

A Buddhism for Radical Progressives - Inspiration for Activists

Preface

I thought to gather together the following essays after hearing a friend describe herself as 'a radical progressive'. There was a time when we wouldn't have needed to add the word e'radical' to progressive, but things have changed, and here we are. I thought about this last night, and realized this distinction is something a lot of us really do need to make. Among self proclaimed progressives, many just wear the title as a badge of honor, and quite a few people are only left-leaning in their political views, but then go no further with them.

In one of the articles that follow, I ask the question, where is the passion for social justice? It's this quality, I think, that makes a person a radical progressive. These are needful times, and so, to be a radical progressive is a response that's awake and optimistic as well. Most of all, it is a willingness to be fully engaged, in some form or another.

From what I can tell, there are two things that Buddhism can offer us now, and they are a world view, and methods that can help us achieve our aims as compassionate people. When these methods work for us, the result is that we have greater resources to bring to the work that we do. The impetus for these essays, then, is that I would like us all to take full advantage of what these traditions offer, and that there is such need.

I have a lot of writings from 2012-1013 to choose from, and some of these same pieces appear in other collections, but for now I simply want to thank my progressive friends for all the good work they do, and so I've put together these articles.

With gratitude,
and with all good wishes to you in all that you do,
your ally,

Jason Espada.
San Francisco,
December 28th, 2013

The Glory of the Good Fight

To join in what my father's generation called "the good fight" was to enter into the timeless struggle for human rights everywhere, with like-minded, courageous souls. It meant to stand with them, to march with them, to raise your voice with them, to fight along side them, and perhaps most of all to be inspired by their dedication and action, and to give your encouragement at every turn.

It means even now to set yourself apart from those who'd turn their backs on compelling causes, those who live only small lives of callous self interest, and with all our strength and to our last breath to work to see that no one is denied their rights or dignity, that no one is exploited or abused, excluded or forgotten.

In this time we need more and more dedicated souls willing to act on a vision of humans and life here that is noble, and that we have not yet realized. Isn't it clear with all the extraordinary waste and shallow, narcissistic self-indulgence in American culture, that to become a mature human being is just this – to take responsibility for each other, however far we can reach? In other times we may not get to see this value so keenly, but in these times especially, a compassionate life is like water in the desert or light when all else is an impenetrable pitch of night. Against this sad and confused backdrop, the tremendous value of such an aim couldn't be more clear.

We may not make a living as activists, or become famous, but we are all called to do our part here, and there is noble worth inherent in that, something no one can take from us.

We're all seeking meaning with our lives, even if we don't put it in those words, and we won't feel fulfilled and satisfied until we find it.

The way is well marked for those who would take it. A few steps in, and we enter this mighty stream with our greater family in this land and generation, and in other places and times;

(Sing the names, oh sing the names) We join with Aung San Su Kyi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Cesar Chavez, Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, Vandana Shiva, Arundati Roy, Frederick Douglass, Mahatma Ghandi, Albert Schweitzer, W. Eugene Smith, Thich Nhat Hanh, Oscar Romero, Rigoberta Menchu, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Paul Robeson, Ida B. Wells, A. Phillip Randolph, Deitrich Bonhoffer, Desmond Tutu, Malala Yousafzai, and countless others;

we become larger, and we receive renewed strength and vision. We go from time to the timeless, from evanescence to what has eternal value.

In memory of my father, the photographer, educator and human rights activist Frank Espada, August 7th, 2014.

Contents

Introduction

Prologue – The Glory of the Good Fight

1. A life giving vision

2. Bridging the divide between politics and spirit

3. Two Selections from Living in Beauty – A Collection of Essays on Metta for Our Times:

From *Metta as the most useful method of meditation for people in the West today*, and,

From *The Great Bridge to Universal Love*

4. Having to believe

5. Systemic change and single issue politics

6. The extent of the change that is needed

7. To embrace collective action

8. Freedom of Mind – the Root of the Social Gospel

9. The challenge of having more than we need

10. Escape and Escapism

11. What precedes empathy

12. Two ways we can condition the mind
13. What comes first
13. Joy in Buddhist Practice
14. On nourishing ourselves with joy
15. The Empowerment of Compassion
16. Our roots go deeper than we know – a reflection on the power of gratitude
17. I Become We – A Confluence of Rivers
18. To be an American Buddhist - The American Ground
19. Dis-engaged Buddhism?
20. 'Come hell or high water' – A Mahayana take on the Fourth Immeasurable
21. The Metta of Martin Luther King
22. Power and Love – A Buddhist perspective
23. An Awakened Heart
24. The thought of enlightenment
25. The Bodhisattva Vow
26. The Bodhisattva Thought Training Teachings
27. A Practice that Thrives in Difficulty

28. From A deeper response

Two Essays on Retreat

29. There's a reason people go on retreat

30. There's a reason people do long retreats

From A Belief in the Miraculous - Buddhism, Magic, and a Sense of the Sacred

31. Sacred outlook - Seeing beyond ordinary perception in modern culture, and American Buddhism

32. On Mysticism

Political Essays

33. Getting on the same page when it comes to American history

34. How will we hold our collective past?

35. Hope and Betrayal in the Age of Obama

36. The New Extreme of the American Left

37. Was anyone thrown out?

38. A different response to war

39. How to end war

From Ending Racism :

40. On the need for a spiritual perspective when healing racism

42. Racism in 2017 - Looking Forward

43. Spread the Word - the Answer is Love

44. On the Election of 2016

45. How things change

46. Twenty-three sixteen - a letter to the future

47. Touch the Present, Heal the Past, Create the Future

About the Author

Also by Jason Espada

About Great Circle Publications

The Metta of Martin Luther King

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 ourselves to the truth the great religions teach.

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.