Six Ways to Make It Work

After the honeymoon, real life sets in—budgets to balance, toilet seats left up, and in-laws coming for dinner. Relationships aren’t easy, says SUSAN PIVER, but if we practice the six paramitas, or transcendent perfections, we can discover how to live in love.

Dharma practitioners are taught the critical importance of developing nonattachment (noticing without holding on as phenomena arise, abide, and dissolve), understanding the only route to happiness is to think of others before ourselves, and accepting the truth of impermanence (nothing will last). This is not only a perfect prescription for spiritual awakening, but also for making our romantic relationships work.

When it comes to relationships, however, even the most basic dharma teachings are difficult to implement. As one who has been both a Buddhist practitioner and a wife for roughly fifteen years, I can tell you that in no area of life are we less likely to apply the dharma than in our love life. I don’t know about you, but although we could practice not holding on to either the good or the bad moments, thinking of our lover first, and recognizing that, no matter what, this relationship will end and we should savor each moment more fully, well, I’m more likely to be a mad grudge holder, to worry overly about whether I’m “getting my needs met,” and, when it comes to acknowledging the eventual end of my marriage, whether through anger, boredom or death, that’s just too much to ask. I need this one little area of my life to exist outside the law of impermanence. And I often catch myself pretending that it does.

This leads to a very painful situation, one where I attempt to enlist my love life in service to my deepest illusions rather than my awakenment. As I look around, I see that I’m not alone in the attempt to use romantic partnership to solidify rather than liberate illusion. Yet, as anyone can tell you who has been romantically involved with someone for more than, oh, three months, relationships are custom-made for battering illusions.

Of course, relationships aren’t easy. Though we may be a genius at solving problems at work or with our friends, when problems arise in love, our elevated viewpoints evaporate and we resort to fancy, adult hissy fits. No one, it seems, is immune: not therapists, ministers, beauty queens, captains of industry, or our post-therapy selves. Forget about Smith & Wesson—relationships are the great equalizer. That said, we can work with relationships by keeping in mind the “container principle.”

The container principle is the idea that the environment you establish or find yourself in can influence or even give rise to an outcome. For example, when you practice meditation in a shrine room, it feels different than when you practice alone at home or outside by the sea or on an airplane. When you eat your dinner standing up over the sink, it may actually taste different than when you are seated at a table with linens and lovely music. If you want to have a difficult conversation with someone, it feels one way to do it in person and another when done via email. These are all examples of containers.

When it comes to relationships, something interesting happens when we expand our view of solving problems to include not just your behavior and my behavior and a deep understanding of our family-of-origin issues, but also the environment in which our relationship is taking place. I don’t mean our house or bank accounts. Nor do I mean if only you were neater or I listened more carefully, or we lived in a different town or spent more or less time together. I’m talking about the energetic structure we create to house our love. Following this advice is not about reducing our conflicts to whatever faults or actions or moments gave rise to them. It is about expanding beyond our list of complaints, and taking refuge in a far more spacious view. We create the container in which love itself wants to live.

There are six elements that go into creating this container. If you practice these steps (called the six paramitas, or transcendent perfections) with devotion, the container arises spontaneously and, poof, you live in love, which is...
way better than trying to feel it. This is akin to owning the petri dish, not the mold, if you will.

Generosity

We each have some pretty distinct ideas (whether we know it or not) about what relationships are supposed to look like. When we were growing up we may have imagined what love would feel like or what it would mean to be in love, and by the time we’re thirteen or so, we have a very fancy relationship movie script to go along with our ideas. It’s like we have a lens stuck in the middle of our forehead and everywhere we look, we project our film onto the environment. Whoever walks through our screen is cast in a role. The people I see when I walk to work are extras; my boss is a villain; the new person at work is a possible lover. When we enter an actual relationship, our filmmaking goes into overdrive and at some point we cease to see the actual human we’re in a relationship with and see only how they do or don’t match our ideal. If we break up, we hope that central casting will quickly send a more suitable person to cast in the role of lover.

We all know what it feels like to treat others this way and to be treated like this—as a device rather than a person. It is very painful and, at the same time, very ordinary. You can tell when someone is looking right at you but not seeing you at all. They see their projection and, when you match it, there is harmony. When you diverge, there is discomfort. We all do this to others, all day long.

One definition of generosity in relationships is this: turn the projector off,. Continuously set the intention and make the effort to separate the person you love from your projections about who they are and who you think they ought to be. Instead of holding them to your ideals, let down your guard. Open to them as they are. Release your agenda over and over. This is an incredibly generous thing to do.

Discipline

When many people hear the term discipline in the context of a relationship, they think that what is meant is a strict adherence to a system of thought that, if observed diligently, will resolve emotional conflicts.

Some systems contain wonderful counsel, such as advocating that couples always seek to compromise, or make sure to spend enough time together (or apart), or that they observe the same rituals or religion. But while these suggestions can be useful, they don’t seem to have anything to do with love. When done with an agenda, even the agenda to create a better relationship, actions fail to connect with love’s transcendent properties.

I propose an alternative view of discipline. Discipline in a relationship is to work with each individual situation that arises with integrity and openness, and also to take the largest view possible of the relationship itself, over and over. This view is rooted in trust in each other’s basic sanity, that over and above our inadequacies, we each possess a kind of brilliance.

When you and your beloved trust in each other’s goodness and basic sanity first and the truth of your flaws second, there is the possibility that the difficulties you experience will self-liberate. So when you find yourself becoming mired in a theory about why a difficulty has arisen, try this. Don’t abandon the theory. Look at it. Examine your views. Take them seriously. Then let them go. The discipline here is to come back to your beloved with open eyes and to see them as they are right now, without having an agenda to change them.

Patience

Patience doesn’t just mean tolerance for your beloved’s frailties, nor does it mean maintaining hope in the face of repeating arguments over the exact same issues. It has more to do with tolerance for your own frailties first, a willingness to take on and work with your own mind. You could say that all relationship difficulties begin with the unwillingness to face our own emotions. It is painful to me when I feel inadequate, unappreciated, invisible—and this pain is real. However, it is a mistake (i.e. not helpful) to assign responsibility for my feelings to my husband, no matter how much of a jerk I may perceive him to be in any given moment. Patience has more to do with becoming solely and always responsible for my emotional reactions.
The sitting practice of meditation is the most direct method I know for adapting such a relationship to your own inner life. I’m pretty sure that without it I wouldn’t have been able to make space for the extraordinary holograms of emotion that come and go during even a single day as partners.

**Exertion**

When I was getting married, I read a lot of books and articles about how to have a successful relationship. I mean, look around. Not many people get it right. I got so into the topic I even wrote one such book myself, The Hard Questions: 100 Essential Questions to Ask Before You Say “I Do.” (I like to prepare.)

Almost all of the advice I got from books, friends, and family boiled down to a single dictum: Relationships take work. I have to say, this did not make me happy. Not that I have anything against work, but when I looked at my sweet boyfriend and imagined that all the effortless love, passion, and delight we took in each other was somehow, through marriage, going to become a kind of drudgery, I thought WTF? How does that happen? And how can I avoid it at all costs?

The Buddhist view of exertion provides a few clues. Rather than implying drudgery, exertion is synonymous with joy. It’s not about working hard to make problems go away or trying your very best to make an effort at all times. It is so much simpler than that. Here, exertion is the noble act of taking an interest. When you get along, you take an interest in that. When you don’t, you take an interest in that, too. You take an interest when you are able to connect with your beloved openly, gracefully, and easily, and also when you connect to them with grumpiness, stupidity, and a sense of entitlement. Taking an interest is not about reductive analysis or figuring out what is going on so you can dispatch it. It is a way of opening to your own experience—and to your beloved—with tenderness and honesty. It is the act of continuously disposing of your agenda to instead live your experience fully, which gives rise to vitality, energy, and joy.

Exertion, as Chögyam Trungpa defined it, is to “work unceasingly with our own neurosis and speed.” Who doesn’t want to be married to someone who does that? When I know that my husband is committed to work in this way, whether he succeeds or fails in any particular instance, I not only trust him, my heart melts toward him.

**Meditation**

In meditation practice, the breath is the object of attention. You train yourself to notice when the mind strays from the breath, let go of what it has strayed to, and then return to the breath. Our practice in a relationship is similar, but instead of the breath, love itself is our mutual object of attention. When attention strays into rage, disconnection, resentment—or even affection, delight, and passion—we come back to love. By love, I don’t mean any particular feeling. Perhaps opening is a better word. When my husband pisses me off with his unbelievably hypercritical comments, or I irritate the crap out of him with my self-absorption or complete lack of spatial awareness, I’m not suggesting that he or I drop our feelings and try to be all sweet and nice to each other. I’m suggesting that we simply open to each other. Again. Again. Again.

Who is he to me right now? Someone I love. And now? Someone I despise. Someone who bores me. Inspires me. Soothes me. And who is he right now, and right now, as best I can tell? Someone who feels happy. Sad. Alone. Confused. When it comes to love, the best you can hope for (and it is far better than whatever you may imagine, based on movies and whatnot) is not someone for whom you feel love all the time—or passion or admiration—but someone who will take your hand and step with you into the insane flood of need and desire and emotion and connection, and, eyes wide open, watch it all and feel it fully. Together.

To become each other’s object of meditation is a good problem-solving methodology when it comes to love.

**Wisdom**

In all my thinking about the nature of wisdom, there is only one thing I can say about it with any confidence: it has nothing to do with me or my little understandings or insights, not that there is anything wrong with them. It has more to do, it seems, with giving up on the idea of “my” wisdom and instead making a relationship to wisdom itself, the field of intelligence that underlies, encapsulates, gives rise to, and is utterly indifferent to “me.”
When I try to love my husband from a place of thinking I know what is going on between us or I know what love is, I fail to connect with him. When I am able to disengage from my ideas about who either of us is or should be or what love itself should look like, and meet him in a place beyond knowing, I see again and again that wisdom, groundlessness, and love are absolutely inseparable. So—whether our connection feels joyous, contentious, dull, or shocking—we begin again. And again.

After all the fights, daily irritations, and completely unpredictable disappearances and resurgences of love and desire, I have given up trying to analyze or control what makes us argue or reconcile. Instead, the best I can do is look at each disconnect, the teeny ones and the seemingly insurmountable ones, as yet another chance to step beyond my comfort zone and into a deeper (and more uncomfortable) love. When I try to hold our relationship in the cradle of loving-kindness in just this way, our difficulties become ornaments in the crazy dance of love.

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Susan Piver is a meditation instructor in the Shambhala Buddhist lineage. Her books include the bestseller The Hard Questions: 100 Essential Questions to Ask Before You Say "I Do" and The Wisdom of a Broken Heart: How to Turn the Pain of a Breakup Into Healing, Insight, and New Love. Piver is regularly featured in the media, including appearances on CNN, “Oprah,” and the “Today Show.”