

**Empathy and Love – extract from Ahimsa programme guidelines**

The recognition that empathy and love are the ground of intimate and caring relationships: without these qualities relationships become functional means of obtaining gratification that are inevitably controlling in nature. Love in this instance is defined as that internal experience that fills oneself and appreciates and feels connected to others, and is differentiated from the experience of desiring gratification from another.

Empathy can be described as being emotionally in tune or resonant with another individual, effectively being touched internally by one's contact with that other person. Whilst it has an important cognitive element in terms of giving one an insight into or an understanding of another's experience, it is founded upon an emotional process, the ability to feel alongside and be emotionally touched by another. As such it is a felt experience, not simply an intellectual one.

Empathy can be seen as the foundation of both intimacy and compassion and is an essential aspect of an individual's experience of love for another person, whether that love is part of a sexual, platonic or a parent/child relationship. It is the basis of one's capacity to recognise that one participates and shares in a common experience of being human, and that others experience physical, emotional and mental pain and joy just as we do and share a need for relationship and affection. The extent that one recognises, is touched by and is attracted to this common ground in another can be seen as the spark and source of interpersonal love. In this context empathy is the means by which this connection with others is felt, and as such can be seen as the ground or channel for all genuine interpersonal intimate love between individuals.

By love what is being referred to here is that quality of experience that feels both connected and attuned to others and one's environment and that is directly experienced as a feeling of loving fullness within that flows outwards towards others in a natural expression of generosity and appreciation. It is effectively the seat and source of both caring and intimacy. Love here is differentiated from desire and gratification, qualities that are often confused with love but are significantly different, inasmuch as they begin from a place of emptiness or deficiency and are oriented towards getting something to fill this sense of lack. Love on the other hand fills one from the inside out and flows outward, so even when personal loss is experienced there remains a basic ground of appreciation and goodness underlying the sadness and grief.

Love in this sense alongside empathy can also be seen as an essential component of a sense of justice and morality based upon compassion rather than retribution, being the experiential ground of an internal experience of guilt and shame that leads to the impulse to change and make reparation. Without empathy there can be no experience of genuine remorse. Such guilt and shame as is experienced without empathy leads only to regret for the consequences to oneself and the wish to change how others see one. It is only with empathy that a sense of care and concern is likely to emerge for the damage and pain caused to those others one has hurt, with a consequent wish to change oneself.

Finally, without empathy one is reduced to responding to others as if they were complicated objects rather than fellow human beings, which inevitably results in relationships that are controlling and manipulative. Effectively others are objectified, which in itself creates a fertile ground for abuse.