

Rumi and Metta – Showing the Path of Love, by Jason Espada

Part I

I have faith that if I begin to speak about Rumi and metta, loving kindness practice, what is here and what I want to say will become clear.

as Rumi said:

*‘Let yourself be drawn
by the silent pull
of what you really love...’*

Being in love, whatever form it takes, feels like an awakening. Colors are brighter, and food tastes better. Possibilities open up that we never thought of before, bringing joy and hope, courage and strength, and compassion for people still struggling along the road, those still ‘caught in the snares of the world’.

Anyone who’s matured their practice can see that there are many valid paths of spiritual development. There are some things, I’m thinking, that we shouldn’t try to prove with the intellect alone, and the underlying unity of religions is one of them. It’s more than enough proof to look at the exemplary lives that different spiritual traditions produce – people of faith and devotion, lives of joy, compassion, peace, and strength, light in our world.

Which brings me with great joy to the subjects of Rumi and metta – Buddhist loving kindness practice. It would be enough of a challenge to just try to *highlight some of the similarities* between the great love that is spoken of in Rumi’s poetry, and what is aimed at through metta practice. But no, it seems I want to do more than that here.

It’s a curious ambition I have, but I feel I owe it to Rumi, and to my fellow lovers of his poetry, as well as to the tradition of metta practice *to see explore how these two paths can complement each other*. I’m thinking that each path is complete as it is, and yet, every path has its strengths and weaknesses.

Make no mistake, I'm not trying to create a 'super path' out of them, by combining them, but rather to say in what follows how all these elements are *already there* in each path, and that perhaps at times we can see our own chosen path more fully by looking at it from the perspective of another spiritual tradition.

Rumi has been an inspiration and guide to me for the last thirty years. I discovered a rather odd shaped copy of some of his poems in a bookstore near Palo Alto, California, and somehow, to my amazing good fortune, it spoke to me right away.

Spiritual Traditions all tell us there is another way – other than the greed and aggression of our common culture; another way to live besides self indulgence, waste, and indifference to those around us. The life of an awakened person is one of joy, freedom of mind and heart, and a true scale of values.

Which brings me to the Buddhist path. Like many people, I came to Buddhism because of my own suffering and confusion. Studying on my own, and then meeting teachers impressed on me that this is a path that can produce the best kind of results for a person.

One of the beauties of the Buddhist path is that it has been practiced continually for the last 2500 years, with each generation verifying for themselves that the way to greater freedom of mind, and fulfillment is within reach for us all.

Another part of this legacy has been that the teachings have been arranged over the centuries in many different ways, all with the intention of making the practice of them more accessible, and more effective for people. This is true of the teachings on metta, or the development of loving kindness.

The Buddha taught the Metta Sutta, which is a poetic evocation of the nature of universal love, and encouragement to us to take up the practice:

*'Just as a mother cherishes
and cares for her child,
her only child,
we should cultivate boundless love to offer to all'*

By the time five hundred years had passed after the Buddha, the commentarial tradition in India and Sri Lanka had formulated a path of practice to cultivate metta step by step to its universal level. One begins with oneself, or whoever is easiest to have uncomplicated feelings of love for. Then one adds to that the cultivation of loving kindness and well wishing for, progressively, family and friends, those we don't know personally, those we have difficulty with, and finally all beings.

Along the way in the practice we meet everything that blocks our having such an unconditional, all embracing love: our attachments and possessiveness; anger, impatience, pride, neglect of others, laziness, and so on - but if we stay with the practice, these are gradually purified, so that our love can really manifest as needed with all people, and in all situations.

There is a lot of creativity allowed and encouraged in metta practice, and yet, there is a discipline to it as well. We don't just let our mind go wherever it wants with it – that would be indulging in fantasies. The discipline is to go gradually, to find our present limits, and to work right there. We bring metta to that characteristic in ourself, or to that situation or person or group of people.

There's also this advantage to metta, that we can look to see if our practice is balanced. There is a part of the metta teachings that they call The Four Brahma Viharas, or Divine Abodes, or the Four Immeasurables. These are universal love, compassion, joy, and what I am thinking of these days as the equanimity born of the strength of love. When we are practicing to develop metta, each of these needs the others.

Apart from the parallels between Rumi's teachings and metta, this need to have balance in our practice is one place where I can see how bringing together the two traditions can be mutually beneficial. For example, we all need joy and passion to continue on our path, and to flourish, and these are there in abundance in Rumi's poetry.

Approached from one angle, Buddhism can seem depressing – with all its talk about suffering. Looked at another way though, it's saying that genuine happiness is possible, and this is the best of all possible news.

Modern Westerners are mostly people of conscience, and this is especially true I think of those who take up a religious or spiritual path. We're aware

of the suffering in ourselves and in the world, and want to do whatever we can about it. Our motivation is good, but we can get lopsided in our development if we're not careful. We need more of 'the winged energy of delight', as the poet Blake called it. This ecstatic, celebratory quality, that which makes our living a joy, is what is brought out and encouraged wonderfully in Rumi's poetry.

What Buddhist loving kindness practice could potentially offer to the Sufi mystic's path of love, I'm thinking, is its very clear guidance on how a person can actually accomplish the aims of love, both for themselves, and for others.

The metta teachings originally came from the Theravada, or 'School of the Elders', and is now found in all other lineages. The Mahayana, or Vehicle of Universal Salvation adds to Buddhism the element of the Bodhisattva – a person who is dedicated to caring for all others in every way that is needed, right up to their enlightenment.

What we all need, every religion tells us, is a path that liberates us from our confusion and dissatisfaction, from small views and prejudices, and that heals and awakens us to our true nature. The whole Buddhist path does this admirably.

A person who dedicates himself or herself to the birth of wisdom and love, in response to the needs of our whole family, our whold world, is called in Buddhism a bodhisattva. Other traditions give it different names, but this is highlighted in the Mahayaha as the ideal. The methods to accomplish our aims are available, and we are urged to take them up, both for our own sake, and for the sake of all our family.

Really, I do feel right here that we need poetry. Others may not agree, or feel it is essential, but I do think that some things can only be expressed with the most beautiful language we have, and with metaphor. In any case, more can be said in a couple of lines of verse than in pages of explanation. This is just how the human mind works. Stories and images work in us at a deep level.

Of course, this is all obvious to those who already have a love of poetry, but here it has a special significance. Religious or spiritual ideas can uplift and

inspire us, and those very same images can be the expression of the guiding wisdom in our lives.

One more note: if we focus on the differences between traditions, while it may help to clarify some things, it can unfortunately also make us feel separate from or in competition with each other. On the other hand, if we highlight the universal characteristics of a teaching, it can empower our own chosen path of practice. This is just something to consider while reading what follows.

Rumi and Metta, Showing the Path of Love, part II

If you play word association with the name Rumi, most likely people will come up with ‘poet’, and ‘Sufi’. To me though, he is above all a mystic – someone who has reached to the core of universal truth. Rumi belongs to all of us.

It’s hard for someone who doesn’t speak or read Persian to know just how Rumi communicates to those who can read him in his original language. As he’s come to us in English, his poetry is related to as ecstatic, illuminating, and inspiring.

From what we hear of his life story, Rumi was thoroughly grounded in his Muslim faith, and they provide the backdrop for the teachings of this remarkable person. There was a context to all he said and taught, that may have been completely familiar to his listeners, but that often gets lost in the translation.

Seldom do you hear people say of Rumi’s poetry there’s a clear outline of a spiritual path we can take, although it is there in his teachings.

Poetry and mysticism, by their nature resist organization, and that is their strength, but for someone looking for a clear path to follow for inner development, they may have to look elsewhere, to the source traditions, or to traditions nearer at hand.

The steps in metta, or the Buddhist loving kindness practice, for example, are very clearly marked out. Where these two traditions come together is that they both have universal love as their aim, with all the richness, joy and ability to live well in this world that brings to a person.

After having practiced metta for some time, and enjoying its benefits, and looking at Rumi now, I can see how there are elements in common to both teachings, and also that there are unique qualities in each.

Rumi can add to a metta practice his uplifting, celebratory spirit, and the path of metta practice can help to see clearly the way of love we share.

We can also embrace this greatest of spiritual poetry, and let it enhance and deepen our metta, as a gift for our whole life.

There are teachings woven throughout Rumi's poetry, and, after a time, you may find that you've been holding a map.

We are not who I thought we were

I never knew it could be this way
 only guessed
 only suspected
 only hoped

Love is self revealing: we have to walk that path to see for ourself

Enter love, and see with the hidden Eye

What we find

How love sees the world

*Every object and being in the universe
 is a jar overflowing
 with wisdom and beauty,
 a drop of the Tigris
 that cannot be contained by any skin.
 Every jarful spills
 and makes the earth more shining,
 as though covered in satin... ”*

*the heart's matrix
 is glutton with rubies*

*springs of laughter
 are buried in your breast...*

Friend, we're traveling together.

*Throw off your tiredness
and let me show you
one tiny spot of the beauty
that cannot be spoken.*

*A man sleeps heavily,
though something blazes in him like the sun,
like a magnificent fringe sewn up under the hem...*

*Human beings are mines.
World-power means nothing.
Only the unsayable,
jeweled inner life matters...*

We learn to see beauty, this life that we have now:

*There is another world inside this one - no words can describe it.
There is living, but no fear of death; There is Spring, but never a turn to
Autumn.*

*There are legends and stories
coming from the walls and ceilings.
Even the rocks and trees recite poetry.*

*Here, an owl becomes a peacock,
A wolf becomes a beautiful shepherd.
To change the scenery,
change your mood*

*Here all beings give birth to angels, and when they see me ascending to the
heavens,
every corpse springs back to life.*

*I have seen many kinds of trees growing from the Earth,
but who has ever seen the birth of paradise?
I have seen water,
but who has ever seen one drop of water give birth to a hundred warriors?
Who could ever imagine such a place? Such a heaven?
Such a Garden of Eden?...*

They have the practice of pure perception in Tibetan Buddhism, where they imagine the place where we are to be a paradise, and both ourselves and others as being Buddhas or divine in nature. This can de-condition the mundane view we hold of ourselves, of each other, and of this world we live in. It took me a while to realize that this is a practice of recognizing the way things already are.

Through metta, we arrive at this very same place, of seeing the beauty of ourselves and all others.

The significance of seeing beauty, if it has to be spoken, is that it brings joy, and that is essential; it brings care, and gratitude; it inspires generosity, and teaches us who we are.

I imagine that people who can't appreciate beauty live in a grey world, and what's worse, they exploit and abuse others, and desecrate this precious earth.

We don't know ourselves – and this is the problem; we don't know our family, or neighbor, or this earth – isn't this what all traditions teach? and don't they all show us ways to wake up, and to cherish one another? They diagnose the problem, saying what it is with different language, and they point us to its resolution.

Call it Buddhist, or Christian, Sufi or Taoist – all in their own way they are saying that we're sleeping, that we've forgotten who we are; that we're drunk with ignorance; the dynamic is that, tragically, we suffer and cause others to suffer, and that it need not be this way.

*When the earth is so broad,
why fall asleep in a prison?*

Whoever is not in love, is a danger to themselves and to others. Isn't it perfectly clear to us by now?

*Sometimes I forget completely
what companionship is.
Unconscious and insane,
I spill sad energy everywhere.*

*My story gets told in various ways:
A romance, a dirty joke,
a war, a vacancy.
Divide up my forgetfulness to any number,
it will go around.*

*These dark suggestions that I follow,
are they part of some plan?
Friends, be careful.
Don't come near me
out of curiosity, or sympathy.*

It is our suffering that blocks us from being able to respond to the needs of others, or worse, it's what causes us to harm them. Right here, within Buddhism, we can see how the Theravada and Mahayana need each other. The individual liberation teachings help us to accomplish our aims of benefitting both self and others.

Thirteen prophets, holders of true Teachings, embodiments of wisdom and grace and mercy, enter the city of Saaba. There they find that the people overfed, indifferent, jaded, and bored, and that nothing has any meaning for them. Isn't this, in more places than we could possibly count, just our America?

These teachers say to the people of Saaba:

*Bring your malaise,
your dullness,
your callous ingratitude...
for this is just what we cure*

And all teachers of metta can say this.

*Friend, our closeness is this:
Anywhere you put your foot, feel me
in the firmness underneath.*

With love, we learn courage; we learn that we have in us a great source of creative intelligence; we go past what we ever thought was possible.

*The power of Love came into me,
and I became fierce like a lion,
then tender like the evening star.*

Don't ask what love can make, or can do. Look at the colors of the world!

*I groped for excuses
but love came
excusing me*

*Don't try
to add up what's been given...
An uncountable grace has come to you*

We learn gratitude:

*The soul at dawn
is like darkened water
that slowly begins to say
Thank you, ... thank you...*

We live our lives nurtured and sustained by love. We might recognize this, but then have no idea of the potential we all carry for its development. In the metta teachings, we first find this genuine love, and then this becomes what we work with to increase it in our lives.

*There is a hidden love-center
in human beings that you will discover and savor
and nourish yourself with.
That will be your food.*

*Wait for the illuminating openness,
as though your chest were filling with Light,*

*Don't look for it outside yourself.
You are the source of milk.*

*Don't milk others!
There is a milk-fountain inside you.
Don't walk around with an empty bucket.*

*You have a channel into the Ocean,
and yet
you ask for water from a little pool.
Beg for that love-expansion.
Meditate only on that
expansion of love*

*In your light I learn how to love.
In your beauty, how to make poems.
You dance inside my chest,
where no one sees you,
but sometimes I do,
and that sight becomes this art*

Joseph Goldstein said in one of his teachings:

‘What motivates us to make this effort? It’s precisely the previous steps on the path. As we understand through Right View the interconnectedness of all things, and we cultivate themes of renunciation, the second step, and thoughts of love, and thoughts of compassion, then we’re moved to speak and act in such a way that minimizes harm, and is conducive to the welfare of beings.’

From love, we can see how every tradition has developed its guidelines for living. In Buddhism, we have mindfulness, the precepts and the bodhisattva vow, and these can all be seen as expressions of wisdom and of great love. This is how we can fulfill our deepest aspirations. Service can then take many forms, all of them noble and sublime.

*Let the beauty you love
be what you do.
There are a hundred ways
to kneel and kiss the ground.*

In Rumi, as in the teachings of Islam, they identify what gets in the way of living righteous lives and our expressing love purely, as the *nafs*, or the energies of the animal soul.

*The beast you ride is your various appetites.
Change your wantings.
When you prune weak branches,
the remaining fruit gets tastier.*

Hazrat Inayat Kahn identifies the *nafs* as ‘the false I’:

‘Rumi says your worst enemy is hiding within yourself, and that enemy is your *nafs* or false ego. It is very difficult to explain the meaning of this ‘false ego.’ The best I can do is to say that every inclination which springs from disregard of love, harmony, and beauty and which is concerned with oneself and unconcerned with all others is the false ego.’

Discipline serves our motivation. Here is Rumi on the need for it:

*The undisciplined person doesn't wrong himself alone—
but sets fire to the whole world.*

*Discipline enabled Heaven
to be filled with light;
discipline enabled the angels
to be immaculate and holy.*

*Little by little, wean yourself.
This is the gist of what I have to say.*

*If the brain and belly are burning clean
with fasting, every moment a new song comes out of the fire.
The fog clears,
and new energy
makes you run up the steps
in front of you.*

*There is nourishment like
bread that feeds one part of your life and nourishment like light for
another. There are many rules about restraint
with the former,
but only one rule for the latter,
Never be satisfied.
Eat and drink
the soul substance,
as a wick does with the oil it soaks in.
Give light to the company.*

*Be generous
to what nurtures the Spirit
and God's luminous reason-light.*

*There is one
righteousness: Water the fruit trees,
and don't water the thorns.*

The fruit trees in Buddhist teachings could be said to be noble ethics and the peace they bring; the development of quiescence, the calm continuity of awareness, and its attendant health; and the wisdom and compassion that support ourselves and all others in this world;

and the thorns, all our afflictive emotions, the strife and contention of the world;

When we do metta practice, we find in ourselves all the things that are not metta, not the best loving kindness we are capable of. *Love is a quality which wants nothing.* We must learn to tell the difference. If we stay with the gradual practice, we can lessen our selfishness, pettiness, arrogance, and laziness. Slowly, step by step, it is possible.

The Buddha taught ‘That which a person frequently thinks about and ponders upon - that will become the inclination of his mind.’

Rumi says:

Work on your stony qualities and become resplendent like the ruby.

Your stoniness will decrease, your ruby nature will grow.

The results of a true path are liberation and the most effective kind action on behalf of others. They say that only two things are necessary here, to grow in wisdom and compassion, and they are to begin, and to continue.

*The prophet has said each prostration of prayer
is a knock at heaven's door.
When anyone continues to knock
felicity shows its smiling face.*

We need passion and commitment to continue on the path. In Buddhism, this ardor is called 'chanda', or a powerful will and energy to accomplish what we set out to do.

*A strong intention can make
'two oceans wide'
the size of a blanket,
or 'seven hundred years'
the time it takes
to walk to someone you love.*

*Without love,
all worship is a burden,
all dancing is a chore,
all music is mere noise.*

*All the rain of heaven may fall into the sea -
but without love,
not one drop would become a pearl.*

*Gamble everything for love,
if you're a true human being.*

*Half-heartedness doesn't reach
into majesty.*

Here, to keep our passion on course, we need wisdom. The teachings on the balance of the faculties, of mindfulness, faith and wisdom, energy and calm have great value here. They tell us that there is this danger, if we're not careful, of going to extremes, which can lead to blind faith and fanaticism. However, when faith and zeal is balanced with discerning wisdom, and calm, we can continue developing fine qualities, without going off the main road.

Here is something I wish I had known 30 years ago: just alternating between suffering, and the passionate aspiration to be free, and the poetic expressions of our highest ideals, can keep a person on the surface. We also need to settle our mind in meditation, and develop calm and insight. This is necessary for freedom of mind, and to get the most out of our study. With meditation, we can clear away the obstacles to joy, and pacify and uproot the defilements. This is where the Buddhist teachings really shine.

In the Theravada there are the teachings on breath meditation, and on removing the hindrances, and in the Tibetan tradition there are the teachings on what they call calm abiding. These are what I've found to be the most helpful over the years.

In Buddhism, and in other world religions, including Islam, we are told that we are never alone in our work to improve ourselves. We have the support of teachers, guardians and protectors. This comes as comfort and encouragement when we need it most:

*When a real Guide is with us,
when we have been so blessed,
we need not struggle,
or doubt.*

*Stop swimming so hard,
and climb in the boat
with Noah.*

The Way is clear, for those who know how to follow the signs of inner progress

*When you do things from your soul, a river moves through you,
Freshness and a deep joy are the signs...*

It seems that Sufism and theistic traditions in general can feel removed from the concerns of the world at times, and this is where great compassion would have us change the emphasis.

'Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the Law of Christ', said Paul.

I like to think it was with wisdom and faith in our potential that the Buddha and Rumi left us the clear principles, of love, and the path, and then left it to each generation and culture to work out their implications.

*When someone asks what there is to do,
light the candle in his hand.*

Beyond the names and forms that divide, there is this universal truth: of belonging, and seeing all others as family. We need more mystics, of all varieties – those who have taken their paths to the point where the practice has done its job. Such a person is then naturally free of sectarianism, or uninformed religious prejudice. Clearly this is something we need more of today.

There are Islamic, Hindu, Christian, and Jewish mystics, but not many who are Buddhist. I think Zen hints at a mystic perspective, but then doesn't quite follow through. All this could be because the Buddhism of Tibet, China, Japan, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand has been the only religion in those countries. They were isolated from outside influences. A mystic is needed when there are different points of view to reconcile.

Paul:

In Christ there is no East or West

Rumi:

For those in love, Moslem, Christian, and Jew do not exist.

Metta loving kindness practice, and Rumi, both open a person to the best that is in us all, the universal ground. They both are most accessible to modern people, with all our diversity and needs. And while any true path, when it's fully received, has all that a person needs to develop into a complete human being, if we're skillful in bringing together the wisdom of more than one tradition, it can only enhance our practice.

May we all become complete through our chosen path, have peace and joy, and with great love, share the benefits of this with all the world.