

## *A Buddhism for Progressives*

### *Preface - Two Traditions*

As the son of an activist, I learned when I was young about the need to care for others. It was part of our upbringing to talk about and to think about what was going on in our world with compassion and with a sense of responsibility. Like many other young people who were raised in the 60's, we received from our parents and from previous generations this precious legacy of the creative struggle for human rights, dignity, and social justice.

I have no doubt that we need this kind of outlook in today's world, with all its strife and division. Now more than ever, we need to learn from our history, and to keep connected to the inspiring, exemplary lives of those who came before us. Doing so, we renew our own strength and our sense of purpose, to continue the work.

In one of the articles that follow, I ask the question, where is the passion for social justice these days? It's this quality, I think, that makes a person a progressive. These are such needful times, and so, to be a progressive now 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.

I learned a bit later in life that just by virtue of being born in this world at this time, we are also heirs to wisdom traditions. For me, Buddhism in particular stands out as having deep insight into the causes of suffering, and the remedy. It is a Wisdom tradition that marks the way to sanity, wholeness, and peace.

I also came to feel that these two - the social justice and the spiritual traditions need aspects of each other to be complete. Their insights should not be kept separate.

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.

Each in our own way,  
May we continue the work of our loving and powerful ancestors,  
and speak and write and act to create the beloved community,  
for this and future generations.

With gratitude for friends and allies everywhere,

Jason Espada.  
San Francisco,  
March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018

## 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 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014.*

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## 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.