

About Where Joy Can Be Found

Joy is essential for each of our flourishing, and joy is available. This is what I'd like people to know.

We may think of joy as a luxury, as something we can get only when we're finished with our day to day tasks, or after achieving some goal. The reality is that we need this quality that enlivens all throughout our life, if we're going to bring out the best we have in us.

Some would object that there's too much strife and trouble to have any happiness, and that with so much going on in our world, it's self centered and egotistical to pursue such low aim. But these goals we set for ourselves need to be sustained, and the beauty and righteousness that adorns our world is here to help us, and is necessary along the way.

Joy is the food of the bodhisattvas, those who are dedicated to helping others with wisdom and compassion.

There are an abundance of resources available, and in these pages I try to point to where we can look for that vital nourishment.

We lose the way if we're without joy for too long. The world darkens, our own senses begin to shut down. At times like that, even a little happiness can be hard to come by, but that small beginning can open the way again to seeing and receiving the gifts this life has to offer.

These are selections from *Living in Beauty*, *A Buddhism for Radical Progressives*, and *A Belief in the Miraculous*, together with fifteen original essays for this volume.

Jason Espada
San Francisco,
December 10, 2017

Introduction II

I've gathered the following essays together for my friends and fellow travelers, because of the importance of joy in all our lives. One way or another, this is something we need for our health and strength, and to flourish in this world.

These writings are mostly taken from a larger manuscript I've been working on the last couple of years, but I realize that they stand on their own as well, and so I offer this, as it is.

My thought is simply that, with so many great things in this life that are worth celebrating, there is no need for any of us to feel we are lacking in resources for our happiness. If we apply ourselves even a little bit, the treasure-house opens, and we can use it any way we want.

May we all find our way to health, strength, and peace.

Jason Espada
San Francisco,
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Liberation through the perception of the beautiful

I heard a phrase in a talk by Ajaan Passanno – ‘liberation through the perception of the beautiful’ that I had never heard before. I had a chance later that same year to ask him about it, and he pulled out his Pali reference book, and was able to identify it for me.

We talked a bit about what is meant by this in Theravada Buddhism, and as I understood it, there is such a thing as a temporary liberation, that can then be a stepping stone to getting free in more lasting ways. I was glad to hear it.

This confirmed something for me, as I’ve been involved with the arts – writing and music – for most of my life, and I’ve always felt that Art has a spiritual value, but I’ve almost never heard it talked about in spiritual traditions, and especially not in the Buddhist traditions I’d been studying.

The idea of a temporary liberation, one that can be used as a stepping stone to greater peace, well being and happiness is so useful as well, and so apparent, to anyone who gives it some thought.

This is something we do unconsciously, or semi-consciously all the time. We go for a walk, or put on the tv, or read, listen to music, or look online for something to take our mind off things, and, at their best, these can refresh us, and re-ignite our joy at being alive.

I think this teaching is significant because if we add to these kinds of activities the thought of their being a temporary liberation, and a support for our then being able to take our spiritual practice further, we’ll really be taking full advantage of our lives and abundant resources.

If instead we don't see them this way, we may be like the person trying to cross a stream, who goes only so far, and then goes back, again and again and again.... endlessly...

We all have such richness here on this earth, at this time, in the arts, in our spiritual and political heritage, in the natural world, and in each other. There is so much to celebrate.

I remember when I lived for several months in the South West, here in the States. My first impression of the desert of California, New Mexico and Arizona was that there were few colors to the natural scenery, the mountains and vistas. After a few months though, my perceptions began to adjust to my new environment, and, much to my astonishment I started to see more of the spectrum of colors that was everywhere around me. It was magnificent! That experience stays with me to this day.

I think it's exactly this way with the arts as well. Listening, or looking, over time, we actually hear and see more, and are nourished by what we hear and see. We need only open our heart to beauty, and have this experience of feeling something new and wonderful, and it's as though we have found a key to living well in this world.

If you want to know just how much a person can be nourished by art, ask a musician, or a writer, dancer, painter or photographer, or become a lover of the arts, and of life.

It's my hope that we take advantage of the gifts that are here, the endless beauty, to free ourselves from such things as discontent, dullness, or feelings of lack. I hope further that we use the freedoms given to us by experiencing beauty to then take it further, and reach more lasting peace, happiness and fulfillment.

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, and
 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 gluttoned 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.*

Hazarat 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 though 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.

{Translations of Rumi's verse courtesy of Coleman Barks, and Jonathan Star.}