

Chapter 13: LOVE

Relationships require commitment.

And commitment can be scary.

After my relationship with Mikey the DJ, I was very wary of commitment. In retrospect, the logic is obvious:

- Because I was scared of conflict, I had crap boundaries.
- Having crap boundaries mean that I swallowed my feelings and stayed silent, which led to me getting hurt.
- After that experience, it was easier to avoid relationships entirely than to deal with a situation where I might self-sabotage.

Of course, I didn't understand this pattern *consciously*. I dated, but I stayed away from anyone who looked like a serious contender. I dismissed nice guys as "boring" and chose scoundrels that I couldn't take seriously. I dated nineteen year olds like Mercutio who were easy to control. No one who could be truly threatening, thank you very much.

Then I fell love with Franklin.
Quite by accident.

Love snuck up on me during a four-month acting tour. Had I not been around him everyday, it never would have happened. But when you're travelling around the United States in a van with eight other actors, hauling your own sets, doing your own makeup, wearing ridiculous wigs, and defiling a perfectly innocent Moliere play by speaking bad French to middle school students...well, that kind of experience bonds you.

Franklin looked like a gawky version of Edward Norton, quiet and unassuming. I watched him from a safe distance as he performed a million small kindnesses for everyone each day. He was true gentleman: unassuming and unfailingly good. I fell for him completely.

After the tour, Franklin and I lived together in New York City before I received the big news: I'd been accepted to earn my Masters of Fine Arts in Acting at the American Conservatory Theater.

Getting accepted to the program was a big deal. There were only eighteen spots in my class. Franklin and I tried to hold the relationship together across three thousand miles and three years, but of course there were challenges. With no language to discuss my ambivalence, I withdrew into silence. Once again, I did not know how to navigate

uncertainty, even though I loved him. I thought that my complicated feelings meant that the relationship wasn't working. After agonizing (privately, of course) for several months, I suddenly broke our relationship off.

Years later, still in love with him (and beginning to have a dim idea that relationships might be more complicated than "all" or "nothing"), I called him to ask if there was any chance for us. Had he moved on? By that time, of course he had.

It's taken me a long time to begin to understand the nature of commitment.

I had always thought of a commitment as a rock, whose power came from its rigidity and imperviousness to change. Commitments were airtight, vacuum-sealed, and perfectly preserved. Cracks in the armour were not permitted. My stiff ideas about commitment were undoubtedly informed by my ex-Marine dad (Semper Fi), who "did the right thing" without complaint until he drowned his feelings in vodka.

To be willing to say yes to a relationship, I had to redefine my understanding of commitment.

I remember the moment that I decided to open myself up to falling in love with Alex. Even after we had started sleeping together, I had been keeping my emotional distance. I was afraid of getting hurt.

Then I took a trip home to the family farm for Christmas.

I sat in the heart of my family's love, participated in our silly squabbles and enjoyed being with my wonderful Dad (who, with the help of AA, had pulled himself out of the devil's teeth). Here was my family, so loving and supportive, but also ridiculous and human and messy. We had come through so much together. And through our challenges, we had grown closer.

I'd been waiting for love to arrive in a neat, symmetrical box. But love may arrive giftwrapped in wild and unruly packaging.

When I returned to Vancouver, I took a breath and decided to open my heart to Alex.

"Uhhhhh, what's going on?" Alex asks me.

"What do you mean?"

He sounds perplexed, "Ever since you got back you've been calling me. Making plans, showing up...."

"Yeah. Well, isn't that good?"

"Well, yeah, it's good....but ..."

"But what?"

"It's different. From how it was. You're kinda freaking me out."

“I’m freaking you out?”

“Yeah, well, what’s changed? Should we talk about this?”

I think for a moment. “I decided to say yes,” I finally say. “I decided to say yes to this, to us. I decided to stop running from my fear and instead see what happens.”

He looks at me, “Oh. Okay then.”

“This is me showing up.”

“That’s great. But...I’m still a little freaked out.”

“Yeah, totally,” I say, “I’m freaked out too.”

Saying yes to *romance* is easy; saying yes to *love* takes courage. When we say yes to love, we are saying “yes” knowing that our relationship with another person is not going to fix or problems or follow a neat plan. Our practice navigating the uncertainty of dating has laid the strong foundation that we need to now embark upon a journey of the heart.

I now understand that a *wholesome* commitment must let the air and light in. There must be flow, new information, and recalibrations. Wholesome commitments are not black and white; they are organic, messy, and flexible. There will be conflict, doubt and ambiguity. The process of navigating this messiness is precisely what helps us cultivate intimacy and become closer to our partners. Relationships, like everything in nature (*prakriti*), move and change. To be alive, they must be allowed to evolve.

Wholesome commitments are made of bamboo, not iron. To remain vital, a commitment stays true to its intent, but has the space to be re-imagined and newly understood. A commitment is an active and ongoing choice, not a passive obligation. It is powerful and enduring when it is deliberately affirmed.

In a wholesome commitment, we stay to uphold our values, we stay to uphold ourselves, and we may stay to uphold someone else.

We don’t stay just because we said so.

Your beautiful heart

Love is governed by *anahata chakra*, the heart’s energetic centre.

As we move from the earthly chakra in the pelvis to the etheric chakra at the crown of the head, the energy of the chakras become progressively more refined. The heart chakra is poised in the center of the body. It is the middle chakra, balanced between pelvis and crown, earth and sky. The heart negotiates the relationship between the physical world and our spiritual understanding.

[Anahata Chakra](#)

Anahata chakra is our heart centre and is located in the very centre of the chakra system. It is the midway point between the lower three chakras (relating to the energy of the material world) and the etheric elements (relating to energy of the spiritual world). Anahata is the bridge between the earth and sky.

Anahata means, “unstruck” and reminds us that the nature of heart – and our Big Self - is pure, unharmed, and free. Anahata is about negotiating balance; our heart chakra governs how we both receive and express love. If we are over expressive in this centre, we may lose ourselves in someone else. If we are deficient in this centre, we may withhold and contract.

Anahata governs our ability to engage in healthy exchange, compassion, to give as well as receive from others. Governed by air and movement, the power of anahata radiates from our heart. Expressed through our arms, hands, anahata’s energy is made physical through how we touch the world.

The heart is the bridge between our earthly humanity and our connection to the Divine. The heart is a pivot point, an opportunity to embody our spiritual values and put them into practice in the world. The heart chakra is governed by the element of air, which is constantly moving. Like the lungs that snuggle the heart, the expression of love is not fixed. There is a constant inhale and exhale, expansion and contraction, reception and offering. Love is not static; it flows. Love is not an idea; it is an action.

Learning To Stay

A wise woman once said to me, “Most relationships end when the other person stops covering up our inner feeling of unworthiness.”

Yikes.

But true.

Most relationships fall into a Missing Piece confusion at some point. We start depending on our partner to be a certain way for us to feel safe. When the other person stops acting the way we want, then we might get upset and say that the relationship is not working. The deal is broken, we fall out of love. The relationship has “serious problems” and “irreconcilable differences.”

Don’t freak out. This is normal.

Our work as yogis is to stay awake, *practice the pause*, and try to figure out what’s really happening. Is there really a deal breaker here? Or have we turned our partner into an emotional security blanket?

Spanda

“Divine vibration.” Spanda reminds us that the universe is always in a state of change, of contraction and of connection. We will connect, and disconnect. We will feel passion, then we will feel distance, then passion once again. All these fluctuations are part of the universal heartbeat.

Our work is to persistently, gently, and humbly return to the present moment. Take a breath, and put our Big Self back in the driver’s seat. From that vantage point, we can see the other person for who they are rather than just for who we want them to be. This is the starting point of unconditional love.

Growth

My yoga teacher has a good story to describe the power of a consistent yoga practice, and it applies equally well to relationships.

Let’s imagine that you want to dig a well in order to get water. You start digging in one place that seems good. At first it’s exciting! Yay! A well! But then it gets boring. You get tired. It starts becoming *work*. So you think, eh, this hole sucks. I’m going somewhere else that’s better. And you start digging a new hole in a different place. Ah, good. At first this place seems much better. Then you run into a rock and the digging gets hard again. So you pull up your stakes and start digging somewhere else. And so on, and so on. Soon you’ve got a field full of holes and no water.

Abhyasa: In the yoga sutras, “practice” has the following conditions: consistency, devotion, and endurance. Like a relationship, practice doesn’t happen when it’s convenient or just feels good. Our relationships are invitations to practice mindful steadiness. By committing, we discover in ourselves a deep well of love and strength that allows us to be present through all the colors of our experience.

Being in a committed relationship is like digging a well. If we give up when we hit the first tough spot, we’re never going to find the water. When we move from one relationship to another rather than digging past the rocks, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to see what’s on the other side, to find the water, to earn the fruits of our labour. Freedom can only be found through commitment.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that you bear out terrible circumstances in order to “learn a lesson.” There are times that you’re going to have to leave your half-dug well – and good riddance! But it’s better to leave with clarity than reactivity.

Yoga: from the root word “yuj” – to bind or yoke. Through binding, we find freedom.

Dharana

The first stage of meditation, dharana (concentration) requires steadfastness. Just as in relationships, we return patiently, persistently, and curiously to the experience of the present moment, even when we are uncomfortable and want to be distracted. By remaining awake and present, we nourish the field of our relationship and culture a deep sense of trust and resiliency with our partner.

When we commit ourselves to anything – whether it’s a relationship, guitar playing, our kids, our yoga, or our work – we start to find the edges of our capacity. We find our grit. We find out where we want to bail, and figure out how we can stick it out. We fail. And we try again. And through our efforts, we start to uncover our inner strength. When we flit from thing to thing, we never find out who we really are. We never get to the juice.

Trust is built when we stay despite the changes, the ups and downs. When we can hit a rock and not rebound into reaction. Not only do we begin to trust our partners, but we start to trust ourselves. Beneath the shifting sands of our feelings and cravings, we discover our consistency and stability.

We have found the water.

Hope

Learning to stay means *letting go of hope*.

I know this invitation sounds pretty unappealing. It’s the antithesis of a chocolate covered romance. However, if you remember from chapter two, intimacy is the opposite of romance. Romance thrives on the unknown (oh, the heights we can imagine!), while intimacy grows in an authentic compassionate understanding of another person.

Letting go of hope is an invitation to give up fantasy in favour of the possibility and power of the present moment. Learning to stay means letting go of the romantic notion that there is something better that we’re missing out on, a greener lawn just around the corner.

This moment is the opportunity. Change, compassion, action cannot happen in the future or in the past or in an imagined alter life. Now is the portal to all action. This life – your life – has put you exactly where you are supposed to be. When you bind yourself to this moment, you are embracing Reality. You are choosing – now, and now, and now - be your best self, your bravest self. One moment at a time.

Samadhi

The culmination of meditation and absorption. The results of steadiness over time. Samadhi is integration, the bliss that results from steadfastness.

From wholeness, relationship

When I began my dating adventures, I was looking for the “one.”

I wanted – needed - to fix my problems by finding someone else to fill the missing gaps, to make me feel safe, and to hold me tight against the storm. I wanted children to feel that I was living a complete life. And I needed the partner to fit my idea of “perfect” in order to make my dream of a life finally come true. My expectations had to be fulfilled in order to feel that I was successful. I needed a house, two kids, a loving husband, and a banging career. Then I’d finally be able to wipe my brow. Phew!

Crashing on the shores of my own expectations and entitlement was an awakening. Terrible, beautiful, and cleansing, like a winter storm off of a rocky, windswept coast. By trying again and again to find happiness in others, I finally saw myself.

The riddle of my happiness will never be solved by someone else. For better and for worse, in sickness and in health, I am my own complex and lovely puzzle to figure out.

Needing someone else in order to be whole is not love.

Ultimately, no one – and no thing - can completely fulfill our deep longing. The human condition is to be sweetly imperfect, continually on the knife’s edge, desperate to hold onto something in the outside world to make us feel okay. Until we soften to this uncertainty and open our hearts to our continual restlessness, we will repeat our grasping patterns. Rather than waiting for a hero, we can gently accept that we are the ones who ultimately must show up for ourselves and hold ourselves in the dark. Although this doesn’t mean that someone else can’t also hold your hand.

By increasing your capacity to hold space for yourself, you release others from the obligation to fix you. When you stand in yourself, then you can see someone else for who they are – rather than who you want or need them to be. *This* is unconditional love. This is intimacy.

Unconditional love supports someone else to engage in his or her own soul’s journey. You can see your partner as a magnificent human being, full of hopes, dreams, stumbles, and aspirations. You can help them breathe through their unfinished business, lean into the darkness, and emerge more fully into the light.

When we arrive in our relationships knowing (or at least trying to remember!) that we are already whole, then we can nourish and support someone else from a place of generosity rather than negotiation.

We will naturally falter.
We will naturally forget.

But yoga helps us to remember our deep and centered intrinsic wholeness. When we love our person from this deep well, we can be truly supportive: ready to engage in mutual discovery and growth.

Spiritual Love

Love is a spiritual opportunity.

Once you have opened the door of self-inquiry, you are committed. Your soul is hungry and curious to dive deeper, understand more, and lean in. You cannot close your eyes to the depths that you have already excavated.

The human heart will choose love over fear. Love invites us to find the best of our humanity, to witness another's process with kindness and curiosity, to support them in their path rather than our own agenda. Our capacity to love is a precious gift. When we connect with others, our most refined qualities – compassion, empathy, sacrifice, generosity – are expressed.

God realization is not something that happens only in prayer or deep meditation. Realizing god in this world emerges from our participation every day in our relationships, in how we touch and reach each other. Each one of us is a reflection of Universal Consciousness, and our opportunity is to create the change that we want to see in the world, one moment at a time. Though this is a practice that is starkly visible in our intimate relationships, we can engage in this practice in every moment.

Sahasrara

The crown chakra, Sahasrara is the energetic center that governs our relationship with god. This centre enables us to connect beyond the bounds of our individual identity and begin to experience our connection in the great web of Universal Consciousness. We are part of a great unfolding. We are part of something bigger. And we are an expression of the Divine.

We are weavers. Our interactions, words, and gestures are the threads that we use to create the grand tapestry of our lives. We are weaving the world into creation with every act and word. Cultivating integrity in our relationships is not just about expressing love to a partner; we are *elevating all of humanity*. The extra breath that we take before

reacting creates more peace. Catching our imaginations at work creates more accountability. Listening with care creates more empathy. Acting from the Big Self creates more love.

We do not weave alone.

While our work is to remember our own self-sufficiency our joy is to reach out, connect, love, and elevate each other in this creative work. Our own weaving is but a small part of the grand universal tapestry that is being created in concert with the rest of humanity in every single moment. How we support each other on the journeys matters. We are in this glorious act of creation together.

In yoga, we often speak of *kula*, or community.

Kula

A community, clan or family. In yoga, we often think of a kula as our spiritual community, which comes together with a shared intention and purpose. A kula is a gathering of like-minded people who support each other on the path. Within a kula, we find a trust worthy support network to wrestle with spiritual questions and support each other through the challenges of daily life.

Your kula is the community of your heart; it includes your cherished friends, family, fellow yogis, and loved ones. Through community, we have the opportunity to support each other in upholding our most precious values.

Maya

Illusion. Maya is the veil of illusion that causes us to see ourselves as separate from everything, rather than recognizing that we are all part of a Divine whole. Beyond the illusion, everything is one.

Love is not about one person; love is expressed in all of our relationships. With family, with friends, with strangers. From our understanding of our own intrinsic wholeness, we have a greater capacity to lean into relationships. Not just relationship with a lover, but our relationship with the world. Not just being our best for one person, but being our best for everyone. Not just leaning into the tenderness and softness of one heart, but all hearts.

Your practice in dating is merely foreplay, if you will.

Now take everything you know into your waking life. Into every relationship. Into each of your daily moments.

Catch yourself in your daydreams, speak your truth when honesty feels scary, uphold your boundaries, recognize your past, enjoy your sensual pleasures, and trust in the

great unfolding of your life. Not only are you a child of the Universe, you are *creating* the Universe in every moment, with every action, with every breath. You are that.

You. Are. That.

Our humanity is to forget.
Our practice is to remember.

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” – Mary Oliver

Practices

Journal: Commitment

- Where in your life have you followed through on an important commitment? How did that feel?
- A good relationship should give us more freedom to be who we want to be – not less. Write out your fears:
 - What scares you the most about being committed to someone?
 - What are you afraid that you will lose?
 - Now examine your greatest fear. What if it's not true?

Journal: Mission

- Come back to the mission statement that you wrote in chapter 3. Explore another brainstorm of your life's mission statement.
- Revisit your values. What are they?
- What would your values look like in action? With a loved one? At work? With a stranger?

Meditation Practice: Cultivating persistence

For the next week, commit to doing a 2-5 minute meditation every day. You can use any meditation that speaks you. The meditation does not need to be perfect. As you commit to a daily practice, notice what obstacles you face. If you fail, then simply start again the next day without judgment or recrimination. Now is the time. It's not about being perfect, but about renewing our dedication to showing up.

Meditation Practice: Heart opening

Come into comfortable meditation seat and settle in for a few minutes, focusing on your breath.

- Bring to mind the face of someone whom you love very much. Visualize this person. Repeat to yourself, “Just like me, you want to be happy.”

- Bring to mind the face of someone about whom you feel neutral. Visualize this person. Repeat to yourself, “Just like me, you want to be happy.”
- Bring to mind the face of someone with whom you experience emotional challenges. Visualize this person. Repeat to yourself, “Just like me, you want to be happy.”
- Slowly begin to expand your consciousness to a wider net of people (your house, your town, your state, your country, the world). With each expansion, hold them in your heart and repeat to yourself, “Just like me, you want to be happy.”
- Let the visualization go and take a few deep breaths.
- How do you feel?

Yoga Practice: Sweet Unfolding

- Pigeon
- Seated Twist
- Forward Fold
- Savasana
- Meditation

It's time to let go and relax into the sweet unfolding. The work is done. Now it's the time to rest in the fruits of your efforts. As you practice these poses, come to your sensible edge, and then practice softening there. Do not rush. Give yourself time to stay. Use each exhale to find more surrender and presence in the pose. Sense how mindful surrender can deepen your experience.

Meditation Practice: Heart opening

Come into comfortable meditation seat and settle in for a few minutes, focusing on your breath.

- Imagine a soft white light at the center of your heart.
- As you inhale, visualize this light expanding into every cell of your body.
- As you exhale, visualize this light contracting back to your heart center.
- Continue this visualization for five minutes, then return to your natural breath.
- Sit in the lightness of your heart, and take this warmth and openness with you into your day.