2000's there are so many of these. There are romantic books, movies, classical literature. The major emblematic mythologies of our culture pivot around romantic love.

I'd like to identify just a few and we could spend our entire retreat just detailing what we know about how it feels to fall in love. First of all, it feels absolutely monumental and life changing. Don't you agree? It feels like nothing will be the same. Everything is much more vivid and much closer. There's a tremendous sense of importance about falling in love. I know for myself from that experience and later experiences of falling in love, the feeling of being taken into the depths of who I am—a feeling that I know why I was born; a sense of purpose and meaning to life that was lacking previously. That quality of feeling seen and known by another person, feeling chosen and very special; that quality that this is something really powerful and pivotal in my experience.

Secondly, a feeling that is very difficult to describe in words, in ordinary rational language; yet wishing to express it and wanting to sing, dance, write poetry and make art—to do anything artistic and make beauty in whatever situation. The feeling of wanting to express and yet knowing that words can't quite express the feeling of falling in love, yes? You've had that feeling?

Thirdly, knowing that this isn't something fake or artificial. There's this sense when we fall in love that it's true. That it's the real thing. We're told a lot about the real thing and true love. We know in our bones that this is true. This is genuine. This isn't just an illusion. It's not going to pass quickly.

These three qualities are ones that also are shared by descriptions of mystical experience. So there's a quality that when we fall in love we're connecting to a genuine spirituality—of a genuinely mystical experience that is life changing and extremely important for us. One can't turn one's back on falling in love because of how powerful and potent it is.

The question next is what are we told by our culture—by our literature, movies, popular songs, friends, family members and all kinds of storylines in our culture. What are we told about love? I know for myself I learned about love when I was a little, little girl. I know that—like many little girls—I had lots and lots of romantic fantasies. I learned a lot of stories about love that I carried with me into my adult life.

These stories are part of what we're looking at today, as well. The first one is that there is only one true love for us. There is the one. We see in popular movies and hear in popular songs: “I think he's the one. I think she's the one.” We believe somehow that there is one true love for us somewhere in the world; divinely ordained and chosen for us in some kind of way and that our task in life is to find this one true love. If we find that person, then everything will be perfect and fall into place. Everything will be solved in our experience. We believe that if we find that one true love, then everything will be happily

ever after. It will be a perfect and complete life. We know that we cannot choose our one true love. There's a sense that it has to happen to us like magic. It's not necessarily the lover chosen for us by our parents or friends. It's not someone we're going to necessarily find among our friends. We can't really see our true love until it happens; we fall in love. Then we recognize that we have found that one true love. There's always a question of danger and some kind of star-crossed quality about meeting our true love.

This adds a lot of magic to the situation. It also adds, for much of our culture, there's the belief that somehow God has chosen our true love. I remember that when I was a little girl, or maybe I was a teenager, I learned a song that I wanted to sing for you that expresses this kind of theology. It's really a kind of pseudo-Christian theology of true love. So, please bear with me. I'm going to sing this song: “Tell me why the stars do shine. Tell me why the ivy twines. Tell me why the ocean's blue. And I will tell you just why I love you: because God made the stars to shine, because God made the ivy twine, because God made the ocean blue. Because God made you, that's why I love you.” This third verse is the clincher, so listen carefully. You know you may call yourself a Buddhist but you really believe this: “I do believe that God above created you for me to love. He picked you out from all the rest. And that is why I love you best.”

Basically what I'm getting at is that our culture has tied true love to a belief in a Christian God. And there's a notion that if you find your true love, you found a divinely ordained love—a love that will last forever. If it is true, it will last forever. We feel this way when we fall in love. We feel confidence in this. We have inherited this from our culture. We believe that love will conquer all; that no obstacle is too great. That if we found our true love, in spite of whatever obvious problems there might be in our relationship; whatever opposition from our family or the culture that we're in, we feel that love will conquer all. We feel that love will last forever. If it is true love, it will last forever. It will last forever, if it is true love. This is supported by, again, the myths of our popular culture. It's supported by classical works of literature, by popular books—whether they're the grocery store romance novels or the situation comedies—or the romantic comedies of the movies, and by songs.

The interesting part about this—about what we're told, is that: if love is going to last forever, it's very difficult for this to take place. Many of our myths tell us that love will last forever only if somebody dies. This is a huge shock that love has a kind of death wish from the stories that we're told. So this is where the dharma comes in. Think about what happened to your first true love. Did it last forever? Did it end? Did it change? Did you stay with this person, but somehow it didn't continue the way that you thought when you fell in love? What happened to that true love? What we find is over and over again, the promises made by our culture about true love are not fulfilled by romantic love. Instead, what happens is things end and things change. Things last forever only if somebody dies, or maybe both people die. But if we're talking about a living love relationship, the dharma tells us that when disappointment dawns, then our dharmic path with love begins. That's really what this series is about.

Judith Simmer-Brown
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I'd like you to think about meditation practice in the way that my teacher, Suzuki Roshi, taught it. Meditation practice is an expression of our willingness to be realistic. I'd like you to look carefully and fully at your romantic fantasies and see what really happens, what actually happens when we fall in love. What we may find is that when disappointment dawns, the real relationship and romance of real love for another person can begin. That's where we're going with this retreat. I'd like you to in your meditation practice during this week before the next talk; I'd like you to contemplate what actually occurs with romantic fantasy. What actually occurs when we find ourselves disappointed and see with the eyes of realism through our practice, what comes next? Thank you so much. I'll see you next week.