

Bridge essays, by Jason Espada

Fourteen essays on the meeting place of East and West, Buddhism and Christianity, and Politics and Spirit

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A few thoughts on faith

{these are few selections from essays I've written this last year}

I.

For my own purposes, over the years I've come to view faith as an intuition, the knowledge of things not yet proven.

When it comes to faith, if anyone were to ask us how we know some things, or why we are being led to go in a certain direction, there's no answer we can give them that can satisfy either ourselves, or them, but without some amount of faith, our progress will be slow, or non existent.

One of the nice things about getting older is that we can look back on our lives, and, it gets easier to trust our intuition. We can look at times when we knew, without knowing *how* we knew, and followed that, and only later saw that things worked out, that there was something that matched the feeling we had.

'Faith goes into the spiritual realm, and brings out those things that are already there, where they can be seen.' – Joyce Meyer

If we have faith, we relax on some level. I think of those who are somehow cut off from this faculty, and how they suffer from wanting to know everything in advance. We know with our hearts so much more than can be understood with the intellect.

Faith is also associated with devotion. If faith is trust and reliance, relaxing and believing in something, then devotion acts more like a magnet, drawing what we are devoted to to us.

Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche has these beautiful and true things to say about devotion: 'Devotion creates readiness, just as in the Spring the sun and rain make gardens ready to plant seeds and start growth. 'Devotion is the key that opens the door of pure vision. It leads us beyond darkness, doubt and hesitation; it will help us recover from periods of difficulty. Devotion takes us beyond conceptions to an understanding of the true nature.'

If we follow our heart, follow our intuition, with faith, trust and devotion, then we will be led to paths we would never find otherwise, to depth and meaning and fulfillment. This is the ideal.

What we call faith is reflection of the mythic, poetic, and imaginative in us; the ability to have a vision, and to dream; it is linked with the Dionysian, ecstatic, and celebratory...

II.

Part of the problem for us Westerners is our over-reliance on rational thinking. This function has its place, but there are also some things that come to us only through the door of the love, the door of the heart, through faith and intuition, or direct experience. If we rely too much on the intellect here, it blocks us.

When we want to know everything ahead of time, or have a logical explanation for everything, we can get in our own way.

I've thought of one analogy to describe both what's true about the rational view and also what it leaves out. It is: a black and white photograph of a color scene - it's true as far as it goes, but, there are many elements that are not seen. Many spiritual truths don't lend themselves to being contained within concepts, and those who live just in the intellect suffer the loss of so many things, like the perception of beauty, mystery, wonder, intuition, inspiration and delight... These things are seen with the eyes of the spirit, and not with the eyes of the intellect alone.

III.

Ideally, faith, and our critical faculties can compliment each other. When faith is balanced with learning, it tests what we know, as much as we possible. Reason can then be used to highlight, and bring into application those things that are sensed with the intuition. And when our well developed reason sees that it can only go so far, and that there is more that can be known directly, reason bows to faith and devotion, stands aside, and lets this ability fulfill its function.

Grace and Buddhism

Grace is the power by which we are ultimately saved, and grace is the power we have to change. - Joyce Meyers

I've always admired the concept of grace in Christianity. I've marveled at the beauty of it, and how it describes a real, profoundly transformative event in people's lives. Such a wonderful thing, they are describing!

Sometimes I've felt like it is present in Buddhism also, for example, when I think of the blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the Saints and our teachers, and the Dharma, and the love we have received from our parents. Nothing we could have done could 'earn' this kindness. It is a tremendous thing. And, just as a blessing is described in Christianity and in other religions, it has the power to 'tip the scales', so to speak.

I remember the title of one book of Beat poetry called 'Grace beats karma'. When I saw that I had to laugh, because in Buddhism we don't usually speak in these terms. In Eastern Traditions, it is talked about, with such terms as 'darshan' (the blessing of being in the presence of a Teacher), and 'shaktipat' (a transmission of spiritual energy), but I've not heard grace mentioned in the same way by Buddhist teachers, or in books on Buddhism. In Buddhism, as it has reached these shores up to now, it's usually all very mathematical, with the teachings about karma saying that *this* action produces *these* results.

This is true, as far as it goes, but when it comes to our lives, and the possibilities that exist, especially when we connect with a spiritual tradition or teacher, more needs to be said. When we are blessed by something or someone, we really have to throw out our calculators. There is no way to measure the great positive influence of a Sage or a Savior in our lives. This is spoken of in many great traditions.

Grace is described in Christianity as '*God's free and unmerited favor*'. Interpreted in non-theistic language, this has its equivalent for us also in a very practical and accessible way, in our own Buddha Nature, that which is with us all the time. This profound truth of our nature is described in the

literature as unproduced by our efforts, unblemished, beyond delusion, and, as it is, the source of all good qualities.

This is our ‘original, unborn, and undying wisdom, which radiates all the time’, says Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinoche. He says, ‘This is the most powerful light. At this moment, the undying flame of wisdom is hidden behind or within our phenomenal conceptions. This inner light resides within us, never dimming, never losing its qualities, never dying out.

‘Whatever brightness, clarity, analytic energy, or understanding we have actually arise from that original, unborn wisdom. All are none other than the innate nature of our own mind.’

This fundamental nature, that is beyond the reach of all deluded activity and mistaken concepts, is in us all. It is all of our birthright— and surely this fits any definition as a grace and blessing to each and every one of us! This potential we have is to really something to celebrate! This is what we aim to realize, both in the sense of understanding it, and in the sense of bringing its intrinsic good qualities to fruition in our lives.

Three parallels

There’s always a risk when we compare great traditions that we’ll oversimplify their message, or bend what they teach to fit what we’d like them to say. It is useful though, to compare teachings when they shine a light on each other, and complement the understanding and practice of each approach.

That said, here are three parallels I’ve found for grace in the Christian and Buddhist traditions. It seems to me that they are using different language to talk about the same thing – in very different frameworks, yes, but there you go. The ‘active ingredient’, I’m thinking here, is the same in both cases. First, these two – the divine, or God’s grace within, and our fundamental nature of mind, or Buddha Nature are *with us all the time*.

The reality that ‘The Kingdom of God is within you’ was not just being invented as it was spoken by Jesus – it was the truth that has always been that was being pointed out by Him.

This is a teaching on universal truth, and not just for those He was addressing. This is saying something about what is always and everywhere true. Quite radically different than how we usually perceive things to be!, and so it needs to be said, and experienced.

The same message, in Buddhist terms is that our fundamental nature is always with us, unchanging, and pure from the beginning. In the Treatise on Buddha Nature, by Maitreya, the basic teaching is this:

The essence of buddhahood abides within all beings,
obstructed by the stains of transient delusions.

The second idea is that receiving, and awakening to Grace, or the realization of this fundamental nature within us can be seen as *the starting point* for us in our spiritual practice. In Christianity, it is in receiving Christ that our new life begins.

‘You have taken off your old self, with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge of its creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and is in all.’ (Colossians 3:9-11)

In Zen, having an insight into our deeper nature is called satori. In the Nyingma and Kagyud schools of Tibetan Buddhism, this is called having the realization of the nature of mind. From that point, there is a re-orientation of practice. It’s as if the clouds had parted, temporarily, and we’re able to adjust our sense of where we are, and where we’re heading.

Tho it’s not often referenced, in the Nyingma, or Early School, they say that until we have a glimpse of the View, we don’t really know what we’re doing or where we’re going in meditation. The same idea, in Christian language is that meeting Christ, from that point on, gives a new perspective on everything in life.

The third idea that I find in both Christianity and Buddhism regarding grace is the idea that *this is what we draw from for our whole lives.*

As one of my favorite modern Christian teachers, Joyce Meyer says, ‘Grace is more than just the power to save us, it is the power we need for every single thing that we do.’

and,

‘Here’s what grace is: grace is not just the undeserved favor of God – grace is the power of the Holy Spirit, coming to us, freely, to help u to do whatever we need to do, *with ease.*’ (emphasis added)

The Scriptures say,

‘Divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness’

(2 Peter, 1:3)

In the Christian tradition they make the distinction between what they call ‘works of the flesh’ and ‘works of the spirit’. They sound the cautionary note:

‘Unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain that build it’

And yet, if we look closely, there is also something blissful about this:

In Romans, it says

‘Grace is a work that is done entirely with God’s mercy, and *without human effort.*’

When this kind of power is present in our life, we can understand what the poet Rumi meant when he said:

‘Stop swimming so hard,
and climb into the boat
with Noah...’

How excellent!

In one of his letters, it’s true, Paul says he struggles, but that he does so using the grace he’s been given.

‘To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.’ (Colossians, 1:29)

In his book, *The Glorious Pursuit*, author Gary Thomas highlights that, ‘Paul is laboring. But he is struggling with *God’s* energy, not his own, ‘which so powerfully works’ within him.’

Elsewhere in the Gospel, Paul affirms that, *‘I can do all things, through Christ, who strengthens me...’*

In Mahayana Buddhism, practice is framed in terms of what are called The Six Perfections: of Generosity, Ethics, Patience, Effort, Meditation and Wisdom, and it’s taught that the true, natural, and, in a way, effortless expression of these all depend on Wisdom – which is insight into Reality, or our Fundamental Nature.

The Zen Ancestor Dogen referred to this at the end of one of his fascicles where he says, ‘The treasure house opens, and we use it as we will...’

In Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism also, where they use visualization, this same idea is referenced when they say that the view is the necessary basis for all the prayers and practices that they do. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on the teacher-student relationship, and the blessings that are given and received through devotion form an integral part of practice within this living tradition.

Often when two traditions are compared, something is lost in the translation, or in the attempt to make things ‘fit’. Hopefully that’s not the case here. If, in drawing these parallels, what’s at work in these traditions is any more clear, then I’ll be glad. May that be to the benefit of all practitioners everywhere, and to all beings.

‘Grace and peace be multiplied to you...’

I have this wish, for all of us, whoever we are, wherever we are.

In the words of Timothy, and then Paul:

Dear friends,

‘Stir up the Gift that is in thee...’

and,

'Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.'

Aah, how wonderful!

The light that is still with us, by Jason Espada

{I hesitate a bit to write this one, but... I have to at least try...}

There's a teaching I remember hearing called, 'What we talk about' – let me see if I can get this right. I think it goes something like this, that:

The best things in life we don't talk about because there are no words for them. We don't even try to wrap language and ideas around those things, maybe because they are too big, or so extraordinary, such that we don't have even the idea of trying to say it.

Then, the next best things, the really good things in life, we have thoughts about, but we keep them to ourselves. These are most personal, and so close to ourselves and our experience that we wouldn't want them to be misunderstood or not appreciated, should we utter a word about them.

Poetry sometimes can stand at the border of what language can say, and, rather than try to encompass, it points the way, and is inviting...

For example, Rumi says,

This is love:
to fly towards a secret sky,
and to cause hundreds of veils to fall away,
moment by moment...

{As with many of his poems, this one ends with the sense of a hushed silence, and wonder...}

And so then, what we're left with when it comes to our everyday language, is... everything else that we talk about. Ha!

And so it is with wanting to write about the miraculous in our lives. I'm reduced to this – to try to use ordinary talk to refer to something that is not ordinary at all. It's like holding nothing but simple clay in my hands, and wanting to represent something magnificent. What can I do? But something should be said, or at least referred to, I'm thinking, from time to time.

(This is me riding on part of my ‘hurry up and say it’ motivation, that I’ve been feeling lately, which is essentially touching the truth of impermanence here on this beautiful earth, with my beautiful family and friends, and feeling, because of that, like we all have this chance to live fully, and that we shouldn’t hold anything back *at all*.

This idea, of our just being here briefly, and that none of us know just for sure how long we have, makes deciding to do some things, such as to write, or to retreat, so easy as to be effortless in a way. This activity depends on that realization, clearly, and so, here goes...)

I think part of the reason why something so extra-ordinary that we would call it miraculous is not talked about often, is because as human beings we are so apt to dis-believe. This is nothing new – we can find teaching stories on this theme throughout time in great traditions, both East and West.

I had to laugh when I heard the one about the Israelites complaining when they were in the desert, and were criticizing Moses and God. After all, it was pointed out, that their Lord had just recently *parted the Red Sea* for them to escape from the hand of Egypt.

Now, can you imagine having lived through an event like that and later *complaining*? Incredible!, but like all good teaching stories there is a truth being vividly expressed there about all of us human beings.

It was the same way, apparently, with the disciples of Jesus – after witnessing so many miracles, still they doubted! Can you imagine?

At one time, I liked to remind myself, as a way to keep an eye on my so so frequent disbelief in what I was seeing, that, ‘the problem is, that a miracle happens on Monday, and on Tuesday we forget about it!’ (and now I would add: ‘and complain too!’)

This kind of thing happened also in the Buddha’s time. Apparently one of his monks was demonstrating various powers, and was chastised by the Buddha, or so the recorded version of it goes. The Buddha then officially forbade them from showing psychic powers unless there was a good reason for it.

One can only imagine a great being like the Buddha, perhaps levitating or moving through solid objects (like one of his modern day followers, Dipa Ma, is said to have done).

The Buddha had so much to teach people, the greatest gifts, but I'm sure that many in the crowds went away talking only about the extraordinary things they had seen, and maybe debating whether they were real or not, and then returning the next day, and, instead of wanting to hear teachings on liberation and enlightenment, only wanting and maybe calling out loudly for some unusual demonstration. One can only imagine the Buddha getting wise real quick to the drawback of showing what he and enlightened beings could do, or even talking much about it.

Still, there are miraculous things happening in our lives, and it's to our great advantage to know this and to remember when this has been so, because I'm sure that same power is with us even now.

We forget, I know, I know, and I know, and, it's *such* a loss!

The same power that has answered our prayers before is still with us;

we can verify this for ourselves

that power that helped us get through the hardest of times is with us,

that power that brought unexpected success,

that made a way out of no way,

the power that parted the Red Sea,

the power that raised Jesus from the dead,

that appeared as light, when we needed it most,

and that, for a time to our perceptions, validated our faith with visible results...

Now, I don't know for sure what to call such a power, except perhaps... Grace... other people may call it different things, and, indeed, the power

that works like this has been given many names, and as far as I'm concerned, all of them are true names to the people that hold them close. Names are not important, but what the names point to *is* most important.

This doesn't suppose much, or any of a belief system – it's reference is to something much closer in our lives than that. Grand, over-arching theories are not really of much concern or help when we're in trouble and fighting for our lives.

I suppose this is to say I have faith in a higher power, or in something much greater than I now understand. Maybe some day I'll understand it completely, and I'll be sure to come back and tell you all about it when I do, but, for now, this is the truth of it.

The faith that I have brings greater peace, when things are uncertain, or scary. This is part of how it works: when I remember the past, and how things worked out because of the light and power that was there, I know that it helps me to touch the truth of its being present also now.

Faith also seems to open the way for the energy of grace to come into our lives. It's always there, I trust, but, from our side, if we have this much trust, I've seen, for some reason, that it helps to bring that power through. I can't say why this is so, but I *can* say that I've seen this at work over the years, and so I feel like I have to at least try to say it.

When we're feeling particularly faith-less, it isn't that this power is not there, but we may not notice its presence, rely on it, or take advantage of it. When we look, when we even celebrate the good we've received somehow in this life, it makes the actual presence of that grace more clear to our mind now.

They say we should give thanks regularly to God, and if we think that way, I can see its point. If we're not of the habit of thinking Theistically, still there is so much we have to be grateful for, and so much help we've received from outside, and in our lives, however we like to think about it.

I think that gratitude and thanksgiving, praise and celebration of all we've received in the past has a valid, and truly vital role to play in our seeing and accessing the blessings for our lives that are available now, today, however we like to think of them.

It's like we're thirsty, regularly, really needing water to survive and thrive, and there is a stream of fresh water running close by, within reach, just a few feet from where we are. It may be there, but if we don't see it, we can't get its benefits.

Regular thanksgiving, praise and celebration are skillful ways to keep in mind that something very much like 'a stream of fresh water to a thirsty person', has helped us in extraordinary ways in the past, and these are ways that help us to see its presence in our lives now.

I don't know what others will make of this, but I felt that at least once in a while, something like this needs to be said.

Faith in Universal Goodness

I have faith in a universal goodness pervading all of life. I say this because I've had glimpses of it – timeless, endlessly inventive, and, when we see it, familiar to us all. That this fundamental nature gets covered over, and our original impulse gets distorted accounts for a lot of our history, both personal and collective, but our story is also one of struggle against everything that follows from this basic ignorance. Light breaks through in one person, then a group, and in a movement. We keep awake in the re-telling of these stories, and in the re-tracing of our history.

This week I learned about Seva – an organization dedicated to addressing treatable blindness worldwide, and I had to ask myself again, ‘Is it true that thousands of people could be helped to see again, except that they are not known about, and not cared about?’

There are so many things here that we spend our time, energy, income and resources of creativity on – sports, computer games, clothes, food and drink, entertainments – the list could go on and on... It feels to me like this is one more area that shows just how caught we are here, as a culture, as a people, bound up in our own problems to the exclusion of our family, our neighbor. There are many we could easily help, in extraordinary ways, were we free enough inside to respond to their needs.

I have no doubt that what covers our fundamental goodness also keeps us, every day we are here, from knowing and responding to the greater world, and the lives of our greater family. It is natural to love, to give of our time, energy, creativity, encouragement and happiness. This all follows as a matter of course when we ourselves are sane, whole, balanced individuals, free of neurosis, and free of affliction.

However we formulate the path of such a mature person, it seems there's always some problem or other with it. For example, if we set the aim of a spiritually mature life as ‘socially engaged, enlightened activity’, we may not do the necessary inner work. We can instead take on a ‘spiritual ego’, or a helper persona, and while this has some value, it only goes so far.

If the inner work isn't done, at the very least, we've limited our own capacity. Worse still, the standard corruptions of human nature being what they are, if not dealt with individually, will again surface in whatever group

or person comes into power. And perhaps the biggest drawback to not deeply clarifying an essential human path for ourselves is that we really don't get to the root cause of manifold problems. That's one side of it.

On the other hand, if we take as the aim of human life and inner development just the personal freedom from suffering and limitation, then we have a definition that stops short of describing the subsequent outward, engaged aspect of a liberated life. We need both parts of a definition of a complete life – the inner development, and its communal expression.

Lama Yeshe said, ‘We don’t need to be enlightened before we can begin to act’, and the thought from Ghandi, that whatever we do will be small, but it’s essential that we do it - feels true here. But then seeing our limitation, and how much remains to be done should act as further encouragement for us to free ourselves. When the obscurations are cleared away, then our capacity to respond is fully awakened.

When I get down looking at our suffering world, and the neglect of those who could be doing more to help, I know I need to remember this – that the nature of us all is fundamental goodness, and that there are reasons for how we respond. Beneath the diverse views and actions, right along with all the troubles, I can see there is also this world of light, with its streaming radiance, and this is where I place my trust, this is where I find my rest.

Loving your enemies – returning good for harm

for Dom Laurence Freedman,

by Jason Espada

The idea of responding to being insulted or abused with non-reactivity, and then even with love doesn't come along in Buddhist practice until what they would call an advanced stage. By contrast, it's right there, plainly spoken in the Christian teaching, as loving one's enemies.

To me, there's something beautiful about this, in that the goal, of having a universal kindness and goodwill is taught by Jesus right from the beginning in Christianity. At the same time, there's a great benefit to having a step by step method to work with, to cultivate such love, that would otherwise seem unapproachable. It's like
having a map through the terrain to where we would go.

We hear the ideal in the Scriptures,

*Love your enemies,
bless those who curse you,
do good to those who hate you,
and pray for those who spitefully use
and abuse you*

only then can you be called children of your heavenly Father...

and

For he makes the sun to rise on the good and evil alike, and sends rain on both the innocent and the wicked.

*If you love only those who love you,
what reward can you expect? Even the tax collectors do as much as that.*

and if you greet only your brothers, what is so special about that? Even the heathens do as much.

There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds.

These can be so inspiring to think about. Or, sometimes, and for many, this can seem impossible. *How does one actually go about getting to that state? How does a person develop to the point where they can love all equally, even those who cause harm to them or to their loves ones?*

I think that Buddhism has something truly significant to offer here, as it has teachings that lay out the stages of development of such an all embracing love. It's as if the two Traditions are mighty rivers, joining together to point to the goal, and the method of arriving there. Magnificent!

The metta teachings lay out five general categories for the gradual cultivation of loving kindness. They begin with oneself, and then those friendly towards us, including family, benefactors and teachers. The third and fourth categories are those of the neutral persons, or those not known to us personally, and those who are hostile to us, sometimes called the category of the difficult person.

Taking a step by step approach, we start the intentional cultivation of the quality of loving kindness with whoever is easiest for us, and go from there. In metta practice, it's only after a person has developed some of that pure quality of care and genuine well wishing for these four different categories of people that they arrive at the fifth, which is the cultivation of loving kindness towards all beings, a true universal love. Before that, it's taught, there's still bias, indifference, or even aversion to be overcome.

Each of these different groups are a rich field of inquiry and investigation. Each one has a place, it would seem, in the progress towards universal concern and active care.

In the West, especially today, it's so clear that many people need to develop more kindness and compassion for themselves. Surprisingly, some of the nicest people we know judge and treat themselves quite harshly. There are many reasons we should be good to ourselves, but here, in the context of developing metta, I'll just mention a few.

When we say, ‘do to others as you would have them do to you’ – how would we know the wish that others have for themselves, for happiness, safety, and peace, unless we were in touch with that in ourselves? And this is not a one time thing to be glimpsed, or just understood intellectually. We can see how it is, that, when we are in touch with our own tender selves, through a practice of meditation, or some other way to be closely aware of how we are feeling inside, then naturally we are more considerate of others we’re in contact with. We know what it is to be a human being, and we can’t help but meet them also as fellow travellers here.

A second reason for developing greater kindness towards ourselves is that it allows us to settle down easily in our meditation. When we’re comfortable with ourselves, which is one of the results of this meditation, we can be at ease physically, and in our mind and heart.

Metta also brings joy, and clarity and brightness to the mind. Any further study or development we then undertake goes smoothly.

Just to mention one more reason for developing our capacity for kindness towards ourselves relates to the theme of this paper, that of extending love even to those who are hostile towards us. With any type of consistent meditation practice we do, there are going to be ups and downs – good days and days when nothing seems to work. That’s when we need for love to come up in us as compassion, gentleness, and even an greater care than before.

Life can be hard, so, what to do? When we really do see our confusion, our impatience, and our mistakes and shortcomings, how can we hold all this? This is the real test and measure of our gradual progress. Here, as with the other categories, as we go, naturally, we find our limitations, and, right there is where we can take the next step, and the next. Right there is where we can work. All this takes patience, and persistance, but it is entirely worthwhile.

The ‘friend’ category too adds something unique to the progress of developing love. We start with those closest to us, although sometimes it’s recommended that we choose a person with whom we have an uncomplicated relationship. There’s a good reason for this, in that with them we can feel our simple, heart-felt love for another. It is pure.

There's something to be said though as well here for working with those closest to us in the first place, even if the relationship is more complex. We learn love in this matrix of family. The unconditional love of a mother or father, sibling or other close relative has a reliable, enduring quality to it that we may not find so readily in our friendships.

This is the ideal, of course, and there's a lot of variety in how people's family relationships have turned out. The method is clear about this – we can experiment and choose whoever is easiest to feel gratitude towards, and are happy to hold in our mind with thoughts of good will.

Sometimes we can then go back and forth, creatively using the method of cultivating metta, as it is suggested we do. It's interesting to experiment here as well. The idea is to find that feeling of easy, genuine good will, and then to direct it to ourselves, family and friends, benefactors and teachers, and then perhaps back to ourselves again.

When we have developed the sense of good will towards a few of our close friends, we extend that also to those we are less close to, and then to those we don't know. The saying of Jesus spells it out clearly for us:

*If you love only those who love you,
what reward can you expect? Even the tax collectors do as much as that.*

and if you greet only your brothers, what is so special about that? Even the heathens do as much.

In the Buddhist approach, there's the use reasoning in times of reflection, which I think is implied in the above passage. When we turn to our less-close friends, and then to those we don't know (sometimes called the 'neutral person' category) we reflect on how they are like ourselves, and like our close friends and family members, in that they too want only happiness, and not the slightest suffering.

Just like ourselves, they too want to be appreciated, and to feel that they belong. They suffer, even as we do, from having bodies that are sometimes not too reliable, from moods that can overtake them, from loneliness, fears, and so on. They too appreciate it when someone is kind to them, and when they meet with success in their lives.

We can see how this builds. From ourselves, or someone it's easy to feel loving kindness towards, to those we are close to, and then gradually to those we don't know as well.

They suggest we choose specific people to represent this category, of someone we don't know personally, and cultivate good will towards them. It's only slightly a problem that, after a while, we will feel genuine, spontaneous kindness well up when we think of them. It just means we have to look for someone else we may have overlooked in the past, or not taken into consideration. Likely, there will be plenty to discover.

Only after cultivating in this way is the general category of enemy, or difficult person introduced, and even then, within this group, we are advised to go step by step.

We can, and often do want to start with the difficult category – and even the most difficult person – the one who has caused us, or someone close to us the most suffering. Though we can try to go directly for developing kindness for that person, it's not recommended, because it's not usually effective. In fact, this is where we meet that 'no, it is impossible' feeling. It means that, though we have a good aim in mind, we're going about it in the wrong way – too directly, instead of step by step. This is like trying to go up a mountain without using the path. We might just look up and say, 'no way'.

There is something organic about the development of love. Some people have a lot of it already, and so, even when they meet with some difficult person, or situation, they can respond from their abundant inner resources of generosity, patience, and kindness. Most of us though, will have to find our way there gradually.

Within the category of difficult person, again, there are degrees we can work with, like with lifting weights, or developing a skill, such as playing music.

I learned some things in classical music study that apply here. In classical training, they say that 'slow is fast', meaning that careful, attentive practice will get us to our goal in the most effective way. There is also the tradition, in music pedagogy, of training progressively with studies, so that the more difficult techniques can gradually be mastered. With this under their belt, a person can then play pretty much anything they want.

It's much the same way in cultivating metta for the difficult person, or situation. Standing in line at the bank, or in traffic, are usual ones I can point to, that has no one to blame, in particular, but that gives us some opportunity to develop even a bit more patience, respect for others, and goodwill as we're standing, or idling there.

There are times also when we may feel like our friends or family are not there for us, or have been unkind in some way. Forgiving and letting go of any feelings of recrimination is maybe easiest with this group, because after all, they have done so much for us. Again, we start with those for whom it is easiest for us to let go of past perceived wrongs, and renew the relationship. Then we can gradually extend that skill we've developed.

It's useful, maybe even essential, to include ourselves in the so called difficult person category. There will definitely be times when being with ourselves is not easy – for whatever reason. It could be an uncomfortable feeling in the body, or some difficult feeling, such as anger or irritation that has arisen.

Taking it further, when we look into our lives, we can see how much we need acceptance, kindness, tolerance and forgiveness. That is the basis for extending it to others.

'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone' and so on.

Grace and barbarity

I've been thinking lately of some of the Christian terms, such as sin and salvation, and especially of grace. It seems we don't have an equivalent for grace in Buddhism, although I do sense it there as well.

We can talk about karma, and look at it as a kind of cosmic justice – in that wrong actions bring suffering with it, but when it comes to the love we receive, and share with others, it seems to me that this is something we can't begin to measure out, or say is deserved, or not deserved.

Love seems to me to be a gift, the supreme gift, that trumps even cruelty, barbarity, and injustice. It 'keeps no account of wrongdoing', and it has the capacity to wipe the slate clean, so we can begin again.

How can we even start to measure something like this? It is truly radical, and of another order altogether from what's bargained back and forth in our so-common, selfish relationships.

The love that is cultivated step by step, following it's organic development, can reach the stage where even those who are inimical towards us are treated with kindness in return.

The term 'enemies', as in 'love your enemies', I think of these days as some pretty clever marketing, designed to get our attention. After all, if someone is our enemy, by definition, they are someone we don't love, and probably even someone we hate back in turn. Isn't that the way it is? It's clear, after some reflection, this is saying that, from our side, not to have enemies. It's about how we hold this person who is threatening, or abusing us, or someone we feel close to.

Do we see them as evil? As irredeemable? Maybe we do if we have the notion of 'unpardonable sin', or 'original sin' or 'eternal damnation'. In Buddhism though, the whole group of those who cause harm is viewed differently, and in a way that can be worked with much more effectively, for all our sake.

First, we don't assert original sin, but rather original goodness, or purity, called in teachings called our Buddha Nature, (or Divine Nature) that is the basis for the potential for change. If we don't see this, or at least acknowledge it as a possibility, then those who are doing wrong will be seen as always being the way they are, with no chance of change. Then of course, what choice would we have other than to set ourselves in opposition to them forever? But seeing the potential for change, we're not so set in our attitude towards those who are doing harm. We're more optimistic, based on what's taught, and also something that we can know in ourselves.

Secondly, when dealing with the difficult person, the greed and anger people show comes from ignorance. They may be powerful, or in a position of authority, but they are no less playing out the very same dynamic we find in ourselves, and in those who give us a hard time in our every day lives.

This doesn't mean we don't get out of their way, or defend ourselves or our loved ones, not by any means, but the whole context of what we are doing

changes when we see these two points – that the harm people would cause comes from their ignorance, and, that this can change. Now we are ready, I think, for loving even our enemies, or those who or those who are hostile towards us.

Nazis and Jews

I know it comes up so often as an example of how it is impossible to return good for harm, that it may illustrate the principles at work to use the example of what happened mid twentieth century, as the National Socialists in Germany set themselves against the entire Jewish people.

The idea of these groups seem so set in our minds. The moral lessons that seem so clear cut to many often include the implied idea that it is impossible to love some individuals, or groups of people, and, in fact, it would be foolish to do so, and cruel to ask another to, as well.

These days, we can probably substitute the Jewish people and the Palestineans, or Klan members and blacks in the South in the 1960's. {or the Japanese in China in the Second World War; the Tutsis and the Hutus in Ruwanda, or the US military and the Native population here}.

Looking back we can ask, in every case, have there been former Nazi's or Klan members, or others who have changed their views, or regretted their actions? Haven't some racists overcome their prejudice?, We all know that some have, and, if this is so, then what does that tell us about all those who committed such crimes? Two things: *that they were deeply ignorant, and, that they had the potential for change.*

Ultimately not taking sides, there is hope for the future. How do you not take sides when good and evil are so obvious? You do it by regarding humanity as one; one in noble birth and heritage; one in our sacred destiny, or divine potential. The mind that sees this is far from the mind of racism, or class superiority, or exploitation, and this is exactly what is needed. It is true medicine, and sustenance for all our days.

In the end, looking back, what I can say is that 'these are things that were done to the people of my own human family', and 'these are things that were done by the people of my same human family - '

May everyone here awaken from such ignorance, and may I be a cause of that!

To dial it back some, because we can probably continue to judge the wrongdoers in history without an end to it, we can look at whatever instances of wrong have been done by our own country, by ourselves, or to ourselves.

Where does forgiveness in each case come from? It comes from understanding, and from the intention to move forward, knowing how much better we can be, and how much more we can do for one another, when our lives are based on what has true, eternal value, based, namely, on love.

In the book, Mount Analogue, the narrator says we should keep in mind the summit, the goal of our journey, while watching the step that is right in front of us, and that while keeping to the path, we shouldn't lose sight of the goal.

The immediate principle in metta practice is that we start with whatever is easiest for us, and go on from there. There is another key piece to this, however, that that is, that we always start wherever we are just now. This gives us plenty of room for our difficulties, and is the most encouraging aspect of it for me. Such a high aim as universal love and compassion is achievable, and this should inspire us. On some days though, may we look up, or look at our own mind, or at the world we live in, and get discouraged at how far we are from any kind of ideal at all.

This essential principle, of always starting from wherever we are now keeps us on course. We don't get carried away if we seem to be making progress on some days, or dejected if we slow down, or stop or even seem to go off course for a while. I heard this phrase, that, when walking someplace, resting does not mean turning back.

I like very much that Jesus spoke of going beyond our own family, or clan, when developing our love. This is surely something that is possible, if we set ourselves to go in that direction. Step by step we can get there.

I feel a great enthusiasm when I so much as get a glimpse at this possibility. I try not to get too carried away with it, after all, since there is still so much to be done here. Still, once in a while, to go to the mountain top, to take in

the great vista, and fill our lungs with clean air, this is something we will surely carry with us everywhere we go.

Freedom of Mind – the Root of the Social Gospel

for Dr. David Hilfiker,

by Jason Espada

'We belong to each other'

I. The social gospel defined

The social gospel is the view that we are made to care for each other; that we are here to protect, support and encourage each other; to love, nurture and celebrate every one of our family, from birth, through all the stages of life, in struggle and difficulty, and in times of ease and success.

That this orientation to our whole life sometimes rises in a person, in different times and places and cultures, independent of religion, tells me that this capacity is something fundamental to us as human beings. There's something in us that can be tapped into that preceeds organized religion. Religions can foster a social gospel, or, remarkably, they can get in the way, but what's happening when this ethic towards the whole of life arises in a person, whether it is facilitated by a Tradition, or not, I would suggest, is the same.

II. Its cause

Everything we see people doing has roots in their inner life – whether there's anger or gentleness, greed or generosity, distorted views or wisdom and respect – it's always the case that what we see reveals what's in a person, or group of people. This is true right up to what we call mass movements, such as militarism, or in economics.

The same holds true of the social gospel - it comes to be, and is sustained in people by causes, the chief of these being inner freedom.

By this I mean something more exact than a pleasant feeling, or being able do to as one pleases. Inner freedom, as it's understood by contemplatives everywhere, entails much more than that. It refers to a mind, or a spirit free

of greed, of aggression, and of delusion regarding ourselves, those we share this life with, and our world. Such freedom, that has wisdom and virtue as its nature, is always what has made it possible for a person to think of others and act to on their behalf.

III. What is then born

On a group level, when enough people together gain a clarity of vision and conscience, works are set in motion that make for real changes in society. It can start with one, or a few people, but eventually many are brought into the work. Witness the changes brought by the civil rights, labor, or women's movements. All these came about because there was an availability and an awakening in a number of people's hearts, and that they in their turn awakened and empowered others, lifting them to higher levels.

IV. Inclusive compassion

Some people wonder out loud how Mahayana Buddhism came into being, historically, with its emphasis on all inclusive compassion. I can tell you that I think it happened because the methods taught by Shakyamuni worked to free enough people from their afflictions and self preoccupation that empathy and active compassion were naturally born in them.

The Thai teacher Ajaan Lee said, ‘The mind at normalcy is the substance of virtue’. This has been talked about by others over time in different ways: as an Edenic state, as our own original nature revealed, full of grace.

Our humanity, when it is healthy, sane, and flourishing, is naturally inclusive. It reaches out. As long as one person is still confused, and don't know their own worth, they will create suffering for themselves and for others, and so we have to take care of each other, to the fullest extent, including everyone.

And as Dr. King expressed it, ‘No one is free until every last one of us is free’. This is only common sense - drawing out the ethic of love to its logical conclusion.

At the most basic level, as Shantideva taught, we should remove suffering simply because it is suffering, and care for others just because it's the right thing to do.

Seeing this, teachers in the past encouraged us to know the great value of freedom of mind in terms of the whole group, of every life.

V. To know that Freedom of mind is attainable

That we don't need to be caught in suffering and a narrow perspective is remarkable news. For someone who hasn't heard it before, it may be hard to believe, but right there is the proposition.

As for myself, my esteem for those who teach and vividly demonstrate that this is possible for us only increases as time goes on. Without them, we'd only have a story someone told once in a book, that we would then need to argue over.

And so I pay homage to Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Bokar Rinpoche, Lama Yeshe, Ajaan Lee and the Thai Forest teachers, Thomas Merton, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Mother Teresa, and the sages who demonstrate by their good works in our world that they have found what has real meaning.

How do we know if the roots of a tree are in touch with living water? We can see it in the broad shade of their branches, and in their fruits – which are abundant, rich, and life sustaining to us all. And so it is with people in this world.

VI. What we all need

Whether or not we're part of a tradition, what we all need is the same, and that is to meet and engage this world in a way that is not confused or afflicted, and, with that as the ground, with a natural heart full of love, to help one another as much as we can.

We may think it's possible to engage the world and make a difference without much freedom of mind, but we can see where egotism and immaturity have gotten us, individually and collectively. Look at how

indifference, neglect, indulgence, exploitation, consumerism, boredom and despair manifest - these show our values, and the state of our inner life. Clearly, something else entirely is needed.

Despite the fact that some measure of freedom of mind and humane values are within reach, what do we see when we look at how most people in this country spend their time and resources?

So many Americans in the twenty first century eat, and over eat, drink, consume, use entertainments to escape, and rely on anti depressants like never before. So many of them are just focussed and closed in on themselves.

All these signs of narrow mindedness, to me, point to a widespread lack of inner freedom, and the acknowledgement and respect for others that it necessarily brings.

As it is now, a lot of how we live in this country, in terms of the impact we are having as a consumer society, what we do and leave undone, has to do with people's stresses, appetites, and attachments, but these can and do change.

What we need then for the social gospel to become a reality is more of a collective awakening, with more and more people becoming free of their lesser views and motivations.

Is there any other way? We're all in this together, and so one or two or a few dozen, or a few groups of people getting there is not enough. The few more awakened and free people can be like leaven in bread, but it's clear that the whole lot of us is what we need to influence. We should aim to reach as many people as we can, for all our sake.

VII. Continuing the work

I look to anyone who is actively engaged in some form of peace, or social justice work, and I ask: what do they have that others don't? – and I see, they have a vision; and of those who continue the work, rather than fall away from it – what do *they* have? They have maintained a connection with the view and power they've found, whatever name they give it, either with the help of traditions, or individually.

Activists very often will leave this step out - they do their work until they have no more to give. Their mistake is in not knowing how to replenish their own sources of inspiration.

Out of people's vision for what is possible here comes their action, and whenever there's a sustained, useful involvement with others, it means that a person has been able to keep a powerful sense of what motivates them.

Whatever our methods, of prayer, or meditation, or solitude, then, we all need to foster that connection to our positive vision and source of strength. There's nothing selfish about this, in fact, this is for everyone's sake.

VIII. The Great Clear Mirror

With the coming of the internet, what is in us as human beings, in terms of our values, is now even more clear. I remember when computers first became a little more widely available. There was the expression 'garbage in, garbage out', to point up the fact that the tools we use are only as powerful as we make them, that they are only as great as our motivation, they go just as far as our vision.

The internet then, is a great clear mirror to our inner life.

Now, more than ever, we can become aware of, and engage with this world of ours. It's remarkable, really, and will only continue to evolve in new ways. Whether this interaction is meaningful, however, or negligent, or exploitative, all depends on who we are inside, on what is in us as a motivating force.

No one would argue - great things are possible like never before, and because of our increased interdependence, now, more than ever, we are in need of a social gospel, a life giving vision.

IX. Teaching the choices we have

What if, then, from grade school on, boys and girls, young men, women, and adults were taught that anger and greed were something that can and should be lessened, and removed entirely?

This goes beyond what any one religion says – it's stating something basic about who we are as human beings, and what we're capable of, that we can choose this as a basis for our life here.

What if, more and more, people had living examples of freedom and virtue in their teachers, and were shown how becoming free of anger, greed, and egotism is possible by a person working with their own minds and hearts?

We can imagine, it would have far reaching effects. It would birth a different world. And nothing less than this is what is needed now, more than in any other time that's come before. We are in need of a wide-scale work.

X. With a view to our future together

I find inspiration in the idea of a culture having, or moving toward an ethic – such as that of respect and care of their elders. This reaches beyond ethics – plural, to having a stable basis in a culture, that then expresses itself in a number of ways.

I would say that what we need in America, and in the world now, most of all, is *an ethic* of compassion, even if it takes some generations to bring into being. This is different from advocating one or two, or a handful of causes, such as universal health care, affordable housing, and education. It is more the ground from which these are addressed. And that ethic, in turn, has *its* unmissaken cause.

When enough of us are liberated, naturally, a compassionate society will follow. And this is where I find hope.

The Metta of Martin Luther King, by Jason Espada

Part I - love as a method of personal and social transformation; Part II - An all-encompassing method; & Part III - A world perspective

Part I

I thought it might be interesting to sketch out a few notes on the parallels between Dr. King's ideas, and the teachings on metta. Both show us love as a method of personal and social transformation. There are a few places where they overlap, and some ways they can potentially compliment each other.

For those who are not familiar with the term, metta is the step by step traditional method of Buddhist loving kindness practice. It begins with oneself, or those who are closest to us, and aims to reach a point that includes everyone.

By contrast, Dr. King drew on Christian sources to speak of love. The first ready parallel I could see was in his teaching on the different types of love:

There are three words for "love" in the Greek New Testament; one is the word "eros." Eros is a sort of esthetic, romantic love. Plato used to talk about it a great deal in his dialogues, the yearning of the soul for the realm of the divine. And there is and can always be something beautiful about eros, even in its expressions of romance. Some of the most beautiful love in all of the world has been expressed this way.

(note: all of Dr. King's quotes in this paper will be set in italics)

It's interesting that he starts here, with something we can all relate to, and not high up in the clouds. Metta practice also begins with the feelings we have for those closest to us, but points out, as Dr. King does next, that there is more to love than this.

The metta teachings from their outset would have us distinguish between attachment, and a more pure love between people. Basically, if we want something in return, if there is possessiveness, or if it turns into something

else, such as anger or hatred, then it's attachment, and not love. We should be clear about this.

Dr. King continues:

Then the Greek language talks about "philia," which is another word for love, and philia is a kind of intimate love between personal friends. This is the kind of love you have for those people that you get along with well, and those whom you like on this level you love because you are loved.

This is also something we have all known in our lives. I recently came across a beautiful teaching on the most noble qualities of friendship in a book by Wayne Teasdale, called *A Monk in the World*. In it, he mentions the tradition of Latin Christianity, which 'places the emphasis on friendship's spiritual character, calling a friend in the monastic context a *custos animi*, or a guardian of one's soul.'

He adds: 'All friendship requires other centeredness', and, that this is 'really knowing our friends' hearts. It includes committed friendship's usual intense affective power, but it also serves our friends' ultimate well being.'

That metta practice moves from oneself, or those who are closest to us, to our friends, is intended to touch this vital quality of caring in us, to awaken and enhance it so we can share it with more and more people. There is refinement of our love, and an elevating quality that is developed.

Martin Luther King concludes this passage:

Then the Greek language has another word for love, and that is the word "agape." Agape is more than romantic love, it is more than friendship. Agape is understanding, creative, redemptive good will toward all men. Agape is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return.

In the same way as this, metta aims to become mature love. In contrast to the Christian methods, which have many wonderful features, the strength of the tradition of metta is that it sets out a path of practice that shows us what step we can take next.

Which brings me to a second parallel teaching of Dr. King's, one he called The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life.

There are three dimensions of any complete life to which we can fitly give the words of this text: length, breadth, and height. Now the length of life as we shall use it here is the inward concern for one's own welfare. In other words, it is that inward concern that causes one to push forward, to achieve his own goals and ambitions. The breadth of life as we shall use it here is the outward concern for the welfare of others. And the height of life is the upward reach for God. Now you got to have all three of these to have a complete life.

Now let's turn for the moment to the length of life. I said that this is the dimension of life where we are concerned with developing our inner powers. In a sense this is the selfish dimension of life. There is such a thing as rational and healthy self-interest..

Before you can love other selves adequately, you've got to love your own self properly.

And you know what loving yourself also means? It means that you've got to accept yourself.

God gave all of us something significant.

I'm so glad he started there. A lot of people have problems being kind to themselves, and, even if it's not essential as the very first step in loving others, from a Buddhist point of view, still it is something we all need to learn to do, if we're going to progress very far in metta practice.

One of the skillful means in metta is that it says we should start with whoever is easiest, and go from there. After cultivating thoughts of well wishing for those who are most dear to us, for some days or weeks or months, we have some tangible metta to work with. We can then start to see how we are also worthy of respect and kindness. For some people this is a long process, but it is something we can all do. I find this very encouraging to think about.

Now the other thing about the length of life: after accepting ourselves and our tools, we must discover what we are called to do. And once we discover it we should set out to do it with all of the strength and all of the power that we have in our systems

Be the best of whatever you are.

And when you do this, when you do this, you've mastered the length of life.

Now don't stop here, though. You know, a lot of people get no further in life than the length. They develop their inner powers; they do their jobs well. But do you know, they try to live as if nobody else lives in the world but themselves.

A lot of people never get beyond the first dimension of life.

So I move on and say that it is necessary to add breadth to length. Now the breadth of life is the outward concern for the welfare of others, as I said. And a man has not begun to live until he can rise above the narrow confines of his own individual concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.

Metta is just this – starting with what is nearest to us and extending outwards, becoming more and more inclusive until it reaches what are called the Four Brahma Viharas, or Divine Abodes, of Universal Love, Compassion, Joy, and what I'm calling these days Peace and Equanimity, born of the strength of our dedication. (I'll come back to that last one further on, as it's a quality that was so impressively demonstrated by Dr. King and others during the Civil Rights era.)

The step wise development of metta is where it really shines. To me, to go from friends and family to all beings, seems a bit too much of a leap. Metta fills it out, and introduces a few categories to make this easier. After self, those closest to us and our friends, we're encouraged to think about and cultivate goodwill towards those we don't know personally. This opens up the field of our practice, of empathy, generosity, joy and compassion quite a bit.

In Buddhism, instead of just suggesting we have more love for others as an idea, we're encouraged to cultivate this insight in our contemplative or meditation practice. When the roots in us are firm, then the results will show themselves in our relationships, and in the world. This is another point I'll come back to.

In Buddhism, the Theravada tradition has preserved extensive teachings on individual liberation, while the Mahayana has added the emphasis on compassion for all beings. Holding these two together as dimensions of a complete life feels both right, and generative of wonderful results for us all.

As I understand it, the Brahma Viharas, or qualities of Universal Love, lead to what is called in Buddhism ‘*bodhicitta*’, or the motivation to develop one’s own understanding and positive qualities in order to be of the most benefit to others.

This leads to what Dr. King then went on to describe as the third dimension of a complete life, which I call the wisdom aspect.

Now if life is to be complete, we must move beyond our self-interest. We must move beyond humanity and reach up, way up for the God of the universe, whose purpose changeth not.

We were made for God, and we will be restless until we find rest in him.

God is the only being in the universe that can say "I Am" and put a period behind it.

Now, the way I interpret this is that the other two aspects both need wisdom to be complete. The wisdom dimension is what gives hope. If you are a Buddhist, it is confidence in the possibility we all have for liberation – that conditions are not fixed, and that we all have a treasure within, the potential to awaken. If you are a Christian, as I understand it, the ultimate truth is that of belonging; knowing God is something we are all capable of.

The Bible says, ‘Seek first the Kingdom of God’, and in the Buddhist Eight-fold path, Right View comes first. This is because the wisdom dimension for both Buddhists and Christians alike is the foundation of all that follows. From it comes all we are able to do for ourselves. and in our engagements with others.

Here is one place Eastern religions can contribute something of the greatest value to the West. In traditions that teach meditation, it’s understood that change in a person doesn’t come about because of having some intellectual knowledge or just changing our point of view on a superficial level. Instead, transformation comes through meditation, which is taking this knowledge

deep, in time set apart, and awakening for ourselves to the truth the great religions teach about.

Clearly, looking at the life of Dr. King, what is most often recognized and celebrated was his wide ranging commitment to social justice. But we should remember also the profound depth of his inner life and spiritual practice, because, from that, flowed the power and grace of his words and actions.

Part II – An all-encompassing method

What is it that brings together the inner life of a person, with the outer world? What is it that would have us step back from time to time, to renew ourselves, and return with strength, and more wisdom? This is the working of love.

If we don't take care of ourselves properly, it's as though we're bound hand and foot. Those who have found some freedom of mind, from what I can tell, are the ones who are fully available to respond to the needs of our community, and our world.

Unfortunately, a lot of spiritual practice and religion is used nowadays just for a little more comfort, a little more peace in our lives. While I can see the point of that, and the need for it, that's not all any tradition that I know of aims for us to be.

This is where the spirituality of Dr. King is of such great value to us today. He calls us to look with love and compassion on the needs that exist in our world. This is what it means to have a social conscience.

Metta'll make a wise radical of you yet...!

Dr. King criticized his fellow religious teachers, and people who said they followed a religious path, saying there was often *a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds*.

It seems that some spiritual teachers would rather have their photo taken with the president, than say anything critical of his policies. When drone warfare, unchecked military spending, and corporations like Monsanto effect us all every day, how religious teachers can remain silent with our government's duplicity is beyond me. It's shameful, really.

I'm still working on not getting steamed when I think about it... because I do see the point of metta... and I look for help to people like Dr. King, Thich Nhat Hanh, Maha Ghosananda, Aung San Sui Kyi, Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama...

There are other heroes I have too, heroes and heroines of love that I try to commemorate, whenever I can. Here's a little something of what I mean:
This is called

The glory of being dis-invited

Aah, the glory of being dis-invited

It's an honor to be dis-invited to the White House,
as happened once with some anti-war poets

We should frame those dis-invitations,
and put them on our walls

We should hold parades
to celebrate the dis-invited,

I can see the few of them now,
walking down the closed off streets
waving to cheering crowds...

We should stamp their images on coins,
and put it on paper money...

you get the point

We could compose church hymns
and rap songs,
and anthems that could be sung
in the seventh inning at ball games

because when everyone else was too afraid to speak,
those few didn't back down

We should remember them,
so when everything else crumbles,
there'll be something left to build on...

Metta is sometimes accused of being too soft, and weak when we need strength. And there is some truth to that - when people would rather avoid any conflict than face it, out of fear. In removing anger, we have to be careful not to set aside power, or bold metta, when we need it.

Here is Dr. King's wisdom:

'One of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites. Love is identified with a resignation of power and power with a denial of love.'

'What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.'

Dr. King urged us to have the moral courage to speak up for what is right.

'True peace is more than the absence of tension and conflict, it is the presence of justice...'

In this light:

'compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.'

and,

'One day we must ask the question, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?" And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy.'

and,

'A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual doom.'

He said this in 1968. What would he say now, in 2013, when 50% of our national budget goes to military spending?

It's exactly the point of continued metta practice, to highlight our inconsistencies, to make them plain as can be, and uncomfortable to our better nature. Then we can work to change, both ourselves, and unjust social structures.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. ... A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, "This is not just." It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of South America and say, "This is not just." The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just."

Loving your enemies

Dr. King is most often associated with his philosophy of non-violence, and with bringing love to bear on the most difficult issues of his time. In the Bible, they translate that activity as ‘loving your enemies’. This is also taught explicitly in metta, as working to transform the most dangerous or oppressive people or situations.

I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems....

Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time: the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence. Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.

At the center of non-violence stands the principle of love.

The nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed

to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage they did not know they had.

From what I can tell, contemplative practice, in every tradition, starts from within oneself, and what is found there is applied in the world. Such is the case here. We find self respect, and that is what we extend to others. We find inner treasures, and can see that same potential for health and genuine happiness exists in all others. How can we then not treat them differently? The basis for this, in both Buddhism and for Dr. King is wisdom and self knowledge.

There is a well known saying of the Buddha, that

‘Hatred never ceases by hatred,
by love alone is hatred brought to an end’

and this is something that was clearly identified by Dr. King.

It's not only necessary to know how to go about loving your enemies, but also to go down into the question of why we should love our enemies. I think the first reason that we should love our enemies, and I think this was at the very center of Jesus' thinking, is this: that hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. If I hit you and you hit me and I hit you back and you hit me back and go on, you see, that goes on ad infinitum. It just never ends. Somewhere somebody must have a little sense, and that's the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil.

He goes on to eloquently state the psychological dimensions of love, verses hatred:

There's another reason why you should love your enemies, and that is because hate distorts the personality of the hater. We usually think of what hate does for the individual hated or the individuals hated or the groups hated. But it is even more tragic, it is even more ruinous and injurious to the individual who hates. ... For the person who hates, the true becomes false and the false becomes true. That's what hate does.

Not losing sight of the humanity of the other

The Dalai Lama said, ‘Your enemies may disagree with you, may be harming you, but in another aspect they are still human beings like you. They also have a right not to suffer and to find happiness. if your empathy can extend out like that, it is unbiased, genuine compassion’.

We often stereotype people, or groups. We make caricatures of them, and this goes unnoticed because of how common it is.

I remember seeing a book on the demonization of other races and people that often accompanies war. Surprisingly, these distortions have been set out not only in hostile words, but in ugly images of the other as not human.

Think of how Jews were portrayed by the Nazis, and other anti-semites though time; how the Japanese demonized the Chinese in World War Two; or the Americans the Vietnamese and Middle Easterners in their wars of aggression.

We can also look at recent race or religious based violence and see the same phenomena happening in every case. The other is seen as less than human, and once this happens, any act of violence or cruelty is possible.

The opposite of this is keeping the sense of the other as human beings. If that is done, there’s no way those unspeakable acts can even be conceived of, so this awareness is something precious, something essential, really. Martin Luther King practiced and taught it, and the Dalai Lama also teaches this same principle.

Dr. King concludes his message here by saying,

Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, "Love your enemies." It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. That's why Jesus says, "Love your enemies." Because if you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption.

In metta, as with the other categories of people, approaching ‘the enemy’, or the difficult person or situation is also done step by step. According to the teachings, it’s more effective that way. First we begin with what is only

slightly disruptive, or annoying, and we build up this capacity to be with what opposes us a little at a time. For those who have tried and not had success with taking on the most egregious abusers, or exploiters, this going one step at a time sets out that path to inclusive love.

Now here, love has gotten a bad rap, and put aside as impractical. It feels better, most people think, to react with anger, or to strike back when attacked. But thinking in the long term, when has that ever worked?

We don't let ourselves get walked on. And we don't confuse the care of metta, or agape with having to like someone or some action. There's much more to it than that.

I'm happy that he (Jesus) didn't say, "Like your enemies," because there are some people that I find it pretty difficult to like. Liking is an affectionate emotion, and I can't like anybody who would bomb my home. I can't like anybody who would exploit me. I can't like anybody who would trample over me with injustices. I can't like them. I can't like anybody who threatens to kill me day in and day out. But Jesus reminds us that love is greater than liking.

Violence is not only impractical but immoral.

If we are to have peace in the world, men and nations must embrace the nonviolent affirmation that ends and means must cohere.

This is the path.

Ends are not cut off from means, because the means represent the ideal in the making, and the end in process, and ultimately you can't reach good ends through evil means, because the means represent the seed and the end represents the tree.

(and) the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.

People who study our very recent history in this country will see that this is true – the non-violent philosophy of love and inclusiveness in the 50's and 60's did produce miracles. There is still a lot of work to be done, but we can look back and gain strength and courage from the tremendous social changes that took place.

Part III - A world perspective

As mentioned earlier, metta, or love, leads to the most inclusive state of mind and heart. It has to be this way.

Here is Dr. King on the subject:

In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...This is the inter-related structure of reality.

Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation. No individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for "the least of these".

The time has come for an all-out war against poverty. The rich nations must use their vast resources of wealth to develop the underdeveloped, school the unschooled, and feed the unfed.

... out of India's population of more than five hundred million people, (in 1968) some four hundred and eighty million make an annual income of less than ninety dollars a year. And most of them have never seen a doctor or a dentist.

As I noticed these things, something within me cried out, "Can we in America stand idly by and not be concerned?" And an answer came: "Oh no!" Because the destiny of the United States is tied up with the destiny of India and every other nation.

And I started thinking of the fact that we spend in America millions of dollars a day to store surplus food, and I said to myself, "I know where we can store that food free of charge—in the wrinkled stomachs of millions of God's children all over the world who go to bed hungry at night."

'I strongly feel that we must end not merely poverty among negroes but poverty among white people. Likewise, I have always insisted on justice for all the world over, because justice is indivisible.'

(I love that last line: ‘justice is indivisible’...)

If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective.

I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture of their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, men other-centered can build up

When we are capable of so much more than what we are doing, all this needs to be spoken, and kept in mind.

What would Martin Luther King think of our world today? If I could meet him now, and spend a few hours talking with him, I’d want to tell him of all that’s happened since 1968, both here in the USA, and in the world.

I’d tell him that the Vietnam war finally ended in 1975, in large part due to massive anti war protests;

I’d tell him that before the war there ended, that Nixon and Kissinger ordered an unprecedented bombing of that country, Cambodia, and Laos;

I’d tell him of the right wing take over of our country, starting in 1980 with Reagan;

I’d tell him of our America’s continued militarism since then, in Central American, and in the Middle East;

and I’d tell him of two stolen elections;

I’d want to tell him of the great, world wide, pre-war, anti war protests of 2003, with millions of people participating,

and that they didn’t stop Bush and Cheney from going to war against the people of Iraq;

I'd want him to know that in 2008 we elected an African American president, a man who ran holding up of many of the ideals of Mr. King himself, but who then turned his back on progressive values;

I'd tell him this is something quite a few people on the left are still sorting out...

I'd want to tell him of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and of the peaceful, non-violent revolutions that took place in the Philippines, the Czech Republic, and South Africa;

I'd tell him that Nelson Mandela was released from Robbin Island prison after 27 years there, became president of his country, and won the Nobel Peace Prize;

and then I'd try to tell him about our world now,

about the internet, and all that's made possible;

I'd tell him about Seva, and Kiva, and Buy-a-net.ca, which distributes life saving mosquito nets in Africa, for about 5 dollars a net;

I'd want to tell him about Grameen Bank, too, and micro-finance;

I'd tell him about the extent of this country's militarism, and how it's much worse now than it was;

I'd tell him about the power of multi -national corporations, their effect in the world, and how it's much worse now than it was;

I'd tell him about the gap between rich and poor, and people's estrangement from one another;

I'd try to tell him about the present level of political corruption in America, and people's despair and doubt that things can change, and how these are much worse now than they were back then;

I'd tell him about Occupy,

and about the mass deceptions of the media, and how it's much worse now than it ever was before;

I feel certain that he's listen and understand all this; that he'd likely be amazed, as we all are by some of it, and that he'd say we must not give up. I'm also sure he'd give us the encouragement we need.

Let me close by saying that we have difficult days ahead in the struggle for justice and peace, but I will not yield to a politic of despair. I'm going to maintain hope as we come to Washington in this campaign. The cards are stacked against us. This time we will really confront a Goliath. God grant that we will be that David of truth set out against the Goliath of injustice, the Goliath of neglect, the Goliath of refusing to deal with the problems, and go on with the determination to make America the truly great America that it is called to be.

I'm sure he would say

O, Keep your eyes on the prize –
hold on!

Here is where I see so clearly in him what I've taken to thinking of as the Fourth Immeasurable – that of Great Strength, equanimity and balance of mind that comes from determination, that comes from that mind that never gives up, that is 'all in', fully committed.

O, that we all have such peace, and integrity!

because

In the end, there is the creation of the beloved community...

Lama Yeshe called this 'the Mahayana Society',

and, in the end, this is what makes it all worthwhile, the aim, for this, and for future generations, of

'one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide world'

and so, I want to remember, and to urge others to do so as well
that this is our heritage;
that what looked completely impossible before, was done because people
didn't give up;
and,
that their strength and vision is with us now.

In the daytime,
you don't think much of a lantern,
but when it's night,
it becomes your treasure,
your safety,
your guide...

Remember!

Dr. King is our native born light, fully human, our own saint, and his legacy to us is more even than the great contribution he made to Civil Rights. Great as that was, his real gift to us is what continues now in those of us that would see this become a more just world. When we're recall and are inspired by that life, then that very same courage, strength and clarity helps us to take the next step, from wherever we are now.

And amen to that!,

I say again, Amen to that!

Sources – sermons:

A Christmas Sermon on Peace, Christmas Eve, 1967;

Loving Your Enemies;

Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution;

The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life;

and,

The Autobiography of Martin Luther King

The Bodhisattva Thought Training Teachings, by Jason Espada

{From a letter to a friend, and included in ‘A few thoughts on lay practice – just the gold’}

And now, a few thoughts on Buddhism...

I realize I haven’t said much so far that was specific to Buddhism, so maybe I can say something along those lines now. It’s not that non-Buddhists wouldn’t gain some benefit from what follows, in fact I’m sure they would, but it makes sense to me that the most will be gained by followers of Buddhism in general, and those who follow and aspire to the Mahayana ideals in particular, and I’ll try to say why this is so. You’ll have to tell me if this makes sense to you, but, from my side, I’ll do my best.

I mentioned bodhicitta, ‘the mind of enlightenment’ in the last section, as the mind of freedom, happiness, and Great Love. A person who has this great heart/mind is called a Bodhisattva – one who lives to serve others with wisdom and compassion. This leads to the Thought Training teachings, that come from dedicated teachers in the past. They are ways to develop in everyday life.

If what are expressed in Mahayana Buddhism as the inclusive, Universal ideals of the Bodhisattva, and the Bodhisattva Vow are well understood, then the door opens up to using the Bodhisattva Thought Training Teachings’. They all work.

For Buddhists, then, it should be said, the ideal is different in some ways from what the average person on the street would think of as ‘a developed person’, or a good person. A Bodhisattva is something more than that.

For one, from his first talk, the Buddha spoke of the possibility of freedom from the suffering that comes from delusion, from not understanding ourselves or each other. As Buddhists, we all hold this ideal, of a liberated person, as something we can each achieve. It’s what we aim for in our life and practice, as well as the basis for helping others.

In addition, can we aspire to all the qualities that we see most clearly in our teachers, of kindness, insight and strength that come from their realization of the path.

Look at all the Tibetan Buddhist thankas, and statues – artistic representations of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, as well as photographs of monks and nuns, and our teachers. Search your recollection of the teachings you've studied, and think of the teachers you have met and received teachings from. Think of what they offer, and embody: These are all qualities we can develop – the stable peace, dignity, wisdom, strength, gentleness, joy and love.

Even if we just hold this aim – to go in this direction of developing our Wisdom and Compassion and ability, just as our teachers have done, so we can help others as much as possible, it is a very great thing, the guiding principle in our lives, however far we get with it.

What's called The Bodhisattva Vow is traditionally described as the vow to become a Buddha in order to benefit all sentient beings. To me, this can sometimes seem abstract, and such a far goal as to feel - not so helpful. Add to it that we, as ordinary beings, may not have much of an idea of what a fully enlightened Buddha is, and it can all kind of wash out into some vague, high minded idea. But it needn't be this way.

It's true that vows shouldn't come easily, but after much reflection, what we *can* actually connect with ourselves are those qualities of wisdom and compassion we see and remember, and intuit, in the Buddha, in our teachers, and in ourselves in our best moments.

We recognize the need for such wisdom and compassion and health in the world, and in the lives of those we love, and so this is what we vow to develop as much as we can. We vow to just go in this direction as much as we can, and in that way we make a gift of our life.

Thinking that way makes more sense to me. It is approachable. That, to me is bodhicitta, the thought of enlightenment. That, to me, is the Bodhisattva Vow. Others may disagree with me if they like, that's alright – I'm just saying what works for me, to think this way.

I sometimes wonder what a person would think of the thought training teachings, if they *hadn't* taken up the Bodhisattva vow. If someone was living a totally self centered life, they would probably wouldn't make much sense. In fact, they'd probably seem crazy! But when living our lives to

benefit others makes the most sense to us, then these ideas, called Thought Training, are a real treasure.

These practices helped me so much while I was in the City. Together with Thich Nhat Hanh's eminently sane teachings on taking care of ourselves wisely, they can make living with others in a city really fruitful. It can be our bodhisattva training ground.

The most famous thought training texts, and the ones most often commented on by teachers, are The Eight Verses on Training the Mind, The Seven Point Mind Training Teaching, and one called Transforming Suffering and Happiness into the Path.

If you are interested in this subject, Lama Zopa has a couple of books that I know of on thought training – Transforming Problems into Happiness, and The Door to Satisfaction; and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's Enlightened Courage and The Great Path of Awakening, by Jamgon Kongtrul, are commentaries on the Seven Point Mind Training. There are others, but these are a good place to start.

Here is my own working version of the Eight Verses:

Eight Verses On Training The Mind

1. May I always cherish all living beings
with the determination to accomplish for them the highest good, that is more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel

2. When among others,
I will think of myself as lowest among all,
and will hold others to be supreme,
from the very depths of my heart

3. I will learn to search into my mind,
and as soon as an afflictive emotion arises,
endangering both self and others,
I will firmly face and avert it.

4. When meeting with those who have especially strong sins and suffering,
I will learn to cherish them as if I had found a precious treasure, very
difficult to find

5. When others treat me badly,
with slander, abuse, and so on,
I will accept all loss
and offer the victory to them

6. When one I have benefited hurts me,
I will learn to view that one as my own Supreme Guru

7. In short, I will learn to offer all help and happiness
to all beings,
both directly and indirectly,
and I will remove as much suffering
as these beings may have

8. I will keep these practices undiminished
by the usual worldly preoccupations,
and by knowing appearances to be
like illusions,
I will be without the limitations
that accompany ego-grasping

As you can see, this is a very complete teaching.

One verse from A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life that I've been thinking of goes as follows: 'Unlike myself, these beings are not capable, therefore, I shall do it for them'

Relating this to practice, and to our whole lives, we can get strength, courage, determination, and clear sightedness from seeing the needs that exist. When I think of what I saw over the years around where I worked, at 16th St. in the Mission in San Francisco – the struggle and addiction, the violence, the hard-heartedness of people (among other things that were great and uplifting too) then, how could it be any other way?

Of course, there's a limit to how much we can be around, which I can personally attest to. At some point we want and need to step back from all that, for the sake of balance. This dynamic, more than anything else, points up to me the difference between what they call Aspirational and Engaging Bodhicitta.

Bodhicitta is this intention to develop ourselves, our wisdom, compassion and ability in order to benefit others. This kind of- motivation leading to action- was what was demonstrated by you, when you took up the study and practice of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

In Buddhism, at some point, the motivation tips over into action, which, as they've said it in the Mahayana, translates into the Six Perfections – Generosity, Ethics, Patience, Joyful Effort, Meditation, and Wisdom.

The good hearted motivations we make, based on what we see in the world, are so important. They are the power behind any practice we do, to get free ourselves, and giving to all others we love! But aspiration alone doesn't 'cook the rice', if you know what I mean. At some point, naturally, we need to practice in such a way that we improve along the lines we intend. We will need to find and develop what works for us to accomplish our ends.

We can't force it, nor should we. When the time is right, the whole arc of study and practice is like water flowing down a mountain. When our motivation is strong enough, without a doubt, we'll find a way.

I recently mentioned to my sister that what's great about the thought training teachings is that they take the very things we usually try to avoid – unpleasant situations, our own limitations, fears, and so on, and *uses* them to progress on the path.

I remember thinking, when I first came across these teachings, that the only thing 'wrong' with them is that they are not better known, and made use of. I think that this especially true about one part of the Seven Point Mind Training teaching. Everything else I felt I'd heard before, but when I came to the part called 'transforming adverse circumstances into the path', I knew I had found something special. This is the heart of the Thought Training Teachings, I think.

I was intrigued, relieved, and excited all at once! Relieved, and glad, that such a teaching actually exists, and naturally the door opened. I could see the point – once we have a determination to use our life to help others, and if we're Buddhist, and have had at least some glimpse of the possibility of the end of confusion and suffering, as proposed from the outset by the Buddha in the Third Noble Truth, then it's natural that seeing suffering and the great needs that exist will make us only more determined to practice, and to share the result of that with others.

Towards the end of The Great Path of Awakening, there are some additional verses I remember that compare knowing suffering in ourselves and in the world to being like the wind blowing when there's a fire – it just makes that fire greatly spread and increase. So it is with Thought Training. When we become aware of some need, instead of being overwhelmed or depressed by that, it can really empower us to work, diligently, and for however long it takes, no matter what it costs, to solve the problem. What can I say? Such is love... Such is knowing our deep nature in response to the needs of the world...

A few years after first encountering the Thought Training teachings, I read with some surprise a text called 'Transforming Happiness and Suffering into the Path', by the Third Dodrupchen, Tenpe Nyima (there's an online version now, on the website called Lotsawa House).

I was surprised because, well, we all know that suffering needs transformation, but happiness too? We usually never think of this as something that needs to be brought onto the path, but, for the sake of opposing laziness, and so we don't get distracted by whatever good circumstances we are currently enjoying, such as health, friends, good weather, wealth, or learning, we do need this kind of teaching. Here is a quote from the text I mentioned:

"Whatever happiness and the various things that cause happiness appear, if we slip under their power, then we will grow increasingly conceited, smug and lazy, which will block our spiritual path and progress."

Now, here is a view on practice that is comprehensive, and one that can keep us on an even keel. It says: whatever our circumstances, this is the best time to practice.

Especially regarding our own happiness, we should recognize our great good fortune compared to so many others in this world of ours, and use it to practice Dharma for the benefit of both ourselves and others.

This term – ‘transforming happiness’ – reminds me of the story of the farmer with a hole in the roof of his house. When it was sunny he thought, ‘There’s no need to fix the roof today – it’s sunny!’, and when it was raining he thought, ‘I can’t fit the roof – it’s raining!’, and so it never got done. This idea, of using whatever circumstances we’re in to practice, helps to make the most of wherever we are now.

The signs of successful practice is that we will have more peace, joy, patience, kindness towards ourselves and others, and glimpses of the ultimate nature of the mind. It’s said that we can also learn to feel spontaneously happy when some difficult situation appears in our life, because of the opportunity it gives us to practice.

Of course, if these methods don’t work, what can I say, try something else. Really. If you’re not satisfied, try something else...

There is a branch from the Eastern and South Eastern Buddhist Schools, that although it wasn’t presented in this form in the Thought Training teachings, still fits into that category, as encouragement and inspiration to practice. This is what is called ‘The Five Recollections’. They are, of aging, sickness, death, separation from loved ones, and karma. The phrasing of them begins, ‘I am of the nature to age, I cannot escape aging...’ and then goes on from there, through the five.

Recollecting impermanence especially is a spur to remove laziness and procrastination, a lack of focus and low energy. We never think, when things are going well, of morality. Why spoil the party, right? But in this way we are setting ourselves up, and we don’t really live fully awake to that aspect of our life while we are here together on earth, and the preciousness of each day we have with those we love. I’ve taken to calling, for my own purpose, the reflections on impermanence, ‘a midwife for love’, because they help for *all* of our love to be born fully into this world.

This is one part of the Teachings of Don Juan, those writings by Carlos Castaneda, that I have remembered and made good use of over the years. He called it, 'Having death as an advisor'. I use it like this: if I'm ever in doubt about whether I should do something or not do it, I look at it in light of the fact of my impermanence here, in this body, and the uncertainty of the time of my death.

We only get one go round, here, like this. If I can touch that truth, it usually straightens me out right away. Whether it's 'should I get this book', or write this, or, 'should I give this away', or hold onto, or let go of these thoughts, the effect is almost always immediate. This cuts all doubts... Now, I may not know much, but I can plainly tell what I would rather have done, or tried to do than have left undone. To me, in the end, loving fully is the only thing that makes it all alright, actually, whatever this life brings.
If I can love fully, in fact, there is no place I'd rather be.

I wrote a poem a while back on this subject that you might like. Here it is with a short note introducing it. I usually don't try to explain a poem, but in this case a few words of how it came to be might add something to it.

{ I went on a short retreat a couple of months ago (in 2011), and when I came back here to San Francisco, on the first night back I had this dream, of a teenaged girl who went to join her parents in a concentration camp. Her father said to her, 'Why are you here? You could have escaped and saved yourself!' and the girl said, No! If I am here I can offer you some joy, for as long as we are together. I can make the suffering less! There is no place I would rather be...'}

I tried to catch what was said and put it in a poem, but I don't know how successful I was... in any case, I had to try... you know the feeling...}

No place I'd rather be

In good times,
hard times,
and the worst of times,
there is no place I'd rather be
than *right there*

If you ask me why,
it is because,
by the power of love,
I can share the joy with you, and make it more
I can help to make the pain less,
and I can offer happiness

That is why,
through it all,
and when things get tough,
and even,
or *especially* in the worst of times
in the worst of worlds,
there is no place that I would rather be

If this were the only world
where there is both happiness and suffering,
still, I would choose just this one
to be with you

By being here together,
we can make the way better for one another
Don't you see?
That means more than anything else to me

For this very reason,
it's worth every effort

whatever we need to go through,
it is, all of it, then,
completely worthwhile

Giving of ourselves,
Measured next to this world's
pleasures –
there is no comparison, really

People don't know of this, or else they don't feel capable,
and so they hide

or run to small pleasures
that disappear even in the moment and are gone

But because we can be light for one another,
make each other's trials that much less,
and offer food, and shelter
even for future times,
through love,
there is no place that I would rather be
than right here

This thought
strengthens me in hundreds of ways

If we only get one song,
and that song is our life,
then let this be my song

Let everything else be done, or left undone,
no matter –

but just this, to aim to care for you
in the best of ways -
this brings life,
freshness that does not fade

Every other gain and loss,
no matter -
but just this
of all worlds, of all paths,
to be with you,
and to offer you my hand,
for your whole life
oh, the joy of this!

Tonglen – A quintessential symbol

To sum up this precious Bodhisattva Thought Training of ours, that is a response to this world we live in, to our own limitations and difficulties, and to those of others, and the way to fulfillment in the midst of it all, here are a few words on Tonglen, as a quintessential symbol (for more on this subject, see the essay called ‘Regarding Tonglen, in Part Two of A few thoughts on lay practice, or online, as before).

The Bodhisattva practice of what’s called tonglen is traditionally set out in a sequence of images, but, just as a story unfolding can carry one message, just so, with this practice. It is a symbol of the great dedicated heart that people know everywhere. This, most simply, represents the essential enlightened activity of removing suffering and giving happiness.

In the traditional sequence of images, we imagine that we breathe in the suffering of ourself or others, and dissolve it completely into our heart, so that nothing of it remains whatsoever, and then we breathe out, from our heart sending happiness, and absolutely whatever is needed.

We can imagine that there is a brilliant jewel at our heart, sending out light like this. We all have this nature in us that is always bright and shining, without ego, and always loving. This is called Ultimate Bodhicitta.

We can speak of these things sequentially, but when one arrives, the other departs, like light dispelling shadow, health displacing discomfort, and wisdom dawning in the mind removing confusion.

It’s like the appearance of a friend in times of need, that immediately removes loneliness and brings joy. The very presence of our love and compassion can do the same.

With this in mind, here are a few examples of how tonglen can be practiced: (Again I notice how that characteristic of all thought training practice is there – of not moving away from limitation or difficulty, but *of using it to progress...*)

If I'm feeling restless, I can imagine that I'm taking in all restlessness, of myself and others, developing compassion, and I send out peace. This is love. The same with sleepiness or dullness or discomfort or pain in meditation or in life. Instead of just lamenting my own inability, of being stuck in a rut or an unproductive state, I can choose to breathe in and out, contemplating how it is this way for *so many* people, and how it holds us *all* back.

This way I can generate a greater resolve than if I felt like I was just practicing for myself alone, or just for this one moment's peace and clarity and well being. I can bring to mind light, and fill myself with it, and then send this out to others on the out breath. There are as many applications of love and compassion as there are needs in our lives, the lives of others, and in this world.

So often when we feel separate, or limited, a practice like this can help us to reconnect with others, and to tap into the resources of our deeper nature. One way or another, however we approach it, this is what we all need to do.

Amen.

A Life Giving Vision

Part One

"The way we're operating right now as Americans and as a global society is unsustainable ecologically and for more and more of humanity. How do we make the system(ic) changes needed so that human and organizational creativity naturally lead toward sustainable and restorative practices instead of destructive ones?

"What can ordinary citizens do?

"Our economic system, our government, all these things we think of as fixed, are social constructs — These are stories we've created, and we can revise the story." - Jennifer Atlee

With fewer people controlling more wealth and power, whole economies changing, and our natural world increasingly threatened, we are not without resources. We have technologies, intelligence, and much more at stake to stir our conscience and inspire us to collective action.

At this time, what we need most of all, is a new way of thinking, about ourselves, about each other, and this world we share.

*'and let us consider together,
studying how we may stir up love,
and helpful deeds, and noble activities.. '*

- Hebrews 10:24

I pay homage to great compassion

I.

We have it in us to conceive of a just world, where people are fed, have housing, and health care, and access to education; we are able to hold the ideal of ourselves as stewards of our natural world, and to keep it, flourishing for the enjoyment of future generations; we can envision a day when the rich

and the powerful don't control and manipulate the rest of us; we can see and believe in the possibility of a world that works for all of us.

II.

That these ideas may sound strange, or hard to even bring to mind testifies to the difficult challenges we live with today. From a purchased political class and the embedded media, to the concentration of wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people; from a failed economic model, to religions that are ineffectual or disengaged; from a self indulgent educated class, to the shallow narcissism of our consumer culture;

I heard one person talk about our family and communal relationships in these times, not just as our having become isolated from each other, and our groups fragmented, but 'atomized' – it's reached that much of an extreme. And as we look around, most of what we see now is that people are disconnected, distracted, overwhelmed, or indifferent. And in all of this, maybe the biggest problem we can see, is the widespread belief people have, of their being powerless.

Once we reach that condition, all we ever hoped for gets set aside, and living then becomes just a struggle to survive – so far from what we once hoped for, so far from what we can be, and far from the fullness of life we're made to live. Yet it's just in times such as these that we need to remember who we are, and the best of what we are capable of as human beings.

III.

We've all heard utopian visions before, and of course, the snarling skeptic jumps up and says – 'what's different now, that makes any positive world view something other than an escapist fantasy? – look at what human beings are! – little better than animals, with the means to exploit each other and wreck the planet!' Voices such as these are everywhere.

We may not think of it in these terms, but what we think we're capable of together is what shapes our personal and collective action. If we think we're not much more than animals, we'll lower ourselves to that idea.

Instead, we have to look up. There are inspiring lives we can emulate. There are visions that awaken a renewed sense of possibility. There are methods we can use to realize our deeper aspirations.

I have enough of the skeptic in me to be critical – I’m aware of how disjointed things can seem, how unconcerned and in their own worlds people can be, and what a low opinion of themselves and our world they hold. In spite of this, I have reason to be optimistic. I know something of how we can contract down to such low views, and how they can be overcome. I know how we can be lifted up to what is both true and beautiful. I’m also well aware that not enough to say, ‘the human spirit has great potential’ – that would be like saying, ‘the view from the mountain is inspiring’. Better that you see this for yourself, and I suggest some ways, in the essays in this collection that you can do this.

IV.

A few things are new about the times we live in, that defy comparison with other times:

- With each passing year, corporate controlled globalized economics shows more of its ruthless, inhumane nature; it ‘works’ for fewer and fewer of us – fixated as it is on short term profit over every other human value. This is a something that has to be stopped if we are to survive and thrive; {remember that there are more of us than there are of them, which means more of the human resources of creativity, and of love} {remember also that even such ideas as ‘fair trade’ are new in our vocabulary. Imagine how much more effective this value will be, in fifty or a hundred years, if it continues to develop in the public consciousness.}
- The political class also shows itself to be more and more corrupt, the lap dogs of the rich – but, the way I’m thinking about it now, this is can become a good thing when it’s brought to light. Change happens when it becomes obvious to enough people that politicians don’t represent them, and in fact are working against their interests;
- And the third new phenomena that has to be highlighted is the technology we now have to communicate with each other. It seems that almost overnight, we’ve taken an inconceivable quantum leap in our ability

to learn about, and to share our riches with one another. This has got to make anyone who thinks about it both startled and inspired by the new possibilities. In every way, in our lives here together in these times, there is more for us to gain or to lose, and how we will manage depends in large part in our having a vision of the future we can move towards courageously.

V.

In the past, we turned to religions for meaning and direction. That institutions don't work for many people these days is undeniable – but we have the same needs as always. We have to find new ways to affirm our deepest human values.

'What is your life giving vision?'

I like the idea of there being multiple ideals, and of our supporting and encouraging each other to come up with values that express the best we have in us. I can imagine people asking each other, 'What is your vision?'

Looking back on the social movement of the 19th and 20th centuries, ideals have never been made into actuality in a single generation, but have usually taken three or four generations to bear fruit. I'm thinking of the suffragist, abolitionist, labor, and civil rights movements. These all started with people having the thought, not only that we could change, but that we *should*, and they lived and held onto those values.

Sometimes we don't dream big enough, so we need these examples of the past that teach us to hold a great vision. Just trying to change one policy, or one small corner of our shared world, many times, doesn't go far enough. We aim too low, and then, even if we get what we want, it doesn't satisfy.

Start with a great vision, however, like setting our sights on a far destination, and all those smaller goals are included in that. We may even surprise ourselves, and go farther than we imagined was possible. Such things have been known to happen.

The problems we face – of corporate criminality, a political class in collusion with them, inequity and transgressions against human rights - probably won't be overcome in our lifetimes. In all likelihood, they will

take generations to right. That's not entirely up us – but what we can and should do is to hold our ideals clearly in our mind, to lift up the principle, and to preserve and spread it, pass it on in letters, and to speak it from the rooftops. This much we can do.

As the poet Kenneth Patchen wrote,

*'If a poem can be headed into its proper current,
someone will take it to heart,
to the beauty and uplift of everyone'.*

Part Two - Bridging the divide between politics and spirituality

It took a Sufi poet to put into words for me what I had been feeling for some time, about the limitations, or dysfunction of religions in America. It was about seven years ago that I read this verse by Unis Emrie:

*Unless you can see the whole world
in a single glance,
anything you do is wrong,
even with all your religion*

I knew he wasn't criticising all of religion, just how it was being practiced in his time and culture.

I grew up on the East Coast in the 1960's. Though I was too young to understand very much of what was going on at the time, I do remember being taken to meetings, being told about the 'boycott grapes' campaign, in support of the United Farm Workers, and wearing my 'Give a damn' button to school – courtesy of the New York Urban Coalition, of which my father was a part.

When I moved to San Francisco as a teenager in 1979, I brought with me an interest in both progressive politics and eastern philosophy. At that time, the street protests were against the support of the dictatorships in Central America. The Reagan era was starting, and the political right wing was just beginning its decades-long take over of power. The Bay Area was also then something of a Mecca for all manner of spiritual groups.

Having had a social conscience instilled in me, I took that with me everywhere I went, and so it wasn't long before I could see the disconnect between what religious groups and spiritual people claim to be (and are at their best) and how they live.

The activist in me felt that, at their worst, religions, or psychology, or yogas were just making people accommodated to a dysfunctional social system, where indifference to suffering, inequalities and injustice are the norm. To this day, I still feel something of this is happening.

We can become too comfortable, lulled into a false security and ‘spirituality’, by keeping a barrier between ourselves and from the real needs that anyone can witness, in any city in this country.

Methods, and community have their place, but too often there is not this element of an active social conscience that should be there. In addition, by complicity with the standing social order, or in more direct ways, institutions can also be seen as the source of problems, (as for example, not criticising corporations, or political corruption, or a president who is about to go to war on a people) and so the verse I mentioned earlier, about ‘seeing the whole world in a single glace’, has had a special meaning for me.

We do need something in our churches and temples, and hearts, of the spirit of ‘liberation theology’ – taking the side of the majority, and of the poor and exploited. As they express it, religion should ‘comfort the afflicted, and afflict (as in stir the conscience of) the comfortable’, otherwise there’s the risk that we’re only adjusting ourselves to what no one of us should accept.

On the other side of the spectrum, of socially engagement, and lives of quiet integrity, that are removed from the tussle of protest and activism, I know there are people helping others in their own way, living exemplary lives. I’m thinking here of nuns or teachers we seldom hear about, except in the back stories of people who then go on to do great things in their communities.

A few years ago I didn’t know quite how to integrate the two – the individual spiritual life and the life of wider social action. They seemed most of the time to be two different worlds. I found also that I was often critical of those who were simply doing their best with what they have, in their own sphere, using whatever methods they could take up to make their lives, and the lives of those around them, a little easier.

Having had a chance to think about these things, having more sympathy now for the struggles people go through, the stresses of living in a city, and wanting to somehow live a useful life, and having had good teachers, I can say now that I’m at peace with the vision I’ve found.

There’s a dynamic element to religions, and to people’s lives when they have a depth and wisdom to them, and I honor that, everywhere I see it at work.

I also see now that there's a place for personal development, and of taking care of ourselves that is not removed from the larger world, if only we knew that. The verse from Unis Emry, then, for me became something I needed to value, and then also to add to, to take another step. So I wrote:

*You don't need to be thinking about
the whole world, all the time -
if your religion is true,
it serves a greater purpose*

I have to express deep gratitude here for the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. His take on things, as I understand it, is based on an integrated sense of non-duality, such that we need never feel that this step that is right in front of us is somehow removed from the rest of our lives. At the same time, we have a natural born responsibility to one another. As I heard Mother Teresa quoted as saying, 'The problem is that we've forgotten that we belong to each other'. That covers everything that's essential right there.

Seen in their true light, traditions and teachings help us all to live this life that has universal value. By this I mean, anywhere you place it, some benefit will come from a person grounded in a life of the spirit.

Now, this goes beyond any one way of saying things. This might be a surprise, but it shouldn't be. That there's a universal truth in our religions doesn't have to be seen as a threat – far from it – on the contrary, it affirms the best that's in us all.

In America these days, with good reason, a lot more people feel comfortable defining themselves as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious'. Aah, intolerance... A lot of what religion has become gives religion a bad name. Divorced from reality, dogmatic and narrow minded – we all know the justified stereotypes too well.

Unfortunately, many people then go a step further and reject all religion and spiritual teachers (who are usually associated with one tradition or another). This is a great loss, because traditions, for all their faults, are also the repositories of knowledge, methods of developing ourselves, and the wisdom of our ancestors. To leave them off completely is both foolish, and a cause of needless suffering.

It's not hard to identify the principles that are found in all the main traditions, those of compassion, and altruism, and the need for humility and gratitude. And yet, generation by generation we have to speak these truths again, so that they're heard afresh, and received into our lives.

Whether we want it or not, we also have to make sense of the right and wrong of what's come before us – we've inherited this world – I call it 'the house we are born into'. We may live trying to ignore the history of our county, or culture, or religion, but it's there with us when we wake up. It forms the context for our lives.

When I'm at my most clear about these things, life's a joy – there's a purpose to it.

My thought is that we need three things: a vital sense of a life giving vision, understanding both our history, the times we are in now, and our potential at its best; a way of understanding, and talking about this with one another; and methods to create the world we wish for ourselves and one another, for our whole family.

It's necessary to speak of this last part – that of having methods that work for us, to free us from confusion and limitations, so that our ideals can move from theory to practical action, and can bring results. Without methods, all our plans and projects, worthy as they may be, will still need a way to be realized.

May all benefit.

May we all receive and make full use of teachings that work for us,
and may all our lives become
a celebration of this love that we share

Sacred outlook - Seeing beyond ordinary perception in modern culture, and American Buddhism, by Jason Espada

'Beware of confining yourself to a particular belief and denying all else, for much good would elude you – indeed, the knowledge of reality would elude you. Be in yourself for all forms of belief, for God (Truth) is too vast and tremendous to be restricted to one belief rather than another.' - Ibn 'Arabi

{I write this for myself, and my family; Here is the great ‘what if it is so?’...}

So much of our pessimism and despair comes from the limited views we hold of ourselves and this world we live in. This is not entirely our own fault. It comes as well from our culture and upbringing.

We would expect that religions, such as Buddhism, would offer an alternative to the one dimensional world of consumerism and competition, and to the flat, affect-less life of scientific rationalism. Instead we find that Buddhism is often presented strictly as another philosophy, or just as psychology, and divorced from many of the elements that would classify it as a religion.

This is understandable- to a point. Many people come to Eastern religions because Christianity and Judaism didn’t work for them. And what’s worse, they’ve had those teachings proselytized at them by arrogant, narrow minded fanatics. We like to joke that many American Buddhists are in recovery from Western religion. For many, the straightforward, practical teachings on how to take care of our minds are of great appeal and benefit. This is all good, but, if this is all it is, there are some profound and precious things that are being left out of our understanding of ourselves, and our world and of Buddhist teachings.

One of the great things about these times is that we are able to look at how other people received and practiced these teachings. One thing we can notice is that the starting place for many other people, in other cultures and times, has been very different than our own.

In most places, Buddhism is a tradition that is alive with wonder, rich with the presence of the sacred, and with the guiding influence of Enlightened beings. Here are a couple of quotes from modern teachers: The first is by Ani Tenzin Palmo, a British born nun, ordained in the Tibetan Tradition.

She says,

‘We are not alone. This universe is full of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who are on our side. And, as is known in all Buddhist countries, although it is not always emphasized in the West, we can pray to them.’

and Lama Zopa Rinpoche has said:

‘You are not alone because all the time there are numberless buddhas and bodhisattvas surrounding you, loving you, guiding you, that is what they do....’

Now, if we compare this way of thinking to the general way people view themselves and this world, and the way that Buddhism is usually taught in the Theravada and Zen centers in America, there is a very great difference. One perspective says that we’re pretty much on our own. Another perspective says that there are many enlightened beings we can call on, and that can help us. Now, suppose for a moment, *What if this were so?*

If this is true, as I think it is, then we’ve reduced our view of this world and ourselves, our traditions, and our options, and this is surely a great loss to us all. What we have when this is the case is a tradition that has been greatly dis-empowered, and therefore generations of students, and those they are connected with, are being deprived of very great benefit.

I recently heard an interview with Sister Joan Chittister, where she said that the maps we use are important, because they are what will be followed by future generations to make their way in the world.

My world is rich, but many modern day Buddhists don’t share this view, and they explicitly or tacitly deny so much of our potential and possible experience.

There are abundant resources available by which we can actualize our aims, and if these are not taken advantage of, then it's like going hungry, and having our whole family go hungry, while there are fields nearby that can satisfy those needs. It is such an unnecessary tragedy to not see this much.

Ani-la added that:

'This is not being theistic – this is being practical. If there's help out there, why not invoke that help?..

May we all be well and happy

May we all awaken to the blessings that are continually here for us!

In a rich world view, Saints, Buddhas, Enlightened Intelligence, Bodhisattvas, and Divine help are available. If we don't know this much, then what are we left with? – a string of doctrines, and we're on our own? No! Our lives, our world, our Traditions hold inconceivably so much more than that! And while it's true that not everyone can perceive these things, or has an affinity with thinking this way - this is how it is in the world - they should *at least* consider the possibility of help from these sources. And they should *at least* not dissuade others who can draw great benefit, solace and inspiration from the presence of enlightened beings in their world view.

Another thing that leads people to reject all religious views is that prayers or the methods used don't always work in the way they want them to. It's the truth that many factors are involved either in bringing a result, or when something does not work. Our lives have this inconceivable complexity to it, as much as we may want to over-simplify things. I can say with many others that the sum of it is beyond me. What then to do?

Where the methods, and the views they are based on enter into it, and I think the reason they shouldn't be rejected outright, but taken up where and when we can, is that they are born of our collective instinct for knowing, and for making things right in our lives. These are methods that have been re-affirmed in every generation. They are our inherited wisdom of what has worked in the past, very often beyond anything that was thought possible. Let's look at this together. This is how it is in these times: the common, mundane perceptions we live with and pass around are really more accurately de-valued, degraded views, of ourselves, each other, and our

world. This reaches these days, unfortunately, even into how religions traditions are taught and received.

I wrote this poem a few days ago:

A grey scale teacher
spalshes his grey scale paint-views
onto everyone and everything
They are a danger!

There is no joy there,
no color,
little depth of feeling,
little or no poetry or wonder,
richness or inspiration

Deprived themselves,
they deprive others...

Part of the problem for us Westerners is our over-reliance on rational thinking. This function has its place, but there are also some things that only come to us through the door of the love, the door of the heart, through faith and intuition, or direct experience. If we rely too much on the intellect here, it blocks us.

I've thought that one analogy that works to describe both what's true about the rational view and what it leaves out is: a black and white photograph of a color scene. It's true as far as it goes, but there are many elements that are not seen.

Another analogy I thought of is this:

If we look at an ocean through a pinhole,
what we see
is a pinhole's worth of the ocean

It's like this.

Many spiritual truths don't lend themselves to being contained within concepts, and those who live just in the intellect suffer the loss of so many

things, like the perception of beauty, mystery, wonder, intuition, inspiration and delight... These things are seen with the eyes of the spirit, and not with the eyes of the intellect alone.

Another element that plays into a common, mundane view is our pride. Every tradition, and common sense too tell us that humility is necessary for learning. It would be one thing if we knew we were arrogant, but when even this much self knowledge is lacking, it's really hard to learn from our teachers, this world, and our deeper nature. This is related to our receptivity. We can say: great humility, great receptivity; small humility, small receptivity; and no humility, then no receptivity whatsoever...

From culture comes a self created world view, and self fulfilling prophecy

{Here is a sketch of how de-valued, ordinary perceptions of ourselves and our world develop, and how they can be undone. Like any sketch, it leaves out many things, but hopes to catch enough of the essential structure of what's going on to communicate its message.}

We live in a culture and a time that is lacking in its sense of the sacred. Wherever the best of human values are not given enough attention, or where religious culture is mocked or ignored, and where a sense of the beautiful is overridden by the volume and quantity of meaningless things, then we become inwardly impoverished.

We live in grossly materialistic times, that deny of the existence of everything beyond the reach of our ordinary five senses. Be assured, this has not always been the case in other times and cultures.

We may pride ourselves on having gotten over what we haughtily call ‘infantile’ views, of a spiritual world, or any higher order than what the average person can see. We denigrate ‘magical thinking’ as naïve, uneducated, false and misleading. We’re so proud of our reasoning and science, and we set that as the standard for everything.

Modern consumer culture then isolates people, and over time, the human connections we all need grow thin. We become suspicious of our neighbors and friends, and set apart from family. The prevalent perspective is actually nihilistic, life denying, a tragic distortion of who and what we are.

The views many of us have inherited, just by the fact of having been born here, are then reinforced by our emotional reactions, which are then reflected back to us as appearances that are colored or tainted by our own minds. If our mind is not dealt with skillful, a patina can cover everything.

What all this adds up to is a disempowered view of what it is to be alive, to be a human being in this precious world of ours. Collective views are shared in mostly unnoticed ways. They are pervasive, and are the ground of our sense of the choices we have, for change or development, or to remedy the problems we face.

To counteract this perception (or rather, misperception) we should be able to recognize diminished values, and degraded views wherever they exist, in ourselves, our family and neighbors, and in the world, so that we can replace them with something truer, something ever closer to the ideal. At the very least, our religious traditions and philosophies should offer us an alternative to nihilism. Life is available, and someone should say it out loud.

To love is to begin to remember who we are

What is it that brings light back into our lives? What will cause us to see ourselves and our world as it really is? Where will we find strength for all we need to do, and vision, and grace? Everyone, no matter whether they are affiliated with a tradition or not, can love. It can be a love for family, for art, for nature, for our teachers, for our young...

Love is the eye that sees beauty.

In that one virtue there is light, and strength. There is daily food for the journey, courage and healing. We can add to this affection for our world a basic practice of meditation that quiets and clarifies the mind. Together, these two can enhance and deepen each other. We struggle more than we need to, when we do everything *but* our inner work. That, we give short shrift. But this is that ‘one needful thing’.

With love, and regularly taking time for meditation and self cultivation, as a basis, and a way of life, we can begin to appreciate what Traditions offer, their great gift to us all.

In Tibetan Buddhism, basic ignorance manifests as what they call ‘impure perception’, or ‘ordinary perception’, or the mundane view of the world that we carry with us, and this is seen as the root cause of how we limit ourselves and suffer. The opposite of this is called an enlightened view, pure perception, or sacred outlook. This is a way of experiencing the world as essentially divine in nature, having great beauty and potential.

The following principles go beyond Buddhism alone, to reflect something of what is seen and lived with in other Traditions as well, and in the lives of contemplatives. They stand in radical contrast and in eternal opposition to the common, mundane view. Here are few tenets of a magical world view, pure perception or sacred outlook:

that all life is sacred;

that the Divine, freedom and peace, the Kingdom of Heaven, is within us all

that our fundamental nature is pure

therefore, that we all have the potential to become free from suffering and attain happiness; we can accomplish great benefit for ourselves and others

that this world is sacred, alive and responsive,
and that we are inseparably connected to it;

that we are always connected to each other, to our whole family

that there are other worlds, other realities

that there are many levels of beings, seen and unseen

that we are not alone in this world

that there are powers we can call on, Saints and Saviors, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Ancestors, and divine beings
that will respond and help

that we are multi-dimensional beings, and so, things such as distant viewing, absent reading, and distant healing are possible

that there are faculties beyond the ordinary that can be developed, each according to our unique temperament and gifts, but to some extent by everyone

that prayer is effective

that ritual works

that mantra works

An enlightened world view, however we come to it, offers us spiritual food, expansive vistas, and the means to accomplish our aims; it offers us support, whenever and wherever it is needed most.

I find such views closer to the truth of how things are. Whatever methods we then use, there is a workable operating basis for living, full and rich. We are empowered by such views, and the heritage of our great resources is again, as ever, open to us.

From an enlightened perspective of this kind, the spiritual practices we do, such as study, meditation or prayer, aim to clear away what keeps us from knowing the truth about ourselves, and our lives here; the fullness of the gifts our teachers and benefactors have given to us, and what we have to draw from to act, to set things right as much as we can here in this world.

May we all be aware of our true heritage,
and live lives of generosity,
great joy, and fulfillment,
of great peace, well being,
and benefit to all!

On Mysticism, by Jason Espada

Meister Eckhart said, "God is a great underground river," and the wisdom in all religions taps into this one source. – Matthew Fox

*We must all become oceans now,
deep at that,
and as broad*

There is a passage in a short biography of Inayat Kahn that reads as follows:

'Inayat began to teach and discuss his world view with different people who would ask what to call this mode of thought. For a long time, Inayat refused to give it a name fearing it would create barriers between people. He would say only it was ancient wisdom from the one and only source.

'He emphasized how none of the great spiritual teachers gave a name to their religious views. Finally, knowing that a body of thought needs some identifier to unify it, he told people it was Sufism.'

The World Today Needs More Mystics

A mystic is someone who has taken their spiritual path far enough to see the universal truth of it. This gives them an understanding of other traditions, not in terms of their history or doctrines, but from the point of view of their goal. They have reached 'the one without a second'. Now, isn't it just this depth of realization that is so needed in the world today? This is what enables people to give up their exclusive claim to the truth.

'Truth is one, but people call it by different names' – The Rg Veda

Think of all the wars in history that have been carried out in the name of religion – in all of these, people felt that they alone knew the will of God, or Allah, and that everyone else was a threat and needed to be converted or die.

One of the great world scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita has this remarkable exchange on the subject of narrow mindedness that has stayed with me since I first read it more than twenty years ago. It goes like this:

Someone asked a wise person, what is the most amazing thing in the world? and the wise person answered, the most amazing things are two: first, that all around us, people are dying, and yet we think that we will never die, and second, that everywhere, people think that others are fools, and that they alone have the truth.

!

I've brought this to mind many times over the years, to try to pry open my mostly unconscious grip on ideas, to try to let some light and fresh air in. It is so on the mark, I'm happy to say, I think it's worked more often than not!

Think of all the close minded arrogance there is in religion today, and all of the fear and mistrust of others. All of this comes, not from religion or spiritual practice itself, but from a lack of depth, from a lack of realization within those very traditions. The traditions themselves are all perfectly capable of producing saints – what's lacking is profound understanding.

We so live surrounded on all sides by a sea of ignorance of other beliefs, and intolerance, that most of us take it for granted. We seldom look, or ask how other faiths can be seen and profitably understood. The closest we may come to getting a glimpse of how pervasive intolerance is in these times, is when we see the sectarian divisions within religions themselves. Sometimes these are the most antagonistic – the most famous these days probably being the Catholic-Protestant divisions in Ireland, but there are others that I know about closer at hand.

For example, when one the followers of a Buddhist teacher disagrees with another person who is being taught *within the same lineage*, you can be sure they don't even regard other schools of Buddhism as genuine, or as being worthy of respect and consideration, let alone study. And if this is the case *within one school*, then other religions are not even viewed as anything other than mistaken. Their perspective, time honored and filled with saints in their history, nevertheless, at the very least, is not received at all. And never mind those who have no religious affiliation – they are not even registered as having anything of truth and genuine worth to offer to humanity.

And remember, here we're just talking, thankfully, about the most benign form of intolerance. At the very least, there is an absence where there could be a greater flourishing of understanding, learning, and even practice. This kind of extreme, closed minded sectarian thinking is there in American Christianity, and in Islam too, and I'm sure in other religions as well. Narrow minded intolerance everywhere has the same characteristics, and what a loss it is to us all!

The problem of idolatry

Every religion has recognized the danger of mistakenly worshipping what is not the real source of benefit to ourselves and others. This may be like seeing a tree, but not seeing its roots. In the Old Testament the idol was ‘the golden calf’. In the Book of Mark, Jesus says, ‘I will destroy this temple, made of hands, and, in three days, build another, made without hands.’ Further on in that same Book, it says: ‘... and the *veil* of the temple was torn from top to bottom...’

Islam, to this day, has a prohibition against *any* representation of the Ultimate truth. And the Zen Buddhist Tradition, throughout its teachings, is especially keen on exposing the limitations of language, and where we get caught by forms.

In the account of what is regarded as ‘the first zen discourse’, the Buddha, without speaking, simply held up a flower. Only Mahakasyapa saw the Buddha’s intent, and he smiled. The Buddha then said, ‘I have a treasure of insight that I have transmitted to Mahakasyapa.’

Thich Nhat Hanh commented that, while everyone was wondering, what is the deep philosophical meaning, only one person saw. When someone holds up a flower, well, he wants you to see it! {a paraphrase, as best as I remember it}

‘Build me a seamless monument’, they also say in Zen. Go beyond the words, and then go beyond the going beyond, i.e., don’t be attached to that either.

It is, as I have heard Meister Eckhart express it, that, ‘as long as we love any image we are doomed to live in purgatory.’ {i.e., as long as we’re thinking this way, we’re only half way there}

But forms alone are not the problem. The crux of whether some form of worship is idolatry is the extent to which we have penetrated the meaning of the symbol. If we have not, that very act sets us up against every other symbol, and every other form of worship. If we have, we find ourselves in deep accord with them all.

We should all be offering each other our best gifts, but instead, because of limited understanding and our attachment to forms, the door is shut and barricaded before our guests even turn up the lane! We go to war against our brothers out of that very same narrowness of view.

Here's part of a poem:

We must all become oceans now,
deep at that,
and as broad
anything less
and the light that could feed,
and save us,
instead
turns against us

Religions become most dangerous forces when they are not fully understood, when we don't penetrate to their universal depth. They can rouse natural devotional passion, and instead of that illuminating reason, and people's lives, and the world, that same ardor can go in terribly wrong directions, as evidenced by so much of what's in the news this last decade and more.

Maybe once long ago, and until recently, people could survive, and even thrive holding to one perspective, one teaching, one teacher and tradition. It may have been that there was *no need* to understand other faiths, as people either didn't come into contact with them, or else they were not dependent on them in any way.

Although I would argue that their lives would have been enriched, and wars based on misunderstanding would have been avoided had people actually learned in some depth, and with respect, what others believed, still it may have been possible somewhere for people to live in peace and fulfillment with secure in just their one set of beliefs.

But these times we are living in now are different. In our increasingly globalized world, we are confronted more and more, whether we like it or not, with different faiths, different languages, different poetries, and different tellings of history. The one thing we can't do any longer is to ignore that there are other traditions.

At this time, we can either choose to attach even more firmly to our beliefs, and, with even greater fervor and intensity, deny any validity other than that, which fundamentalists everywhere are doing, or we can go in the opposite direction and begin to open to the possibility that truth itself is not just contained in one tradition or set of beliefs. In other words, we can become more realized in our own tradition, and to some extent at least, in our own way, touching universal truths, we can become mystics.

As each day goes by, the need for mystics grows more and more. We need people who have taken the practices of their tradition far enough so they recognize the same essential truth shining in those who walk other paths. More and more, we need people who will spread this truth about the religions of the world.

In the past, it may have been enough to just produce realized beings who had no contact with or knowledge of other traditions. In these times though, it's a dangerous thing *not* to understand that our own path aims to bring us to a goal shared by others.

Add to religions devotional passion the contact with other traditions, without understanding this truth, and this is exactly how fanaticism comes about. People blow up buses, clinics, open fire in churches, burn mosques, and deny that we are all of one family, all out of this kind of blindness.

What we need is a depth of realization, produced everywhere, in all traditions and non-traditions, such as the arts, that sees the universal truth of our own particular path, and that then goes on to embrace all of humanity, all of life as its own, naturally encouraging others to do the same.

We need to reach beyond distinctions, 'where there is neither East nor West'.

Rabindranath Tagore offers us these timeless lines:

‘O, grant me the prayer
that I may never lose the bliss
of the touch of the One
in the play of the many’

and,

‘Where the mind is without fear,
and the head is held high,
where knowledge is free;
where the world has not been broken up
into fragments,
by narrow domestic walls –
into that heaven, wake!’

When you look at mystics across time and cultures, it’s reassuring to see how they have more in common with each other than with many of their fellow believers.

‘All mystics’, said Saint-Martin, ‘speak the same language and come from the same country.’ They all teach that life is sacred, and that the highest ideal is love. They all affirm that life is one, and that, whoever we are, wherever we are, we belong to that one life, and to each other.

Twentieth Century theologian Howard Thurman wrote, in *The Luminous Darkness*,

‘It may be, I don’t know, that to experience oneself as a human being is one with experiencing one’s fellows as human beings. It means that the individual must have a sense of kinship to life that transcends and goes beyond the immediate kinship of family or the organic kinship that binds him [or her] ethnically or “racially” or nationally. He has a sense of being an essential part of the structural relationship that exists between him and all other men [and women], and between him, all other men [and women], and the total external environment. As a human being, then, he belongs to life and the whole kingdom of life that includes all that lives and perhaps, also, all that has ever lived. In other words, he sees himself as a part of a continuing, breathing, living existence. To be a human being, then, is to be essentially alive in a living world.

Isn't it clear now more than ever, with all our differences emerging, that this view what we need more of? This is what will harmonize the differences, and make the cacophonous discord of Babel a great ocean-like symphony, enriching to us all.

Other mystics come to mind here, such as Rumi, Hafiz, Meister Eckhart, Hazrat Inayat Kahn, Lama Yeshe, Thich Nhat Hanh, Albert Schweitzer, Martin Luther King, the poets Mary Oliver, Naomi Shihab Nye and Pablo Neruda, and of course the Buddha, and Jesus.

There are greater and lesser mystics, people with deeper or less profound realization, but we do need them all. It is also entirely possible for someone to reach a depth in their practice without thinking of it as mysticism. Seeing a unity behind the multiplicity of forms, depends on contrast, which goes like this:

Whether someone recognizes that they've found a unifying truth depends on whether they come in contact with other language and methods, and, in an open-hearted, open minded way comparing their tradition with his own, he sees with joy that they come to the same conclusion.

Part of it, certainly, is having the intention to look. There can never be a legacy-tradition of realized beings, passed down like so many physical goods, for this reason. We each need to affirm certain truths for ourselves. But when we see the need to look deeply, the same truth we find within also begins to be seen elsewhere, to shine from other sources.

I recently had the surprise and delight to hear the following, expressed by Father Thomas Keating: 'If one completes the journey to one's own heart, one will find oneself in the heart of everyone.' How wonderful!

Rabia has a poem in which she says:

'In my soul
there is a temple, a shrine,
a mosque, a church
where I kneel.
Prayer should bring us to an altar
where no walls or names exist...'

And St. Theresa of Avila has said:

This magnificent refuge is inside you.
 Enter. Shatter the darkness that shrouds the doorway...
 Be bold. Be humble.
 Put away the incense and forget
 the incantations they taught you.
 Ask no permission from the authorities.
 Close your eyes and follow your breath
 to the still place that leads to the
 invisible path that leads you home."

If we see this much it should be enough.

It is clear to me on my good days that traditions have these two aspects to them, the precious historical dimension, and the ultimate dimension, which goes beyond any one tradition, and that empowers all traditions.

Recognizing the aspect that is beyond names and forms, then we know at that time our unity with other people, in other places and Faiths.

It is this ultimate dimension that gives *life* to traditions, both our own, and those of others. It's like when the roots of a tree go down deep into the earth and reach water, and that life nourishes the whole tree. Then all the branches, leaves, flowers and fruit will certainly flourish. It has always been this way in the past, it will always be this way in the future, and it is this way now.

How to pray, How to act, and How to live in this world

The strength of devotion, and the joy of believers in the different traditions tells us is that they have each found a source of strength and sustenance, and that they know keeping in contact with that is essential for their spiritual survival and continued strength.

One of the great things about being alive in these times is that we have so many choices of teachings and teachers available to find what meets our needs, our karmic affinities, and character. I have no doubt that anyone who searches sincerely, without giving up will find the living water.

It gets so personal at that point, and it never need be anything other than that. Think of a rose, or a pine tree, or a wave - they can only be what they are, thankfully. It's in being what we are made to be that we give our gift fully to this world.

A version of ‘think globally – act locally’

I remember being surprised a number of years ago, when I went to receive acupuncture treatments, to find out how they can place a needle in one part of the body, to effect another. I remember this now because it seems to be exactly analogous to what we would think of as acting locally. The truth of it is that, just like the body is one, this life is one, and anything we do on a personal level, even the smallest action, effects the whole of life. We may not see it, but we can be sure that it is so.

Wherever we are in life then, as long as we are acting with a positive motivation, with kindness and compassion, and being as inclusive as we can, we can be sure that life beyond what we see benefits.

We can continue to learn throughout our whole lives, and share what we know, and the basis for doing this will always be the depth of our own spiritual practice and insight. This aspect of living *must* be honored, my brothers and sisters, in all its forms.

Our eyes and our heart are privileged to see many of the ways people live, and believe, and practice their path today. Even if we don't understand the language, or what they do, or if we see them practicing their path only partway, still the common basis of our faith and life can always be clear to us, and constant. And, life with all its challenges, at that point, as the mystics love to tell us, is fulfillment, a great festival of celebration, and of service.

Hafiz says:

You carry all the ingredients
To turn your existence into joy,

Mix them, mix
Them!

and

We have not come here to take prisoners
 Or to confine our wondrous spirits,
 But to experience ever and ever more deeply
 Our divine courage, freedom, and
 Light!

and

You are with the Friend now
 And look so much stronger.

You can stay that way
 And even bloom!

Keep squeezing drops of the Sun
 From your prayers and work and music
 And from your companions' beautiful laughter.

Keep squeezing drops of the Sun
 From the sacred hands and glance of your Beloved

And, my dear,
 From the most insignificant movements
 Of your own holy body.

Now, sweet one,
 Be wise.
 Cast all your votes for Dancing!

A mysticism of personal and collective value

I know that when many people read lines such as these they think, ‘what does this have to do with my life?’ Spirituality in general, and mysticism in particular have gotten a bad rap over the years as having nothing to do with life in the world, and as having little or nothing to offer, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Who among us is actually able to bear witness, and to respond to suffering effectively, other than people who are liberated from their own inner conflicts, in other words, those who have matured far enough in their spiritual life. This maturation can take any form, but everywhere it is the same story unfolding, wherever there is an effective method at work – born of empathy, then, by their fruits we know them.

What mystics especially have to offer, in addition to being able to respond to the lives of those around them, is an understanding of our common ground, that we are all of one family, and that it is our responsibility and privilege, the greatest joy for us, to care for one another. It is this universal perspective, a unitive vision, and active engagement in healing the world soul, that truly characterizes the mystic, and not those caricatures imagined from a distance.

Addressing an unfounded bias against spiritual practice, Matthew Fox, the author of *Original Blessing*, was asked the following question about the place of the mystic in society:

Sam Keen: ‘It seems to me that psychotherapy, like religion, is concerned with healing and that it has the virtue of providing a time and place for remembering our individual wounds and for private lamentation. But don’t both fail to lead us beyond our private suffering and into the wounds of the body politic?’

and he replied:

‘Both therapists and politicians should join the mystics in leading us, gently but surely, into the wounds of our times, because if we did not live in such denial we could develop the collective imagination necessary to deal with our problems. But we are afraid to face the nothingness.

‘The mystics tell us that from the encounter with nothingness comes a breakthrough into imagination and creativity -- the next step in the journey. Once you experience the awe and face the darkness, creativity is unleashed. It’s not something you have to manufacture. Creativity is utterly natural in us. It’s our divine power.

‘In the final stage of the journey, creativity gives us the impulse and power to transform ourselves and our society. I think of the transformative way as

the practice of compassion, the struggle for healing, for justice, for bringing the balance back into our bodies, our psyches and our communities.'

Acting this way, always and everywhere, we are taking part in something larger than ourselves, 'carried on the tide of the spirit', as Rumi said. There is little or nothing of the ego there, with none of the separation that comes from false distinctions.

Were the time not so pressing, I wouldn't have tried to write at this much on something so seemingly vague and impractical as mysticism.

Actually, from another point of view, there is nothing more precise, and necessary in our times than pointing out how our religions have a common basis, and to try thereby to foster greater respect for other faiths.

In writing this then, it is my hope simply that enough of the great value and necessity for our times of a depth of realization and universal perspective, will have come through to encourage people on their path, for all of our sake.

May all benefit.

Power and Love – a Buddhist perspective

We fear power because we associate it with aggression. It's there in everything from militarism to abusive husbands and boyfriends, to those we say are 'drunk with power' – implying control, domination, and injustice. But power in itself is neutral. **Power can be turned any way, and this is something we need to know, for our own sake, for that of our community, and world.**

The rising up of energy when it's needed is natural to us. This we all know. When there's some crisis, or even just a need at home, say, a pipe breaks, and water starts to fill our study, getting closer to books and papers; right there, we'll find more energy arise in us to deal with the situation.

The challenge of power is that we need intelligence, and a wise heart to guide it. I know why so many people are suspicious of all expressions of power, such as strength, courage and boldness – it's because they equate these qualities with deluded aggression, which is power without wisdom. The problem is that we then go on to associate kindness only with the soft, gentle side of it, when we also have a profound need for love that is empowered to act in whatever way is necessary to help, or to protect others.

The energy that arises when seeing a real need often gets 'hijacked' at a very early stage. It can get subverted by fear, or by the tendency to strike out. Because this is so often all we see in our culture, in the media and when we engage other people, we can come to see aggression as the only kind of power. This is a dangerous mistake.

The expression of power can take many other forms, from the very gentle, and patient and far seeing, to very wrathful, all born of love, along with wisdom guiding it to the outcome we hold in our heart. A mother has power; someone on strike for a living wage, so he can feed his family, has power; the editor of a community newspaper has power, and the discipline to shape his message; a minister has power...

I'm thinking of Martin Luther King here, who was without anger, or hostility, but full of the grace of the strength of love.
This kind of power is not to be feared, but taken up, and embraced.

Other examples come to mind: the courage of those protesting against war, the love and strength of those who marched for civil rights, and the courage we express every time we stand now in solidarity with a just cause. In every case, this is answering a call, creatively acting for the healing of the world. This is what we need much more of in these times. Without the strength when needed, love is weak, and ineffectual, and remains incomplete. Just passively wanting things to improve is not enough. We also have to have the courage to speak, and to act in whatever way is called for.

Handling power is no easy matter. Impatience may assert itself, saying, ‘There is no time to lose’; anger clouds the mind, making people confused; seeing suffering brings with it a sense of urgency, such that we could then just react in a short sighted way, leading to mistakes. Right there is where we see the real value of having a strong center in our life, such as what we cultivate when we have a deep contemplative practice. A stable center is needed so we don’t get pulled off balance, so we can act clearly, compassionately, and efficiently.

One of the benefits of being part of a tradition is that we are not alone in our exploration of what it is to be a human being. We can look at how others have handled similar challenges of power in the past, and how they are holding them now. We can ask questions. Often just bringing a teacher to mind communicates more than words. They embody what they have learned. I think now of Thich Nhat Hanh, who faced what for most of us are unimaginable difficulties during the war on his country. I look to him as someone who was able to respond to the needs of his time fearlessly, compassionately, without losing his cool, and without giving reign to anger. Because of his strong practice, dedication and clarity, he was able to do a great amount of good, and his example continues to inspire.

The Dalai Lama also comes to mind here, as someone who for the last fifty years has responded to the aggression in his homeland out of deep wisdom and strength, with nothing but compassion. Their responses may seem inconceivable, but it’s because they have great love in them that they, and other activists for the cause of human rights, such as Aung San Sui Kyi, and Nelson Mandela, are able to stay committed to their ideals.

These teachers show us how it is *just* as Joanna Macy has said, that, ‘The capacity of the human heart-mind to look into the face of suffering and pain

has everything to do with its awakening it its full dimensions, joy, and power.' They demonstrate important lessons for us all.

The Thought Training teachings in Tibetan Buddhism say that we should respond to a great need with great energy, but that the arising of that power in us should be guided by compassion. They tell us we need both vigor, and knowledge of the means to alleviate the problem. It is this kind of long range thinking that is missing in mere anger, or aggression as a response to some problem. Powerful though aggression may be, it is destructive. It accomplishes nothing of lasting value. I find these teachings especially helpful in difficult times, when it seems that no answer can match the needs we see in our world. They tell me to never give up, to keep the ideal in mind and to act with boldness, trusting our inner resources, and a responsive world.

Love leads someplace very different from greed, or the will to control or exploit others. Everywhere we find it, love goes beyond what the ego wants. It takes love manifesting as courage to look at our own mistakes, and go beyond them; it takes that same kind of courage to step out of the circle of what's familiar to us, and to follow our conscience.

Whereas aggression divides people, and puts up barriers, love dissolves boundaries. It removes the sense of separation between ourselves and our neighbor, between ourselves and the natural world, and, finally, between ourselves and those who cause suffering (which is both the highest precept in Christianity, and the most advanced practice of love in Buddhism).

The well being and suffering of others *then becomes our own well being and suffering, and our own responsibility.* With that comes an indomitable strength of will to do our work.

Reading history, it seems that every generation feels like theirs is facing the greatest challenge. I remember something of the 60's and 70's, and the urgency of those times. It's hard to compare, but what we do know is that there is so much at stake now, especially for the coming generations. These are needful times, in many ways like never before. *How will we respond?*

With so much going on in this world, the extent of political corruption, the desecration of the environment, the militarism and inequality, and more, so much that calls for our attention and our strong response, it can be

overwhelming. We often ask, How much can one person do? It seems we can never do enough by ourselves alone to fight against injustice, and the abuses of power, and yet, being taken hold of by love, I'm surprised to say, I have reason to hope.

In love, there is strength that an aggressor could never imagine. It's been described as a hidden power, a spring of creative action, as wine, and bread, delight and sustenance. And this love is what we share, the power that accompanies an awakened heart. It is, as Dr. King has said, that 'Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.', and, 'Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness.'

In Buddhism, the iconic form of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, has an eye in the palm of each of his many hands. This is the eye of wisdom and love that guides his actions. This tells me that such power, when we meet it, or feel it rising up in us, is not something to be avoided, but taken up; this is what finally removes fears. As Shantideva said:

*It's a protector of the helpless,
a guide to those wishing to cross over,
or a bridge, or a raft...*

Dr. King again: 'In the final analysis, love is not this sentimental something that we talk about. It's not merely an emotional something... Love is the understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all men.' 'It is the refusal to defeat any individual. When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. ...'

Love challenges us then to look at our own lives. This is the compass. '*Let love be without hypocrisy*', as it says in one of Paul's letters.

Whether we call ourselves religious or not, moving from our ideals to actualizing these aims, *has to* be a kind of awakening, of both vision and strength in us. It may not always be comfortable, but this is just what is needed now, more than ever.

May we all be empowered by love,

*May we walk without fear,
and advance the work of our Noble Ancestors in these very times,
to create the beloved community*

A different response to war, by Jason Espada

People fall into three camps when it comes to America's wars: there are those who unquestioningly accept these as necessary, and unavoidable, if tragic; a second, much larger group wants nothing to do with our nation's history – having divorced themselves from any association with it, they feel removed from any responsibility for it at all; a third group sees the evils that have been committed by our government, with our tax dollars, wasting lives and depleting resources that are needed here;

Many in this last group bay for blood when new or old information comes to light about the crimes of government officials in the past, such as those of Henry Kissenger, Richard Nixon, LBJ, Reagan, Bush and Cheney, right up to our current president. Yet I would like to propose another response to war making that is not covered in any of the above. I would like to suggest the idea of *finding guilt without punishment*.

I know this may sound very strange, impractical, unjust, and impossible to achieve, but if there is a thread of truth to what I'm about to say, then this may offer another possibility when faced with crimes of the magnitude of what was done in South East Asia in the '60's and '70's, in Central America in the 1980's, and now in the Middle East, from the early 1990's to present.

When Obama ran against John McCain in 2008, much was made of McCain's status as a 'war hero'. This was never challenged, by Obama or in the media. If it was analyzed anywhere, it was well off the radar for most Americans. I said at the time that if he wanted to run with that as one of his qualifications to lead the country, then it should be brought out into the open. The man dropped bombs on people. How many did he kill?, and *was he fighting a just cause* in doing so?

The right or wrong of Vietnam is a debate we have not finished in this country, and, as I would like to describe here, not seeing this through on a national level leaves the way open for still more deception, for the depravity of more wars where innocents are killed abroad, and young Americans maimed and killed for no good reason.

The left is so weak now, that what passes for a public progressive here has no criticism of the modern ‘good soldier’, but only unalloyed praise. Just where did those on the left lose their moral courage? If the cause is wrong, unjust, and the government immoral, then have pity for the soldier, but don’t exalt his or her so-called ‘heroism’, or try to separate what they do from the barbarity, illegality and destructiveness of their actions. Popular newscasters and spokesmen on the left are confused, wanting to side with the soldier, and yet also wanting to oppose these wars.

When former president Ford passed away, I took it as a chance to look at his legacy. Ford pardoned Nixon, and the highest ranking criminal in our nation walked away, not only without being punished in any way, but, what was worse, with some ambiguity in the minds of American people about what it is he had done. In the years that followed his resigning from office, there have been schools and libraries named after him.

After Nixon, we got Reagan, who went much further than Nixon in the Iran – Contra scandal to subvert the constitution, and establish a new code of executive level immunity from breaking the law. After Reagan we got Bush and Cheney, who again went exponentially further than their predecessors, shredding the constitution and robbing the treasury to give to corporations. Today, Obama continues the shameful legacy of authoritarian criminality.

I know there are a lot of well meaning people who want to avoid thoughts of revolution, as the only way to change a system. In the history of revolutions, we can read the same story told over and over again, of people being pushed and exploited without limit, and exhausting every legal option, before taking up arms.

The neo cons play on people’s respect for the law and the reluctance to fight back. Yet there is nothing ethical about them. They hide behind laws, but then overrule, or find ways around them altogether. The uninformed, the misinformed, the deceived, support them, and carry out their orders. It would seem that only in playing their own game better than the right could we hope to change an unjust system.

I see one factor though that has the potential to slow, and change the course of the rule by the few, at the expense of the many; I can think of one method that can take apart the machinery of war, and that is – to tell the truth about this country’s past.

Right there, as soon as I say or think this, the thought rises up, of how what we may call justice is so often linked to retribution; that most of the time, people want those who caused suffering to suffer; we want to see them in jail or worse. This is opposed naturally by those who just want to live in peace now; the past is past, they will say, let us move forward;

It would also, without question, be opposed by everyone who had anything to do with war making – from the generals and their families, going back generations, on down to the pilots and soldiers and their families and friends; from military contractors to the politicians who were their advocates, and all those who were complicit; few would be exempt, and so there's the fear of where this would lead, were we really to open that Pandora's box.

This shows a lack of imagination, and what's worse, it leaves intact the roots of the crimes this country has committed in the past. With these factors still in play in public consciousness, political leaders and the rapacious capitalist forces they represent can again exploit and manipulate people into wars of aggression. Finding our country's leaders guilty, without seeking merely to punish those few individuals may not be emotionally satisfying for those who have felt wronged or betrayed by them, but the aim goes much further than singling out a handful of people for revenge.

Admittedly, there's no 'thrill' here, if you could call it that, but only what could be a fruitful grief over the inhumane actions done by this country. Veterans against the war show how this is possible.

If people in America had really come to terms across religious, economic and geographical lines with what was done in South East Asia; if we had really known the extent of the lies and the atrocities that were committed there, there would have been less willingness to take the government's word on anything after that, or to go to war. Maybe then the aggression against Central American people, and the people in the Middle East would not have happened as it did.

The interesting thing about both lies, and the truth is that they are perennial - always in season. Governments need people to believe in the righteousness of their cause, or no one would follow the drum beat. By the same token, telling history as it actually happened is always what we need to do, opposed as it will be.

Tell me - What other force can disarm the generals?, what other creative, non-violent power can stop the machinery of war?

Who were the Hitler's, the Mao's, the Kissengers, the Reagans, and the Bushes, other than incredibly deluded men who went on to lie and deceive a great number of people? Without the consent of the public, they would have been no more dangerous than a lunatic raving in a dark alley. To paraphrase the constitution, they derive their power from the consent of deceived people. Take that away, and they have nothing, no troops, no armaments industries, no dock workers willing to load and unload their munitions, no foot soldiers.

We can look for examples of finding a person or group guilty, without seeking retribution. It has been done before. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa comes to mind here. It's purpose has been to make a way forward out of a violent past. It did this not by ignoring what had happened, but by holding it up for everyone to see, and remember.

This is our best protection. Without knowing our history, we're at the mercy of those who would perpetuate the long night of war for profit, the holding on to and building the wealth of the few at the expense of the many. Some may argue that it's always been like this, and that nothing is going to change, but great changes have happened, in fact we're living them now. This may be hard to see, without reflection, and without a study of our history, but we're right in the middle of it.

For just one example, consider how much we as a nation have turned away from racism. We still have a long way to go to erase this stain, and to entirely eliminate racist views, true, but compared to a hundred years ago we can only describe the difference in attitudes here as a sea-change.

One sign of how far we've come is that we elected a black man president in 2008. Quite apart from the crimes he's committed since coming to office, in the 50's, 60's, and 70's, and even later than that, this would have been inconceivable. Just ask anyone who lived through those decades.

My point is that if views on race can change so substantially, in less than half a century, so can what we think about the past and present militarism of this country. Who knows what we're capable of?

Just as what we are taught about race has changed dramatically, so can we change what we teach about war, and the cruelty and violence that some Americans have done, and continue to do, right up to today. We suffer, and wars go on, for lack of any historical memory.

Another place we can look, for a response to war that goes beyond mere retribution, so that no generation repeats the crimes of the past, is to late twentieth century Germany and Japan. They institutionally, and extensively teach the immorality of the men who committed the ultimate crime of going to war. This is the best protection against it happening again. This is what we need here, though it would seem we're far from it now.

Many people here are indulgent, self-centered, unconcerned, or feel disempowered, but this is only part of the story. Remember February 15th, 2003. I'd like to see it become a national holiday, commemorating the best that's in us. That was the day when millions of people across this nation and in cities all over the world protested against the war the American leaders were getting ready to launch against the people of Iraq. To my mind, this was an incredible event, almost unbelievable, and something that deserves to be marked on the calendar and celebrated.

When in history have people every protested, on such a scale, *before* a war even began? Not only that, but the protests took place all over the world. Overwhelmingly, as a group, as a species, we were of one mind, of one heart. That the war went forward anyway, with catastrophic consequences for the Iraqi people is a terrible fact we're all still living with now. But we shouldn't forget that, on that day, people worldwide stood up, and stood together, against militarism, and wars of aggression for profit's sake. This gives me hope, because you don't kill a thought like that – this is what is redeeming in all of this, when I remember that our story is still being written.

Can we hold up Abu G'rhab and say, 'never again'?

Can we look at drone warfare and call it immoral, and call those who bomb innocents war criminals, and, more than that, say, *we stand against this, forever?*

I want more than retribution. I want to see the end of blind allegiance to the flag and militarism in this country. We're so much better than that.

So let the truth go out. Find someone who still hasn't made up their mind on what was done in our name to the people in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, or in Central America, or in Iraq, and tell them it's important to cross that invisible boundary and be able to repudiate unjust war on innocents.

I know why people defend this government, against all reason, and it's because they still have an all or nothing mentality when it comes to war, or crimes against humanity. But how can we move forward if we don't acknowledge the past, all the right and wrong of it, all the good and evil of it? 'To move forward' means we don't repeat the mistakes of the past, forever, because we have been able at last to learn our lesson.

{reading now: A People's History of the United States, by Howard Zinn; listening to: Mozart Flute Concertos, and The Speeches of Martin Luther King; also recommended: Lies My Teacher Told Me, by James Louwen; and Confessions of an Economic Hit Man, by, John Perkins, and the documentary films 'Why We Fight', and 'You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train'. }

How things change, by Jason Espada

(number 59 in a series)

If you set out to write the most optimistic words you can manage in hard times, you have to start with what we're up against. And so, piled high on one side of my desk, I have the latest news about Monsanto, corporate control of the media, puppet politicians, and a shallow and distracted American public;

if we want, we can add the seeds of violence that are being sown every day by the use of unmanned planes dropping bombs, with 'every innocent killed, a victim with family and friends' – I said I was going to write optimistically – I didn't say it was going to be easy.

Actually, it is amazing to me that people face down these facts every day, and put themselves to caring for a world that looks set on self destruction. I saw how one commenter to a post vented that trying to change a corporation was just an ego game some people play, to feel better about themselves, but that we're 'outnumbered 50 to 1', *and I thought, Are those really the odds? Why not 500 or 5000 to 1?*...

I remember laughing the first time I heard the cut that 'old people don't have to learn history – they remember it'. Well, here are a couple of things I remember:

I remember wars with little or no protest, inequality before Occupy, factory farming and fast food consumed without questioning if it was any good for us;

I remember thinking this country would never in my lifetime, elect a person of color to the white house, and, even if O has been a complete washout, I think, if this is possible, what more can we do?

I have an image in mind, several in fact, just to chart more fully where we are now, on the way to where we want to go.

My father is the great documentary photographer, Frank Espada. In the 1960's, while we were in grade school in New York, my father was helping to organize voter registration. This was just after the water-shed voter's rights act of 1964, and although it was many years before he launched his career as a photographer and teacher, my dad had his camera with him.

I found some of the pictures he took of that voter registration drive. In them, we see a young white woman holding up a sample voting box, and explaining to people lined up how to punch holes to cast a vote. The most amazing thing to be seen in these pictures is the look in people's eyes: I swear I can see something of their disbelief- that they never thought the day would come when they'd have a voice, but most of all what you can see is their determination. Although it was late afternoon, and it was starting to get dark out, something in their look said they weren't leaving until they understood how to take this chance that was now set right in front of them.

It's important to remember other times when things looked impossible to change: America in Vietnam, blacks excluded from lunch counters, parks and libraries, the pre-war apathy of the left and middle America: If we don't remember the world wide anti war protests of February 15th, 2003, for example, and keep it vividly in mind, we have nothing to guide us when things start to feel really oppressive.

History moves slowly, but it does move. Listening to Dr. King's speeches, we can't help but wonder what he'd think of the changes in our country since the 60's. There is still *a lot* of work to be done, everywhere you look, but there are also large and small successes that we need to draw from, and use to build on to move forward.

Take for just one example the development of microfinance. This movement started in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, in response to the overwhelming unmet need for poor people to have access to small loans to improve their lives. The organization Kiva, and others like it have picked up this simple concept, of directly lending small amounts, and millions of people worldwide have benefited and will continue to benefit.

As I write this, we have a lot of knowledge that wasn't available 20 years ago. More of us know more now about the food we eat, and how it's grown, about our history, and about global economics. We also have the internet,

which has immense potential as a tool for social change. I hope to live a while more to see what we'll do with it.

My first reaction when seeing the '50 to 1' comment was briefly one of agreement with it, and despair. But then something else kicked in. It goes back to another family story. This one relates to when my father was a young boy, growing up on the island of Puerto Rico. The story goes that there was a bully who was terrorizing him, and that one day he decided he'd had enough. The next time he saw the bully coming at him he picked up a big rock, and scared the living shit out of him. The bully, he says, was never a problem again for him after that. What's more, as the capper to the story goes, my father went back to the spot where he had confronted the bully the day before, and he says, he couldn't even lift the rock. After hearing this, or repeating it ourselves for the umpteen time, there is usually a dramatic pause, to let it sink in...

Now, I don't know what other kids' parents told them when sending them off to school, but I do remember my father telling us, 'don't take any shit from anybody'. That I do remember. Point being, I see, all these years later, that when you're threatened, you'll have strength that you didn't know you had in you, so don't be afraid. After a while, you go out looking for bullies. This has been the trajectory of my father's career, and, in our own ways that of my brother, sister and myself.

You want to know how change happens? It starts by looking the bully in the eye, and saying, that's it, I'm not going to back down. This is something bullies are not used to hearing. Nixon wasn't used to it; neither are corporations, high government officials or military men. But they do fall.

If we know ahead of time that bringing life saving changes, or some improvement in human rights isn't going to be easy, we won't give up so easily.

So what if politicians are bought and paid for, while people here are distracted by silly cat videos on their so-called 'smart' phones? or by reality tv, or the latest food and shopping? There are also these days more informed, dedicated people than ever before. I have to remember this, or else reading or even thinking about the news would be too much to bear.

I remember now: Aung San Sui Kyi was released from her second or third extended period of house arrest last year. She lives in one of the most oppressive military dictatorships in the world, and has been their steadfast opponent for decades. This reminds me that things change, not by themselves, but because some people don't give up when it's hard to keep hope. So make your own list of heroes and heroines. Think of what they have done, or are doing now to fix the hurting world we live in. Share what you know with your cohorts.

I was thinking the other day how no one of us gets to work with anything more than a part of the whole, and to think otherwise is just our pride talking. And yet it is important that we do our part as well as we can. This very work we are doing now will be our legacy. Just as we received an unfinished work from our ancestors, so also the work will be unfinished when it leaves our hands. No matter. ‘Ours is the labor, but not the fruits thereof’, says the Bhagavad Gita.

Just this is how change happens: we hold the dream in our hands, and carry it forward, with all our courage and care.