

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. Using the Greek words, the first of these is *eros*, which he refers to as an esthetic, romantic love.

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.

The next kind of love Dr. King describes is *philia*, which 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 by speaking about agape. He says this is “*an 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*, which are *its length, its breadth, and its height*. *Its length*, as he describes it, refers to the concern for one’s own welfare.

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. If we have difficulty starting with ourselves, we can cultivate thoughts of well wishing for those who are most dear to us, and after some days or weeks or months, we will 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.

After the length of life comes *its breadth*, which refers to an outward concern for the welfare of others.

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 definitely 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, *its height*, which I would call the wisdom aspect. He sets

forward the idea that these three together are what we need to be complete as human beings.

The way I interpret this is that the other two aspects of life 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:

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.

He said: *"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."*

He said this in 1968. What would he say now, in 2013, when 50% of our national budget goes to military spending? when more educated people are aware of economic exploitation, and yet do nothing to change things?

It is 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.

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.

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, when he says that *“love has within it a redemptive power.. there is a power that eventually transforms individuals.*

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 through 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.

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.

Dr. King realized that love is visionary. It sees what the future can be, and works with confidence towards that end. This is the reason for the path of non-violence. He taught that

“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.”

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...'*

'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 to face down what he called "*the Goliath of injustice, the Goliath of neglect, the Goliath of refusing to deal with problems...*"

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