

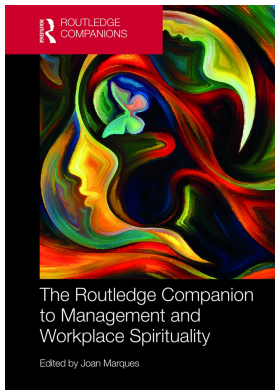
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A TIME FOR US

Collectively Moving Toward Higher Consciousness

Joan Marques

The Greatest Thing You'll Ever Learn
Is Just To Love And Be Loved In Return.
(*Eden Ahbez, "Nature Boy," 1947*)

The Power of Love

We don't need a high level of education to understand the statement above. It is a statement that is comprehensible for all human beings, because love is the single emotion that is felt long before other ways of communicating start. And yet, while it may be the topic that most songs and poems have been devoted to over time, it seems to have disappeared from our common, everyday radar. Perhaps not in the romantic sense of passion and desire, but very much so in the humane sense of compassion and acceptance—at work, as well as in other settings.

Still, there are an infinite number of touching stories that attest to the greatness of love, such as Max DePree's (2008) story of Zoe, his granddaughter, who made it through premature birth thanks to love. Born weighing 1 pound and 7 ounces, Zoe had only 5 to 10% chance of making it through 3 days in life. DePree, best known as the successful CEO of Herman Miller, Inc. and currently referring to himself as a student of human nature and life, recalls the orders from the hospital nurse who was aware that Zoe's father had left and was unwilling to take on his role. The nurse explained to Max,

For the next several months, at least, you're the surrogate father. I want you to come to the hospital every day to visit Zoe, and when you come, I want you to rub her body and her legs and arms with the tip of your finger. While you're caressing her, you should tell her over and over how much you love her, because she has to be able to connect your voice to your touch.

Zoe, which is the Greek word for "life," made it thanks to this love that was shown to her before she could actually comprehend any other verbal communication.

The Cause of Discontentment and the Need for Loving-kindness

The greatest protection in all the world is Loving-kindness.

(Buddha)

The second half of the twentieth century was characterized by individualism, the desire to do things only for the sake of our separate self. Our society has been dominated by the desire for fame and wealth, material things, and hedonism. As a result, many people have fallen away from their spiritual traditions and their families. We cannot have healthy families if we believe joy can be found only in the pursuit of power, sex, and wealth.

(Thich, 2003, p. 171)

As our 21st century world—and therefore our environment—becomes more complicated due to greater diversity, increased speed of actions, accelerated change, and a continuous demand for self-reinvention due to greater job insecurity, many of us find ourselves looking for ways to maintain our inner-balance, and refrain from being overtaken by an unremitting state of disgruntlement. The questions that we oftentimes ask ourselves are, “Is this all there is to it?—Is it really worth my while to continue racing against everyone else?” There is a well-known statement that says, “Even if you win the rat race, you’re still a rat.” I, personally, have no problem with rats in their symbolic depiction, because they form a rather smart group that we can surely learn a thing or two from. But a *rat race* has something hopeless to it. Dictionary.com (2018) describes “rat race” as “A difficult, tiring, often competitive activity or routine.” Wikipedia (2018) even adds a very striking contemporary analogy to the definition:

A rat race is a term used for an endless, self-defeating or pointless pursuit. It conjures up the image of the futile efforts of a lab rat trying to escape whilst running around a maze or in a wheel. In an analogy to the modern city, many rats in a single maze run around making a lot of noise bumping into each other, but ultimately *achieve nothing (meaningful) either collectively or individually.*

How true! Whether we are masters at playing office politics or not; and regardless if we can play our part in the socializing game well or not, we all wonder at times what it is ultimately good for. A prestigious position? A high salary? Excellent benefits? Gaining a place in the in-group? Should we really define ourselves as such? How long do these so-called privileges stay with us anyway? And what about our self-perception? How much do we like ourselves at the end of the day when we quietly review our actions and get confronted with our conscience? What about the long-term picture? After retirement, for instance?

I know a man—we’ll call him Frank—who is now a senior citizen in another country. During his working years, he held a very prestigious position. He was a management member at a large multi-national corporation, and was very proud of his job. So proud, that he would identify himself through his workplace, even when he would answer the phone at home. He would consistently use his last name followed by the name of the company he worked for, as if that were his identity. His family members would chuckle about it, but they never said anything to him in order to spare his feelings, as he was otherwise really a very nice man. Then, two major things happened almost at the same time: Frank’s retirement came up, and the economy of his country went down. His local-currency pension, which he had highly anticipated, became practically worthless, and the company that he had so highly admired and faithfully served for

over four decades, was unwilling to do anything about it. Frank had been replaced and forgotten, as he was no longer of any use to the corporation. So, the well-to-do, proud man became poor and disillusioned, and instantly dependent upon his children for financial support.

Frank's story illustrates how fickle positions and prestige are, and how rude the awakening can be if we cling too much to status symbols of any kind. While the level of appreciation may have changed for the better in the past years in some workplaces, there are still many organizations that only value their workers for what they can get out of them, and not any further.

On the other hand, if we consider that there is a continuous increase in books, workshops, and organizational leaders that focus on issues related to human wellbeing at work, we may become a little more hopeful about the place of loving-kindness in the workplace. Contrary to what the daily rat race instills within us, loving-kindness is not an obsolete emotion, but one that is very much alive.

Wallace (1993) shares the idea that loving-kindness is still vibrant and very useful in our world today. He states,

The cultivation of loving-kindness is ideally suited for the bustling world we live in. It generates a quality of mind that wishes for the well-being of others, and at the same time it profoundly enhances our ability to attain well-being in our own lives.

(p. 119)

Kornfield (2002) agrees, "Loving-kindness offers care and well-wishing to another without expectation or demand. There is no distance between their well-being and your own" (p. 71).

Understanding Wallace's and Kornfield's statements above requires for us to elevate our level of consciousness in order to transcend the boundaries of "self." Indeed, we are our own person, but even more than that, we are part of the greater whole that is humanity, and an even greater whole that is life on Earth. When we decide to raise our awareness to this level, we start realizing the futility of shortsighted selfishness, excessive profit focus, or discrimination on any basis. And then, loving-kindness becomes possible.

Stepping Up to Higher Consciousness

Increasingly, distinguished authors from various disciplines are referring to the necessity of a higher consciousness for human wellbeing and the wellbeing of all life on earth.

In *Power vs. Force*, David Hawkins (1995) distinguishes between the *self* and the *Self*. He starts out by explaining, "Our vision of consciousness is aligned with our concept of self: The more limited the sense of self, the smaller the parameter of experiencing is" (p. 251). Explaining the narrowness of perceiving ourselves as separate entities from all others, Hawkins continues, "The identification and experience of *self* could be limited to a description of one's physical body" (p. 252). Hawkins then explains how we can move away from limited perspectives of the *self* toward an increased awareness of *consciousness* as the driver in our existence, simply by expanding our thought process from having a body with the mind as its driver, to consciousness as the observer of all subjective and objective phenomena in life. He clarifies, "Consciousness is experienced as beyond all form and time and seen as equally present everywhere" (p. 253). In his continued elaboration Hawkins affirms that consciousness is a state "beyond mind" (p. 253); "it is complete, all-inclusive, with neither need nor want, and beyond the limitation of experiencing the merely individualized, personal self" (p. 254). He also explains that pure consciousness transcends ordinary thoughts or feelings and elicits senses of infinite power, compassion, gentleness, and love (p. 254).

Hawkins is not the only one calling for higher consciousness. In his book *The Universe in a Single Atom*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama also devotes a number of chapters to this topic. Consciousness is of high importance in Buddhist philosophy. “In Buddhism, since the definition of ‘living’ refers to sentient beings, consciousness is the primary characteristic of ‘life’” (Dalai Lama, 2005, p. 106). The Dalai Lama asserts that, while there is still little consensus about what consciousness exactly is, the process of in-depth examination of this phenomenon has significantly intensified in the past decades. He emphasizes, “According to the earliest scriptures, the Buddha saw consciousness as playing a key role in determining the course of human happiness and suffering” (p. 121).

Another authority in the area of consciousness is Wallace (2002), who accentuates in his article “A Science of Consciousness: Buddhism (1), the Modern West (0)” that, while Western civilization has not yet developed a science of consciousness, Buddhist philosophy has traditionally taught its adherents to *observe the mind with the mind* in order to bring about transformations for the better in one’s perceptions and behaviors. This is captured in the last of the Four Noble Truths. These Truths are, “[1] the truth of suffering, [2] the source of suffering, [3] the cessation of suffering together with its source, and [4] the path leading to that cessation” (Wallace, 2002, p. 18). So, the fourth truth, the path leading to the end of suffering, is the one where consciousness enters the picture, and it is not difficult to conclude that, if our suffering is caused by office politics, strife, increased job insecurity, or any other source of external stress, we should seek the answer in ourselves, by transcending the boundaries that we have thus far erected in our minds.

Reviewing the current status of consciousness as a research topic, Wallace (2002) does conclude that neither the scientific nor the Buddhist tradition thus far embodies “a rigorous, unbiased, multifaceted science of consciousness” (p. 26).

A Time for Us

Regardless of the current levels of development in examining consciousness as a scientific phenomenon, it seems that an increasing segment of humanity is becoming aware of the flaw in defining one’s existence as merely a limited “self,” while all contemporary developments and trends lead us into one unified direction: the necessity to realize our one-ness as “life on earth,” regardless of our divergent physical or psychological traits. At the largest level, this necessity manifests itself in the serious ecological threats that our planet is facing today. The need to do something about the continuously and increasingly worrying endangerment of various forms of life on Earth—human beings not excluded—is forcing us to rethink our acts, and, with that, our narrow perceptions of “self.”

Overcoming the Hurdles: Some Thoughts and Steps

I have known you
For the longest time
Because you are me
And I am you
Yet, I have been blinded
By lessons from blind teachers
Who received their lessons
From blind ones before
But as my eyes are opening,
I see the real essence of this—our existence

We are all in this together
And by lending each other a hand
The journey becomes more enjoyable
For I am you
And you are me

(Joan Marques)

Interconnectedness: that's what this is all about. Yet, it takes time to distinguish that, especially in our fast-paced, aggressive, ever-changing contemporary world. Many people go through the motions of their cultural values and religious beliefs without ever fully integrating loving-kindness in their lives. Yet, if we start pursuing higher consciousness, the realization of loving-kindness becomes a true reward to ourselves and all our stakeholders. Wallace (1993) explains,

To develop an attitude of loving-kindness, first we must develop a truly loving attitude toward ourselves, compassionately understanding our own desire to be happy and to avoid suffering. As part of that, we must understand the nature of our own ignorance that thwarts this desire for happiness and instead brings suffering. This done, we will have taken an essential first step toward developing loving-kindness toward all beings.
(p. 120)

Before starting to comment that loving-kindness toward all beings in this turbulent world is an impossible task to achieve, we should consider the following: every major problem started as a small issue, but got escalated into something humongous. Equally, every major solution can begin as a small gesture that can expand into something great. The small gesture in this case, is love or loving-kindness. But this type of love can only be ignited when we become willing to look past our trivial differences, and take these for what they really are: beautification of life on Earth as a multifaceted, multi-colored flower garden. I once saw an advertisement for Denny's, an American restaurant chain, in their campaign toward embracing diversity. It entailed a young man explaining that America is a garden of flowers: some are daisies and some are roses, but they are all in the same garden, contributing to the beauty and colorful view that brightens a day.

The garden we should focus on today is larger than just America: it spans our entire globe. All we need to recognize it, is a higher level of consciousness: a sense where we learn to stimulate the part of our mind (right brain hemisphere) that is aware of interconnectedness and mutuality, and bring that in balance with the part that accentuates our individualism, which forces us into the constant strive with the Joneses and encourages the rat race mentality (left brain hemisphere). When we choose to rise to higher consciousness, we cease to focus on only the short-term outcomes of our actions.

- We start broadening our perspectives and examine the wellbeing of life in general in everything we do.
- We start rethinking our job and its contents, the organization where we work and its mission, and our behavior toward our colleagues, friends, and loved ones.
- We become aware that meaning is crucial in making our life's journey a pleasant one for others and ourselves.
- Consequently, we start engaging in ways to create meaning. In doing so, we reach out. We deviate from positional protectionism, political friction, and selfishness in our daily actions, and evolve toward the things that are really important: a purpose in everything we do, and sustainability for all life on Earth.

Because the process of obtaining higher consciousness in our daily actions has to start small before it can evolve into something larger, we need to begin at the personal level. Some useful reflective questions we might ask ourselves are:

1. Am I *who* I want to be? What part of my actions am I proud of, and what part am I embarrassed about? How can I minimize the latter? What do I need to do to achieve that?
2. Am I *where* I want to be? Do I like my job? Are the rewards I receive meaningful to me and those around me? Am I content with my life at home, and are my loved ones content with me? If not, what can I do to achieve that?
3. Am I living *how* I would like to? Am I living beyond my means? Am I doing things solely to impress others? Why is that? Is it necessary? If it causes too much pressure onto me, what can I do about that?
4. Am I *treating* those around me in a correct manner? Am I honest and truthful toward them? Do I give enough? If something is not right, what can I do to change that?
5. Am I *contributing* to the wellbeing of the planet? Am I participating in the wellbeing of my community? Is it enough? Am I satisfied with it? If not, what can I do about that?

These simple reflective questions can help us focus toward a more meaningful life for ourselves and those around us, but, ultimately, also for those who don't even know us. Living with higher consciousness is beneficial for our own existence as well as those of others. It opens the gate to loving-kindness. And loving-kindness is expressed through compassion. Compassion is an intrinsic element in all religions, but it stands as a pinnacle in Buddhism. The Dalai Lama (2005) confirms this in his statement, "In Buddhism the highest spiritual ideal is to cultivate compassion for all sentient beings and to work for their welfare to the greatest possible extent" (p. 10). In *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama further explains,

Compassion can be roughly defined in terms of a state of mind that is non-violent, nonharming, and nonaggressive. It is a mental attitude based on the wish for others to be free of their suffering and is associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility, and respect towards others.

(Dalai Lama & Cutler, 1998, p. 114)

Thich Nhat Hanh (1991) wonderfully weaves love and compassion together when he states,

Love is a mind that brings peace, joy, and happiness to another person. Compassion is a mind that removes the suffering that is present in the other. We all have the seeds of love and compassion in our minds, and we can develop these fine and wonderful sources of energy.

(p. 81)

Figure 30.1 illustrates the cycle that can be instigated when replacing *self* with *Self*.

Figure 30.1 should be interpreted as follows:

- Adopting a higher consciousness is a process that happens from the inside out: you have to be willing to re-evaluate your attitudes, actions, and perceptions, in order to attain higher consciousness (see reflective questions above).
- In attaining higher consciousness, the awareness of being interconnected with all others increasingly starts making sense.

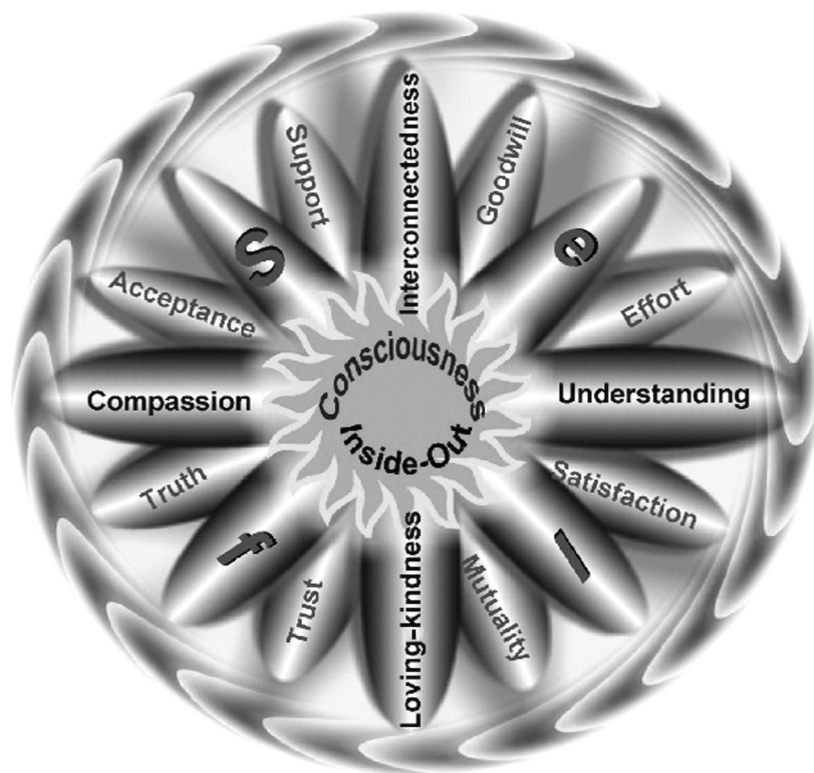


Figure 30.1 Self Through Higher Consciousness

- Your understanding of we-ness augments, and your sense of I-ness decreases.
- Because you learn to see others as part of yourself, you learn to accept and love them, and loving-kindness becomes a part of your life.
- Through love, compassion gets stimulated, and, with that, the will to help others get ahead alongside you instead of continuously competing, striving, backstabbing, and badmouthing. “Mindful observation is the element which nourishes the tree of understanding, and compassion and love are the most beautiful flowers” (Thich, 1991, p. 84).
- With these major realizations, *Self* has started.
- As a consequence of this all-encompassing awareness of *Self*, reciprocal values-based actions such as trust, truth, acceptance, support, goodwill, effort, satisfaction, mutuality, and others become logical petals of the beautiful flower that is life.

When we allow love for all life as part of the *Self* into our existence, the greater picture comes into view. We learn to understand the lesson in everything that happens to us, because we instigated a process of conscious elevation. The world becomes a better place for us, and those around us, and therewith, also for those around them, up till the global level.

The source of love is deep in us, and we can help others realize a lot of happiness. One word, one action, or one thought can reduce another person’s suffering and bring him joy. One word can give comfort and confidence, destroy doubt, help someone avoid

a mistake, reconcile a conflict, or open the door to liberation. One action can save a person's life or help him take advantage of a rare opportunity. One thought can do the same, because thoughts always lead to words and actions. If love is in our heart, every thought, word, and deed can bring about a miracle. Because understanding is the very foundation of love, words and actions that emerge from our love are always helpful.

(Thich, 1991, pp. 84–85)

Toward Wakefulness

Once we can get ourselves in a frame of mind that seeks higher consciousness in order to practice continuously amplified compassion and elevating loving-kindness, we have started our path toward awakening. Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) reviews the seven factors of awakening, which he refers to as limbs of the same tree, and which are:

1. Mindfulness: this involves “remembering, [thus] not forgetting where we are, what we are doing, and who we are with” (p. 215).
2. Investigation: this should not be implemented with a preconceived intention of outcomes, but rather with an open mind in order to “allow things simply to reveal themselves” (p. 216).



Figure 30.2 Seven Factors of Awakening

3. Energy, effort, diligence, or perseverance: this requires deeper looking into the things that matter, and realizing their essence.

When we look deeply, we see that life is a miracle beyond our comprehension. But for many young people today, life is meaningless. Many thousands of young people commit suicide every year. [...] We need to help their lives have meaning.
(p. 216)

4. Ease: this is harder to attain and maintain as the standard of our life—and with that the pressure—increases.

We have to learn ways to bring our energy from our head back to our abdomen. At least once every fifteen minutes, we need to practice letting go [...]. We need to practice resting even when we are not sick.
(p. 217)

5. Joy: this precedes happiness. Thich (1998) explains, “When you are thirsty and a glass of water is being served to you, that is joy. When you are actually able to drink the water, that is happiness” (p. 218). Thich elaborates, “If we can expand our vision and also see what is right, this wider picture always brings joy” (p. 218).
6. Concentration: this only becomes wholesome if we make it beneficial to our wellbeing. Buddha used his concentration “to shine light upon his suffering, and he was able to go deeply into life and develop understanding, compassion, and liberation” (p. 218).
7. Equanimity, or letting go: this is not the same as indifference. Rather, it entails that “we love everyone equally” (p. 218).

Every seed that is planted and nurtured well grows. Why not the seed of loving-kindness? “He who experiences the unity of life sees his own Self in all beings, and all beings in his own Self, and looks on everything with an impartial eye” (Buddha).

As a conclusive note, I am inviting you to read the story below about loving-kindness, and how compassion ultimately gets understood, respected, and rewarded.

The Elephant and His Old Blind Mother

Long ago, in the hills of the Himalayas near a lotus pool, the Buddha was once born as a baby elephant. He was a magnificent elephant, pure white with feet and face the color of coral. His trunk gleamed like a silver rope and his ivory tusks curled up in a long arc.

He followed his mother everywhere. She plucked the tenderest leaves and sweetest mangoes from the tall trees and gave them to him. “First you, then me,” she said. She bathed him in the cool lotus pool among the fragrant flowers. Drawing the sparkling water up in her trunk, she sprayed him over the top of his head and back until he shone. Then filling his trunk with water, he took careful aim and squirted a perfect geyser right between his mother’s eyes. Without blinking, she squirted him back. And back and forth, they gleefully squirted and splashed each other. Splash! Splash! Then they rested in the soft muck with their trunks curled together. In the deep shadows of afternoon, the mother elephant rested in the shade of a rose-apple tree and watched her son romp and frolic with the other baby elephants.

The little elephant grew and grew until he was the tallest and strongest young bull in the herd. And while he grew taller and stronger, his mother grew older and older. Her tusks were

yellow and broken and in time she became blind. The young elephant plucked the tenderest leaves and sweetest mangoes from the tall trees and gave them to his dear old blind mother. “First you, then me,” he said.

He bathed her in the cool lotus pool among the fragrant flowers. Drawing the sparkling water up in his trunk, he sprayed her over the top of her head and back until she shone. Then they rested in the soft muck with their trunks curled together. In the deep shadows of afternoon, the young elephant guided his mother to the shade of a rose-apple tree. Then he went roaming with the other elephants. One day a king was hunting and spied the beautiful white elephant. “What a splendid animal! I must have him to ride upon!” So the king captured the elephant and put him in the royal stable. He adorned him with silk and jewels and garlands of lotus flowers. He gave him sweet grass and juicy plums and filled his trough with pure water.

But the young elephant would not eat or drink. He wept and wept, growing thinner each day. “Noble elephant,” said the king, “I adorn you with silk and jewels. I give you the finest food and the purest water, yet you do not eat or drink. What will please you?” The young elephant said, “Silk and jewels, food and drink do not make me happy. My blind old mother is alone in the forest with no one to care for her. Though I may die, I will take no food or water until I give some to her first.”

The king said, “Never have I seen such kindness, not even among humans. It is not right to keep this young elephant in chains.” Free, the young elephant raced through the hills looking for his mother. He found her by the lotus pool. There she lay in the mud, too weak to move. With tears in his eyes, he filled his trunk with water and sprayed the top of her head and back until she shone. “Is it raining?” she asked. “Or has my son returned to me?” “It is your very own son!” he cried. “The king has set me free!” As he washed her eyes, a miracle happened. Her sight returned. “May the king rejoice today as I rejoice at seeing my son again!” she said.

The young elephant then plucked the tenderest leaves and sweetest mangoes from a tree and gave them to her. “First you, then me.”

Adapted from Buddhist Stories (2018).

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