A Buddhism for Progressives

Inspiration for Activists

by Jason Espada

A Buddhism for Progressives

Inspiration for Activists

©2017 Jason Espada

All rights reserved

Great Circle Publications

ISBN # 978-1-948589-24-6

First Edition, March, 2018

For information contact: jasonespada.com

The gospel of light is the crossroads –
of indolence, or action.

From What I have learned so far, by Mary Oliver

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 it's 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 10th, 2018

Prologue - 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 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.

Table of Contents

Introduction page 1

Prologue – The Glory of the Good Fight 3

1. A Life Giving Vision 9

2. Bridging the Divide Between Politics and Spirit 14

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* 19

4. Having to Believe 22

5. Systemic Change and Single Issue Politics 24

6. The Extent of the Change That is Needed 27

7. To Embrace Collective Action 31

8. Freedom of Mind – the Root of the Social Gospel 34

9. The Inner and Outer work 41

10. What Precedes Empathy 46

11. Two Ways We Can Condition the Mind 49

12. The Empowerment of Compassion 51

13. Our Roots Go Deeper Than We Know – A Reflection on the Power of Gratitude 53

14. I Become We – A Confluence of Rivers 58

15. To be an American Buddhist - The American Ground 61

16. Dis-engaged Buddhism? 65

17. 'Come Hell or High Water' – A Mahayana Take on the Fourth Immeasurable 69

18. The Metta of Martin Luther King 72

19. Power and Love – A Buddhist perspective 88

20. The Thought of Enlightenment 94

21. The Bodhisattva Vow 99

22. Introduction, and A Practice that Thrives in Difficulty 105

23. From A Deeper Response 113

Two Essays on Retreat

24. There's A Reason People Go on Retreat 114

25. There's A Reason People Do Long Retreats 117

Political Essays

26. Getting on the Same Page When it Comes to American History 121

27. How Will We Hold Our Collective Past? 128

28. Hope and Betrayal in the Age of Obama 132

29. The New Extreme of the American Left 137

30. Was anyone thrown out? 142

31. A different response to war 145

32. How to end war 153

From Ending Racism :

33. On the need for a spiritual perspective when healing racism 155

34. Racism in 2017 - Looking Forward 161

35. Spread the Word - the Answer is Love 165

36. On the Election of 2016 169

37. How things change 174

38. Twenty-Three Sixteen - A Letter to the Future 179

39. Touch the Present, Heal the Past, Create the Future 186

Resources 193

About the Author 197

Also by Jason Espada 198

About Great Circle Publications 201

A Life Giving Vision

"The way we're operating right now as Americans and as a global society is unsustainable ecologically and for more and more of humanity. How do we make the system(ic) changes needed so that human and organizational creativity naturally lead toward sustainable and restorative practices instead of destructive ones?

"What can ordinary citizens do?

"Our economic system, our government, all these things we think of as fixed, are social constructs — These are stories we've created, and we can revise the story." - Jennifer Atlee

With fewer people controlling more wealth and power, whole economies changing, and our natural world increasingly threatened, we are not without resources. We have technologies, intelligence, and much more at stake to stir our conscience and inspire us to collective action.

At this time, what we need most of all, is a new way of thinking, about ourselves, about each other, and this world we share.

'and let us consider together,
studying how we may stir up love,
and helpful deeds, and noble activities..'
- Hebrews 10:24

I pay homage to great compassion

I.

We have it in us to conceive of a just world, where people are fed, have housing, and health care, and access to education; we are able to hold the ideal of ourselves as stewards our natural world, and to keep it, flourishing for the enjoyment of future generations; we can envision a day when the rich and the powerful don't control and manipulate the rest of us; we can

see and believe in the possibility of a world that works for all of us.

II.

That these ideas may sound strange, or hard to even bring to mind testifies to the difficult challenges we live with today. From a purchased political class and the embedded media, to the concentration of wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people; from a failed economic model, to religions that are ineffectual or disengaged; from a self indulgent educated class, to the shallow narcissism of our consumer culture;

I heard one person talk about our family and communal relationships in these times, not just as our having become isolated from each other, and our groups fragmented, but 'atomized' – it's reached that much of an extreme. And as we look around, most of what we see now is that people are disconnected, distracted, overwhelmed, or indifferent. And in all of this, maybe the biggest problem we can see, is the widespread belief people have, of their being powerless.

Once we reach that condition, all we ever hoped for gets set aside, and living then becomes just a struggle to survive – so far from what we once hoped for, so far from what we can be, and far from the fullness of life we're made to live. Yet it's just in times such as these that we need to remember who we are, and the best of what we are capable of as human beings.

III.

We've all heard utopian visions before, and of course, the snarling skeptic jumps up and says – 'what's different now, that makes any positive world view something other than an escapist fantasy? – look at what human beings are! – little better than animals, with the means to exploit each other and wreck the planet!' Voices such as these are everywhere. We may not think of it in these terms, but what we think we're

capable of together is what shapes our personal and collective action. If we think we're not much more than animals, we'll lower ourselves to that idea.

Instead, we have to look up. There are inspiring lives we can emulate. There are visions that awaken a renewed sense of possibility. There are methods we can use to realize our deeper aspirations.

I have enough of the skeptic in me to be critical – I'm aware of how dis-jointed things can seem, how unconcerned and in their own worlds people can be, and what a low opinion of themselves and our world they hold. In spite of this, I have reason to be optimistic. I know something of how we can contract down to such low views, and how they can be overcome. I know how we can be lifted up to what is both true and beautiful. I'm also well aware that it's not enough to say, 'the human spirit has great potential' – that would be like saying, 'the view from the mountain is inspiring'. Better that you see this for yourself, and I suggest some ways, in the essays in this collection that you can do this.

IV.

A few things are new about the times we live in, that defy comparison with other times:

- With each passing year, corporate controlled globalized economics shows more of its ruthless, inhumane nature; it 'works' for fewer and fewer of us – fixated as it is on short term profit over every other human value. This is a something that has to be stopped if we are to survive and thrive; remember that there are more of us than there are of them, which means more of the human resources of creativity, and of love; remember also that even such ideas as 'fair trade' are new in our vocabulary. Imagine how much more effective this value

will be, in fifty or a hundred years, if it continues to develop in the public consciousness.}

- The political class also shows itself to be more and more corrupt, the lap dogs of the rich – but, the way I'm thinking about it now, this is can become a good thing when it's brought to light. Change happens when it becomes obvious to enough people that politicians don't represent them, and in fact are working against their interests;

- And the third new phenomena that has to be highlighted is the technology we now have to communicate with each other. It seems that almost overnight, we've taken an inconceivable quantum leap in our ability to learn about, and to share our riches with one another. This has got to make anyone who thinks about it both startled and inspired by the new possibilities. In every way, in our lives here together in these times, there is more for us to gain or to lose, and how we will manage depends in large part in our having a vision of the future we can move towards courageously.

V.

In the past, we turned to religions for meaning and direction. That institutions don't work for many people these days is undeniable – but we have the same needs as always. We have to find new ways to affirm our deepest human values.

'What is your life giving vision?'

I like the idea of there being multiple ideals, and of our supporting and encouraging each other to come up with values that express the best we have in us. I can imagine people asking each other, 'What is your vision?'

Looking back on the social movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, ideals have never been made into actuality in a single generation, but have usually taken three or four

generations to bear fruit. I'm thinking of the suffragist, abolitionist, labor, and civil rights movements. These all started with people having the thought, not only that we could change, but that we *should*, and they lived and held onto those values.

Sometimes we don't dream big enough, so we need these examples of the past that teach us to hold a great vision. Just trying to change one policy, or one small corner of our shared world, many times, doesn't go far enough. We aim too low, and then, even if we get what we want, it doesn't satisfy. Start with a great vision, however, like setting our sights on a far destination, and all those smaller goals are included in that. We may even surprise ourselves, and go farther than we imagined was possible. Such things have been known to happen.

The problems we face – of corporate criminality, a political class in collusion with them, inequity and transgressions against human rights - probably won't be overcome in our lifetimes. In all likelihood, they will take generations to right. That's not entirely up us – but what we can and should do is to hold our ideals clearly in our mind, to lift up the principle, and to preserve and spread it, pass it on in letters, and to speak it from the rooftops. This much we can do.

As the poet Kenneth Patchen wrote,

'If a poem can be headed into it's proper current,
someone will take it to heart,
to the beauty and uplift of everyone'.

Bridging the Divide Between Politics and Spirituality

It took a Sufi poet to put into words for me what I had been feeling for some time, about the limitations, or dysfunction of religions in America. It was about seven years ago that I read this verse by Unis Emrie:

Unless you can see the whole world
in a single glance,
anything you do is wrong,
even with all your religion

I knew he wasn't criticizing all of religion, just how it was being practiced in his time and culture.

I grew up on the East Coast in the 1960's. Though I was too young to understand very much of what was going on at the time, I do remember being taken to meetings, being told about the 'boycott grapes' campaign, in support of the United Farm Workers, and wearing my 'Give a damn' button to school – courtesy of the New York Urban Coalition, of which my father was a part.

When I moved to San Francisco as a teenager in 1979, I brought with me an interest in both progressive politics and Eastern philosophy. At that time, the street protests were against the support of the dictatorships in Central America. The Reagan era was starting, and the political right wing was just beginning its decades-long take over of power. The Bay Area was also then something of a Mecca for all manner of spiritual groups.

Having had a social conscience instilled in me, I took that with me everywhere I went, and so it wasn't long before I could see the disconnect between what religious groups and spiritual people claim to be (and are at their best) and how they live.

The activist in me felt that, at their worst, religions, or psychology, or yogas were just making people accommodated to a dysfunctional social system, where indifference to suffering, inequalities and injustice are the norm. To this day, I still feel something of this is happening.

We can become too comfortable, lulled into a false security and 'spirituality', by keeping a barrier between ourselves and from the real needs that anyone can witness, in any city in this country.

Methods, and community have their place, but too often there is not this element of an active social conscience that should be there. In addition, by complicity with the standing social order, or in more direct ways, institutions can also be seen as the source of problems, as for example, not criticizing corporations, or political corruption, or a president who is about to go to war on a people, and so the verse I mentioned earlier, about 'seeing the whole world in a single glance', has had a special meaning for me.

We do need something in our churches and temples, and hearts, of the spirit of liberation theology – taking the side of the majority, and of the poor and exploited. As they express it, religion should 'comfort the afflicted, and afflict - as in stir the conscience of - the comfortable', otherwise there's the risk that we're only adjusting ourselves to what no one of us should accept.

On the other side of the spectrum of socially engagement, are lives of quiet integrity, that are removed from the tussle of protest and activism. I know there are people helping others in their own way, living exemplary lives. I'm thinking here of nuns or teachers we seldom hear about, except in the back stories of people who then go on to do great things in their communities.

A few years ago I didn't know quite how to integrate the two – the individual spiritual life and the life of wider social action. They seemed most of the time to be two different worlds. I found also that I was often critical of those who were simply doing their best with what they have, in their own sphere, using whatever methods they could take up to make their lives, and the lives of those around them a little easier.

Having had a chance to think about these things, having more sympathy now for the struggles people go through, the stresses of living in a city, and wanting to somehow live a useful life, and having had good teachers, I can say now that I'm at peace with the vision I've found.

There's a dynamic element to religions, and to people's lives when they have a depth and wisdom to them, and I honor that, everywhere I see it at work.

I also see now that there's a place for personal development, and of taking care of ourselves that is not removed from the larger world, if only we knew that. The verse from Unis Emry, then, for me became something I needed to value, and then also to add to, to take another step. So I wrote:

You don't need to be thinking about
the whole world, all the time -
if your religion is true,
it serves a greater purpose

Rumi said:

Shams chose to live down in the roots
and now he soars
as your sublimely articulating love

I have to express deep gratitude here as well for the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. His take on things, as I understand it, is based on an integrated sense of non-duality, such that we need

never feel that this step that is right in front of us is somehow removed from the rest of our lives. At the same time, we have a natural born responsibility to one another. As I heard Mother Teresa quoted as saying, 'The problem is that we've forgotten that we belong to each other'. That covers everything that's essential right there.

Seen in their true light, traditions and teachings help us all to live this life that has universal value. By this I mean, anywhere you place it, some benefit will come from a person grounded in a life of the spirit.

Now, this goes beyond any one way of saying things. This might be a surprise, but it shouldn't be. That there's a universal truth in our religions doesn't have to be seen as a threat – far from it – on the contrary, it affirms the best that's in us all.

In America these days, with good reason, a lot more people feel comfortable defining themselves as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious'. Aah, intolerance… A lot of what religion has become gives religion a bad name. Divorced from reality, dogmatic and narrow minded – we all know the justified stereotypes too well.

Unfortunately, many people then go a step further and reject all religion and spiritual teachers, who are usually associated with one tradition or another. This is a great loss, because traditions, for all their faults, are also the repositories of knowledge, methods of developing ourselves, and the wisdom of our ancestors. To leave them off completely is both foolish, and a cause of needless suffering.

It's not hard to identify the principles that are found in all the main traditions, those of compassion, and altruism, and the need for humility and gratitude. And yet, generation by generation we have to speak these truths again, so that they're heard afresh, and received into our lives.

Whether we want it or not, we also have to make sense of the right and wrong of what's come before us – we've inherited this world – I call it 'the house we are born into'. We may live trying to ignore the history of our county, or culture, or religion, but it's there with us when we wake up. It forms the context for our lives.

When I'm at my most clear about these things, life's a joy – there's a purpose to it.

My thought is that we need three things: a vital sense of a life giving vision, understanding both our history, the times we are in now, and our potential at its best; a way of understanding, and talking about this with one another; and methods to create the world we wish for ourselves and one another, for our whole family.

It's necessary to speak of this last part – that of having methods that work for us, to free us from confusion and limitations, so that our ideals can move from theory to practical action, and can bring results. Without methods, all our plans and projects, worthy as they may be, will still need a way to be realized.

May all benefit.
May we all receive and make full use
of teachings that work for us,
and may all our lives become
a celebration of this love that we share

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*

I have one more reason why I'm looking at metta, loving kindness practice, as having the greatest value for us today, and it's because *it is the teaching and practice of what has true human value*. This is the complete opposite of the materialism and self centered indulgence, narcissism, pettiness, avarice and aggression that are so common these days.

Metta is just the method we need when we meet fear and mistrust, self-denigration, and the denial of the worth and rights of others. Metta can actually heal us, and our world, and for this reason, in times of despair, it offers hope.

From *The Great Bridge to Universal Love*

There are many ways we can extend love towards the larger group of those we don't know personally. Thinking of others can start out as a concept, but it's important that it doesn't remain there.

So that it doesn't become a vague abstraction, we can always aim to learn about and become more familiar with how others are living. Organizations like Kiva can be a big help here. They facilitate micro-loans, via the internet, to people in Third World countries. There are short biographies, and pictures to help us get a more grounded sense of who's out there; or we could take up the cause of animal rights, basing the extension of our care on what we feel for the lives of the animals we do know and see.

We may say that the lives of those without health care in our country are not our business, *but we can make it our business;* or that the way people live in the slums of Rio, or in Kenya, or in America is none of our business, *but we can make it our business;* We may think it's beyond us to be concerned with the availability of basic medicines in the Third World, *but we can, in fact, choose to make it our business;*

We might think that Monsanto introducing untested, genetically modified food into the market, without letting people know is not our business, *but we can make it our business;* We may not pay attention to the economies and environment in China, India, and Latin America, and how the people's lives in those places are effected, *but we can make it our business* to know and find ways to respond to it…

I know some people are bound to object here and say it's all too much, and that there are too many needs in our world to give time and attention to them all, and they do have a point. What we can do though is to take care of ourselves well, and then to identify a few causes where we feel we can make a difference, and do what we can right there. It's important though that we don't shut out the rest of it from the overall way we see our lives. We should learn as much as we can about this whole world of living beings that we share, and then try to be responsible human beings.

One of the precepts of Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing says, 'do not close your eyes before suffering', and *of course, this isn't comfortable*, but our humanity calls us to it. If we can live with this awareness, although we won't be able to solve every problem right away, in time we might be able to find a way to make a difference. Now isn't that something?

These are all ways we can extend metta in the category of those we don't personally know. I'm sure we can all think of other ways, if we spend some time with it. In each case, we can

ask, What would love have me do here? or, How would I respond if this were happening to those I know and care about? This is what actually makes the bridge, to all-inclusive love.

We *can* make others' concerns our own, and their joys and sorrows something we register, and respond to, and when we do this we find that our metta has grown by that much.

To aim to go in the direction of really having love for all is truly a most noble aspiration, and the great advantage of the method of metta practice is that it shows how we can actually accomplish this. Now, how amazing is that? Once we know the metta teachings, the way is open for those of us who want to take it.

Having to believe

One of the teachings that I remember from the books of Carlos Casteneda, after 30 years, is called Having to believe. The story that illustrated that principle went like this: Carlos was taking two cats to be put down, and as he approached the vet, one of them leaped out of his arms and dashed down into a sewer drain. Don Juan said that action perfectly illustrated how essential it is sometimes to believe. He said, for all the cat knew he'd drown down there, or be eaten, but that he *had to believe* he'd survive, or he would have been paralyzed with fear, and would have gone to his certain death.

These days, I think more and more that we have to believe we will survive as a species, that we will find a way to get out of the horrible messes we're in globally, that we won't off ourselves, slowly or all at once.

We have to believe we'll find a way to not ruin our only home, the one our lives and the lives of future generations are dependent on;

that we'll wake up to the rate of species extinction and climate change;

we have to believe that although there now exist weapons of tremendous destructive power, they will never be used, that we will find a way to decommission them and collectively prevent them from being produced again;

we have to believe we can end the epidemic of gun violence;

we have to believe we can uproot the injustice and inequality that pervades social systems;

we have to believe humans can shed narrow self interest as the driving force for their whole lives,

that we can have societies that work for people everywhere.

I know some people will complain when they hear utopian ideas, saying it's unrealistic, saying it's too late, saying they

have enough to worry about, but I'll ask you now, look into the eyes of your children and tell me what you see, and what you feel.

This love that is in us needs us to look at our beloveds and awaken. We have to believe we can survive and thrive, or else we'll be paralyzed into not acting. We'll simply seek to numb out or to escape in one way or another. We have to believe we can pass along this beautiful world with all its treasures to the coming generation, and to their children.

I remember once when I was young, my sister and I were frightened by a neighborhood woman, and we went home crying. My mother, who has never been more than 5 foot 5, saw us and heard what we said, and in my mind's eye, she became a mother lion with her back up and her teeth bared. She took us by the hands and went out looking for that woman with a ferocity I've never seen before. Her immense love and protective instinct was white hot, and you can believe after that day that bully never came anywhere near us again.

We need exactly this kind of passion now. We need to leave our homes with no trace of fear at all, and face down the monsters that threaten our children, face them all down so that they never come near us again.

Systemic Change and Single Issue Politics

There are two ways we can work to change the urgent problems of our times, such as this country's militarism and drone warfare, violations of the constitution and international law, its environmental degradation, homelessness, or the exploitation of labor here and abroad: we can work to remedy a single issue, or we can aim to change the systemic causes to these same issues. We need both of these aspects for our activism to be effective, and to result in substantial and lasting transformation.

If we leave out single issue politics, and knowing our history and the current state of the individual crises and challenges we face, it's all too easy to slip in to an abstract disengagement with the real world. We may talk about changing the system but have we examined our own life? Do we at least aim to work out the inconsistencies between our ideals and our actions? How do we treat our family and neighbor, or the person looking for something to eat in our own neighborhood? Do we even see them?

On the other hand, leaving out a knowledge of larger political and social systems, we run the risk of not getting to the root of these problems. It may not matter if we lobby some politician to pass a single law. If that person is corrupt, they need to be replaced. And if the voting process or lawmaking itself has been hijacked, then it doesn't matter who we vote for – the whole process is rigged and needs to be overhauled.

We can waste precious time and resources if we don't know this, and instead play right into the hands of those who control elections and much of our collective life. When problems have a common root, we're being deceived as long as we think real change comes from anything less than working from the ground up, from that fundamental level.

Done right, the awareness of single issues, such as the under funding of our schools, the availability of health care and affordable housing, or political corruption and corporate control of the media, can deepen our commitment to changing the values and supporting systems all these come from. At the same time, stepping back, and taking the overview, we can more clearly see the pervasive effects of one class's rapacious greed, backed by militarism and implemented with sophisticated psy-ops, also known as public relations and advertising. This will bring us closer to those particular people and groups everywhere who are being effected by the current ignorant, rich and powerful minority.

One fine example of a progressive who strives to make such connections between events and their larger context is the journalist Abby Martin, on the show 'Breaking the Set'. This can be found on RT television, and archived on youtube. The topics range from the Orwellian 'National Defense Authorization Act', to our war criminal president; from the exclusion of third party candidates, to the corporate takeover of the media, and much more.

My list of recommended journalists, historians and documentary films can be found in Appendix One.

How we can make our way to a more just and compassionate world

If we are committed, and bring our resources of creative intelligence and love to any of the manifold problems we face, I know we can make real progress. It may not happen as quickly as we would want, but, as my father taught me, commitment is an irresistible force. It means we are in it for as long as it takes, no matter how hard it is, not matter what it costs.

One more piece, for completeness' sake

We may think it's enough to have a social conscience, and the big picture, and in fact, most activists stop there. The question is whether the view we're basing our activism on goes far enough. Contemplative traditions would say no – that we need to add one more piece to achieve our aims. What they are saying across generations is that the root cause of our many problems and challenges lies in the heart, in the soul and consciousness of people. If this isn't changed, then any political or social system will get corrupted. It's greed, hatred, and ignorance that are our real enemies. Our view needs to have both breadth, and insight into causes.

But don't take my word for this. See for yourself, and see if you find, as I have, that the heart of the matter is whether we will wake up to our own depth and beauty, to that of our neighbor and the natural world. If we do this, and encourage others to do this over generations, then we'll really have deserved the name of 'radical' – a person who goes to the root cause and works from there.

The Extent of the Change That is Needed

People of good will and social conscience are the hope of this world. They distinguish themselves from those who are self centered and immature, or unaware or unconcerned with what's going on around them, as well as larger issues of the state and natural world. I question however whether our activism goes far enough. There are some issues, such as the fight for a living wage, or to put an end to militarism, or gun violence, or to protect our environment that need to be looked at in their larger context in order to create the changes we seek. If we don't go far enough with our vision, we will waste precious time and resources, and our aims will not ultimately meet with success.

What I would like to propose is that each of our single issues – whether they be homelessness and hunger, universal health care, or an end to the bombing of innocents – all need to be addressed in both their breadth and their depth in order for substantial change to come about.

To illustrate what I mean by the breadth of a problem that impacts us all – take for one example the near total takeover of our food supply by a few corporate interests: if we don't address the political corruption that accompanies all the excessive, undemocratic control of our public life, we will be wasting our efforts trying to merely label GMOs, or proposing laws that insure that industrial meat and poultry is safe to eat. The fix is in, and it goes all the way up the Supreme Court.

A second example of the breadth of a challenge in our public life, that is still close in our political memory would be the charade of debates on providing all citizens here with decent health care that, from the outset, took single payer off the table, despite overwhelming public support. As before, what we have now in 2014 is a still an ever increasing corporate

profit system, with the added element that the insurance and pharmaceutical industries are now embedded more firmly than ever in mandated government policy.

One more example of how and why we need to think as broadly as possible is in considering how we are going to care for our environment, and what kind of world we are going to leave our children and future generations. Only rarely do we hear our climate and natural resources spoken of in light of the pollution and desecration of the earth in developing countries, and in the Third World. China has a billion people, as does India; African and Latin American countries also have vast populations, and where there are lax or non existent environmental laws, we are all effected, in every country, as we share one planet. Hard as it may be do to, we have to take into account how these nations are treating our one home. We have a responsibility to one another here. In the widest sense, these are the commons.

I take these examples simply to reference a larger principle at work throughout our culture and world, and that is that each of the immediate circumstances of our lives and struggles, for adequate food, housing, a livable environment, health care and education, are linked to larger forces at work. If we want to assure our safety and improve our lives and those of our children and neighbors, we need to see as broadly as possible the context in which we live, and to identify what supports and what opposes the improvements we seek.

Humanitarians, social philosophers, progressives and visionaries all have this much in common: they know our history, and to them, the agendas of corporations, politicians and lobbyists are plain and unambiguous. Most radicals go only that far, but I would like to propose here that a second step is needed, if we are to achieve our aims for a just world, where all of us can flourish in peace and safety. In addition to

seeing the full breadth of contemporary issues, we also need to address them in their depth.

Everything we see in this world comes from people's motivations. If the people are basically wise and righteous, we get all that's praiseworthy – from schools and hospitals to social movements for human rights. On the other hand, if people are corrupt – lazy or indifferent, greedy and violent, then this world is turned more and more into a hell realm. Isn't it so?

If we were to somehow accomplish every single external change, but leave human beings more or less the way they are now, self centered, narrow, provincial, and cruel, we'd soon be right back to where we are now, or worse. Everything we see manifested in the outside world comes from the soul of man.

Make no mistake about it, changing people's hearts is by far the greater work. The Buddha is quoted as saying in the Dhammapada that, *One man defeats a thousand in battle, and another conquers himself – and I consider the second the greater victory*. We can call this spiritual or religious or psychological, and that doesn't matter. It also doesn't matter what path we take to get there and what methods we then teach, as long as they are effective, liberating and enlightening.

And so here we are. This is the extent of the multi-generational change that is needed, in both it's breadth and it's depth. This is what we should be teaching our children, now. For me, this is the kind of thinking that holds all the pieces in place, and gives our lives meaning and purpose. I know it can seem overwhelming at times to think on big subjects, and to try to take a macro view, but it can be uplifting as well, and that's what we need to remember when things are looking impossible.

At one point I thought that the great challenges of the 21st century are just to address twin evils of the oppressive

influence of corporations - worldwide - on our collective life, and the current endemic political corruption. I would now add that what we need is also a collective awakening of true human values. This is both possible, and necessary.

I do not underestimate what human beings can do, when they see that it has meaning. I'm continually inspired by the social movements of the past, by the immutable edge, the undying flame, the righteous march. Great men and women have come before us, known and less known, and when I remember that, I feel like to there's no telling what we can accomplish. I don't know about you, my friends and family, but I'm all in.

To Embrace Collective Action

The willingness to engage in collective action arises in a person only when they see that individual efforts are not enough. Before that, they may labor under the illusion that our own personal recycling, or refusing to support Nike, Nestle, Arrowhead Water, McDonalds, Monsanto, Exxon or Shell Oil is sufficient, morally and practically, to change the course of malevolent corporate greed.

An analogy I can get my head around on my better days runs like this: we're all on a boat, and are each having some effect on the boat taking on water. I may stop my part of it, but if the people to my left and right all down the line continue to flood the boat, we're all going down together.

Seeing the need for collective action, my responsibility then becomes not only to stop my part in the destruction of the only vessel we have, and that we all depend on, but to convince enough of the others to do the same. I find right here the moral obligation to proselytize – not in the sense of narrow minded, dogmatic, religious types, but as a passionate activist would: to advocate, agitate, to motivate others, to seek light and share it widely, and to encourage others to do the same.

It may not be that everyone needs to be convinced to give up what is a callous, indifferent, or destructive lifestyle – destructive not only for them, but for us all – it would be enough to turn a critical mass to face these truths and to change their actions.

Global issues usually are too much to grasp as anything more than abstract ideas, but I saw a graph recently that really hit home. It charts the rate of humans' use of fossil fuels, and the unsustainable rise in CO_2 in a very short period of time. Looking forward, this kind of consumption is not viable for us as a species, for our children and grandchildren. Seeing that

graphic, at least for a time, was enough to tip the balance for me to understand: changing my behavior alone would be nowhere near enough. Unless there is a collective awakening we are all going to suffer. Unless we change our thinking and actions as a group, we are headed for a cataclysmic self-extinction of our species, as well as the destruction of many other forms of life on this earth.

I bring this same feeling of personal responsibility with me to social causes: the systemic exploitation of the poor; the thriving of an upper class while millions don't have even the most basic necessities; the usurpation of political power here and abroad. In each case I can feel that my own view and relatively small action is next to nothing compared to the extent of the transformation that is needed in people's hearts and in their actions, and I feel the ethical obligation to provoke change in the greatest possible number of people. Anything less and I've not really accomplished anything other than my own gaining a small bit of clarity. Practically speaking, there will be little to no effect. I have a responsibility to you and to everyone, and you and each person also has a responsibility to everyone else. This is called doing one's part.

What is called "bodhicitta" in Buddhism is the intention to take care of oneself as well as we can so that we can best care for others. It is the expression of the sense of responsibility for all others. An essential feature in this bodhicitta is the idea that through training, or self cultivation, a human being can become free of the root causes of suffering for us personally and collectively - greed, aggression, fear and despair, and not just temporarily, but in such a way that these factors in the psyche are removed from within us, never to rise up again. For this reason, bodhicitta is sometimes referred to as "the thought of enlightenment".

This is the best gift one can offer to the world, the best way to integrate taking care of oneself, and contributing to others' vision, strength, verified faith and courage. I lose the thread again and again, overwhelmed by the news of the world, and by my own faults, but I know enough by now to go looking for this key again.

They say that when something is true and you investigate it, it becomes a deeper realization. The more I think about the role of the individual and just how much one person can do, compared to the vast needs that exist, the more I'm convinced that waking up, freeing myself thoroughly, and enabling others to do the same is what's called for. Here is the noble, sustaining ideal. When such compassion and understanding come together, more and more, this becomes the aim and the fulfillment of our being here.

Freedom of Mind – the Root of the Social Gospel

for Dr. David Hilfiker

'We belong to each other'

I. The social gospel defined

The social gospel is the view that we are made to care for each other; that we are here to protect, support and encourage each other; to love, nurture and celebrate every one of our family, from birth, through all the stages of life, in struggle and difficulty, and in times of ease and success.

That this orientation to our whole life sometimes rises in a person, in different times and places and cultures, independent of religion, tells me that this capacity is something fundamental to us as human beings. There's something in us that can be tapped into that precedes organized religion. Religions can foster a social gospel, or, remarkably, they can get in the way, but what's happening when this ethic towards the whole of life arises in a person, whether it is facilitated by a Tradition or not, I would suggest, is the same.

II. Its cause

Everything we see people doing has roots in their inner life – whether there's anger or gentleness, greed or generosity, distorted views or wisdom and respect – it's always the case that what we see reveals what's in a person, or group of people. This is true right up to what we call mass movements, such as militarism, or in economics.

The same holds true of the social gospel - it comes to be, and is sustained in people by causes, the chief of these being inner freedom. By this I mean something more exact than a pleasant feeling, or being able do to as one pleases. Inner freedom, as

it's understood by contemplatives everywhere, entails much more than that. It refers to a mind, or a spirit free of greed, of aggression, and of delusion regarding ourselves, those we share this life with, and our world. Such freedom, that has wisdom and virtue as its nature, is always what has made it possible for a person to think of others and act to on their behalf.

III. What is then born

On a group level, when enough people together gain a clarity of vision and conscience, works are set in motion that make for real changes in society. It can start with one, or a few people, but eventually many are brought into the work. Witness the changes brought by the civil rights, labor, or women's movements. All these came about because there was an availability and an awakening in a number of people's hearts, and that they in their turn awakened and empowered others, lifting them to higher levels.

IV. Inclusive compassion

Some people wonder how Mahayana Buddhism came into being, historically, with its emphasis on all inclusive compassion. I can tell you that I think it happened because the methods taught by Shakyamuni worked to free enough people from their afflictions and self preoccupation that empathy and active compassion were naturally born in them.

The Thai teacher Ajaan Lee said, 'The mind at normalcy is the substance of virtue'. This has been talked about by others over time in different ways: as an Edenic state, as our own original nature revealed, full of grace.

Our humanity, when it is healthy, sane, and flourishing, is naturally inclusive. It reaches out. As long as one person is still confused, and doesn't know their own worth, they will create suffering for themselves and for others, and so we have to take

care of each other, to the fullest extent, including everyone. As Dr. King expressed it, 'No one is free until every last one of us is free'. This is only common sense - drawing out the ethic of love to its logical conclusion.

At the most basic level, as Shantideva taught, we should remove suffering simply because it is suffering, and care for others just because it's the right thing to do. Seeing this, teachers in the past encouraged us to know the great value of freedom of mind in terms of the whole group, of every life.

V. To know that Freedom of mind is attainable

That we don't need to be caught in suffering and a narrow perspective is remarkable news. For someone who hasn't heard it before, it may be hard to believe, but right there is the proposition.

As for myself, my esteem for those who teach and vividly demonstrate that this is possible for us only increases as time goes on. Without them, we'd only have a story someone told once in a book, that we would then need to argue over. And so I pay homage to Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Bokar Rinpoche, Lama Yeshe, Ajaan Lee and the Thai Forest teachers, Thomas Merton, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Mother Teresa, and the sages who demonstrate by their good works in our world that they have found what has real meaning.

How do we know if the roots of a tree are in touch with living water? We can see it in the broad shade of its branches, and in its fruits – which are abundant, rich, and life sustaining to us all. And so it is with people in this world.

VI. What we all need

Whether or not we're part of a tradition, what we all need is the same, and that is to meet and engage this world in a way that is not confused or afflicted, and, with that as the ground,

with a natural heart full of love, to help one another as much as we can.

We may think it's possible to engage the world and make a difference without much freedom of mind, but we can see where egotism and immaturity have gotten us, individually and collectively. Look at how indifference, neglect, indulgence, exploitation, consumerism, boredom and despair manifest - these show our values, and the state of our inner life. Clearly, something else entirely is needed.

Despite the fact that some measure of freedom of mind and humane values are within reach, what do we see when we look at how most people in this country spend their time and resources? So many Americans in the twenty-first century eat, and over eat, drink, consume, use entertainments to escape, and rely on anti-depressants like never before. So many of them are just focused and closed in on themselves. All these signs of narrow mindedness, to me, point to a widespread lack of inner freedom, and the acknowledgement and respect for others that it necessarily brings. As it is now, a lot of how we live in this country, in terms of the impact we are having as a consumer society, what we do and leave undone, has to do with people's stresses, appetites, and attachments, but these can and do change.

What we need then for the social gospel to become a reality is more of a collective awakening, with more and more people becoming free of their lesser views and motivations. Is there any other way? We're all in this together, and so one or two or a few dozen, or a few groups of people getting there is not enough. The few more awakened and free people can be like leaven in bread, but it's clear that the whole lot of us is what we need to influence. We should aim to reach as many people as we can, for all our sake.

VII. Continuing the work

I look to anyone who is actively engaged in some form of peace, or social justice work, and I ask: what do they have that others don't? – and I see, they have a vision; and of those who continue the work, rather than fall away from it – what do they have? They have maintained a connection with the view and power they've found, whatever name they give it, either with the help of traditions, or individually. Activists very often will leave this step out - they do their work until they have no more to give. Their mistake is in not knowing how to replenish their own sources of inspiration.

Out of people's vision for what is possible here comes their action, and whenever there's a sustained, useful involvement with others, it means that a person has been able to keep a powerful sense of what motivates them.

Whatever our methods, of prayer, or meditation, or solitude, then, we all need to foster that connection to our positive vision and source of strength. There's nothing selfish about this, in fact, this is for everyone's sake.

VIII. The Great Clear Mirror

With the coming of the internet, what is in us as human beings, in terms of our values, is now even more clear. I remember when computers first became a little more widely available. There was the expression 'garbage in, garbage out', to point up the fact that the tools we use are only as powerful as we make them, that they are only as great as our motivation, they go just as far as our vision. The internet then, is a great clear mirror to our inner life.

Now, more than ever, we can become aware of, and engage with this world of ours. It's remarkable, really, and will only continue to evolve in new ways. Whether this interaction is meaningful, however, or negligent, or exploitive, all depends

on who we are inside, on what is in us as a motivating force. No one would argue - great things are possible like never before, and because of our increased interdependence, now, more than ever, we are in need of a social gospel, a life giving vision.

IX. Teaching the choices we have

What if, then, from grade school on, boys and girls, young men, women, and adults were taught that anger and greed were something that can and should be lessened, and removed entirely? This goes beyond what any one religion says – it's stating something basic about who we are as human beings, and what we're capable of, that we can choose this as a basis for our life here.

What if, more and more, people had living examples of freedom and virtue in their teachers, and were shown how becoming free of anger, greed, and egotism is possible by a person working with their own minds and hearts? We can imagine, it would have far reaching effects. It would birth a different world. And nothing less than this is what is needed now, more than in any other time that's come before. We are in need of a wide-scale work.

X. With a view to our future together

I find inspiration in the idea of a culture having, or moving toward an ethic – such as that of respect and care of their elders. This reaches beyond ethics – plural, to having a stable basis in a culture, that then expresses itself in a number of ways. I would say that what we need in America, and in the world now, most of all, is an ethic of compassion, even if it takes some generations to bring into being. This is different from advocating one or two, or a handful of causes, such as universal health care, affordable housing, and education. It is more the ground from which these are addressed. And that

ethic, in turn, has its unmistaken cause. When enough of us are liberated, naturally, a compassionate society will follow. And this is where I find hope.

The Inner and the Outer Work

There are those who dwell in material, and spiritual poverty;
there are those who suffer physical, and spiritual illness;
there are those in physical, and spiritual prison;
there are those who experience physical, and spiritual blindness;
there are those who have physical, and spiritual hunger;
and there are those who live under political, and spiritual oppression

There are those who dwell in material, and spiritual poverty - can you compare them? One leads to the other in this world. Those who are in spiritual poverty are callous and endlessly greedy. They so lack any inner contentment that they try to find meaning and fulfillment by accumulating possessions, in insatiable ego gratification or in wielding power. They cause the great unbalance of people elsewhere with not enough food, medicine, or shelter, who struggle to survive.

The materially poor labor and live in fear, their lives are pressed, but they may be inwardly whole, and healthy compared to others.

Those free enough to help must do so. The inner and outer forms of our lives meet just here.

There are those who suffer physical, and spiritual illness - a person may be healthy physically, but suffering spiritually. If we have eyes to see, their manner and actions in our world tell of their pain. Others may be infirm in body, and well in mind and heart and spirit. They may do a great amount of good despite their limitations.

What should we heal first, if we had the means? We don't need to choose one over the other. All suffering needs to be healed, and nothing less than this will satisfy good hearted people.

Dilgo Khyentse said that when we dedicate merit, we can think that the entirety of the good we have created goes to each individual sentient being. We can think this way.

Sherman Alexie, the great contemporary Indigenous writer said we shouldn't engage in any kind of 'suffering olympics' when comparing our experiences, and this makes sense to me. How can we even begin to measure such things? All I know is that suffering of any kind stops a person from experiencing the fullness of life, and engaging with others in a responsive, ethical, and beneficial way.

Spiritual illness leads also to physical suffering, as healers everywhere have stated. This is the root that needs to be addressed, both for those who are only physically well, and for those who suffer both in body and spirit.

There are those in physical, and spiritual prison; The free among us, those of us who can come and go as we please, may still be bound in the prison of our own minds, wrong concepts and afflictive emotions. The outer freedom can belie the inner state. We need eyes to see both, and to respond to both kinds of being bound and not free.

There are those in jails, but their spirits are not bound. Their condition needs to be responded to, to address the social causes, and *their* roots in people that landed them there.

The spiritual prison is the harder one to break out of. Many more are caught, their natural range of motion proscribed, and they accept this as all they've ever known, and as natural.

If one day they saw someone walking outside the boundary of what they were familiar with and accustomed to, they'd be shocked.

If they saw someone draw a full breath, or walk when all they knew was crawling, or fly when all they knew was dragging their feet around the courtyard, they'd instantly set

themselves on understanding their state, and how others like themselves became free.

There are those who experience physical, and spiritual blindness;
One we witness, the other, far less often. Some forms of physical blindness, like that caused by cataracts, can be cured. The Himalayan Eye Institute does this kind of necessary work, and can we even begin to measure the value of being able to see? to read, to behold our loved ones? Those of us with resources need to do all we can to advance the health and well being of others.

Spiritual blindness is what keeps us from seeing our own worth, the preciousness of others, and of our world, and it keeps us from responding fully to the needs that exist. The spiritually blind do not honor themselves, or others, their ancestry, teachers, or this earth. This root cause of suffering has been proclaimed in religion, and taking up its remedy and sharing it as widely as possible is the perennial challenge to compassionate people.

There are those who have physical, and spiritual hunger;
We mask the tragedy that is malnutrition, by labelling it, and putting it quickly out of our minds. We do this because the truth is so hard to hold that we need real inner strength to maintain the awareness of these truths. The reality is that not having enough food causes children to not develop properly. Once this happens, their whole lives can be effected, limited, and the loss cannot be measured for even one person, let alone thousands, or millions.

In adults also, not getting enough to eat makes their lives into just that desperation, or insecurity. We can't talk about education, or the development of any inner life then. Our lives while here are built on this foundation of the body, and the

basic needs of the body have to come first, before any other kinds of human needs can be talked about.

The physical needs met, the spiritual hunger that people have can be addressed. This is the kind of need that isn't fulfilled by physical food and conditions alone. A person with spiritual hunger unfulfilled can consume the entire world and still not be sated, such is its nature.

Which of these is worse? Hunger of the body comes and goes, and if it isn't too disabling, or limiting for a person, it doesn't block their access to an inner life. Spiritual hunger though, when not met, causes unending problems. These exist on a continuum. When one is met, we can respond to other needs. There is no one starting point, I'd say, but it's more like a circle. From our awakened heart, every need must be responded to skillfully.

And there are those who live under political, and spiritual oppression

Racism, economic inequality and exploitation, and the lack of self determination are social effects, and the heavy burdens that human rights activists everywhere respond to. To be spiritually oppressed is to be controlled by anger, greed, fear, depression, and other negative emotions, and to be held down by wrong views.

One of these is the root of the other. Removing the ways we are spiritually oppressed leads naturally to the expression of that inner freedom in our world, the valuing of lives, and registering them in our thoughts and motivations.

Efforts to make the lives of others better that are lacking this element of addressing spiritual oppression go only so far, and then are endless. They have immediate worth, but are like eating grain, and not planting for coming seasons.

We need both immediate and long terms needs cared for. If not for addressing the immediate, there'd be no one left to

enjoy the fruits of our efforts, and if we leave out the long range vision, we will not only neglect the causes that got us here, we will also be caught in a limited version of the life that is possible.

This is the complete work before us.

What Precedes Empathy

Everywhere there are thoughtful people, empathy is praised, and cherished as essential for healthy personal and social relationships. If we stop here, however, just recognizing great importance of this quality we call empathy, we can easily find ourselves with an altogether worthwhile aim, but without a way to get there.

If we merely repeat the word, or just intensely desire to be more capable and more responsive, we can find ourselves stuck, frustrated, and possibly even feeling like we are not up to this task of becoming more empathetic human beings. I think many well-intended people have find themselves right there.

"Lord, make me an instrument of Your Peace", prayed St. Francis, but what, good Sir, is the *way*? Teachers, tell us that! Empathy is praised and its great value is recognized, but I seldom hear it spoken of as *a result* of a set of causes, and as the product of a whole way of life.

Buddhism teaches me to look at all phenomena as the result of causes and conditions coming together. It is exacting that way, and encouraging too, especially when we have a great work in front of us, such as promoting more awareness and kindness in our lives, and in this world we share.

In these times, it's not just criminals and drug addicts who lack empathy. The wealthy, politicians, and ordinary working class people also experience this lack of feeling what others feel, and directly sharing in their joys as well as their suffering and struggles. In our atomized society, work that over- taxes us, a 21st century education that causes us to drift farther from family, neighbors and community, results in either not knowing, or not caring what others experience. Blind to all but self-interest, it's inevitable that the actions of a person or

group without feeling for others will conflict with the greater good.

This lack of empathy is a danger not only to our communal life, but for us personally as well. Without it, we contract, and are estranged from our family and neighbors, seeing others as alien to us. We forget our birthright, our heritage, and organic place in community. How can we then hope to thrive?

What then are the causes that enable empathy to first appear, and to become stable, and increase over time? I would say that empathy arises gradually as a person becomes free from psychological entanglements and lesser, immature motivations. We can see across cultures and times that it is in the character of all mature people to extend the gifts they've received, and to encourage those they recognize in others. You can see in every instance how empathy is the product of a liberated mind and heart, and of an overall education that is inclusive in its love and concern.

Empathy also comes into being as a stable force as a result of living wisely, nourishing ourselves with the great things we are surrounded by, with art and nature, with our best noble intentions, with rest, and by touching the deep sources of vitality that are available. In wise living, this is something that is not to be done once, but regularly.

I am convinced this is something we can all learn to do, and what's more, it is something we all *need* to do, for all our sakes. Even one person without empathy is a danger to us all.

How can I best encourage others? I myself must walk this talk, live and breathe it, or my words will be nothing more than a flight of imagination, or some cheap ego-adornment, and then, heaven help us all!

My teachers, Thich Nhat Hahn and Lama Zopa Rinpoche smile to me this afternoon, from my desktop. I know that they embody what I am trying to speak of here, that freedom of

mind and heart, and that strength, and natural sensitivity and responsiveness we are all capable of. More than anything else, with their presence, this is what they teach.

I would like to encourage whoever finds their way to these few words to investigate two things for themselves: the first is the importance of empathy for our personal and social health and happiness; the second is the idea that empathy arises and remains stable in our lives when we create the right causes and conditions. I trust then that we can all find our way to the freedom of mind, inner strength, and the balance that allows our sensitivity to reach far and wide.

As unlikely as it may seem at times, each one of us does have the capacity and the innate intelligence to find our way. If we get a fundamental education about ourselves, and what makes for wise living, and we take up the challenge and use our innate wisdom, I do believe we can all hold the joys and sorrows of being a true human being in these difficult and extraordinary times. Such is my faith.

Two Ways We Can Condition the Mind

It's become clear to me that there are two completely opposite ways we can use and condition our mind. One way leads to a contracted and deeply impoverished view of ourselves and our world, and the other leads to more expansiveness, and to a bright, blessed and enriched experience.

If we develop the habit of focussing on what is right about ourselves and this life, and being nourished by it, the world opens up for us. Miracles are found everywhere, whole worlds of possibilities make themselves known to us, along with the energy to accomplish great things, both seen and not seen to the outside world.

If instead we develop the ingrained habit of focussing overwhelmingly on what is tragic, or distorted, or far from the expression of our true human nature, over time we lose the sense of the miraculous. We can become jaded and numb, with senses obscured, isolated from each other and the natural world. The resulting experience is then one of fear, aggression and despair. There is a marked absence of light, joy and peace – all the things any healthy person would want for themselves.

There is a way to celebrate our being here, and to hold and care for the difficult aspects of our personal and shared life, and it is that very skill that we need to learn and to practice most of all.

A heart and a mind that treats self and others and this earth with reverence is plainly the result of learning to see things as they are, with breadth and depth and clarity of insight. The arts, our loved ones, our ancestry and Traditions, our natural world, all these are abundant sources of joy and fresh inspiration. With gratitude, meditation, quieting ourselves, prayer, ritual, and study, and structuring our lives to refresh ourselves as needed, we can access these gifts more and more.

The result is joy and strength, optimism and courage, and life lived with delight, as it should be. As we learn the art of healing ourselves and our world with all these means, we find more within our reach, and we tell our neighbors, friends and family, using universal language.

I have written this in response to the way this world is now, in response to how we are currently using our precious lives, played out against the unchanging background of our possibilities for health and happiness.

The Empowerment of Compassion

It takes strength to be aware of suffering and not be overwhelmed by it. Driving past the tent city on Division street, some people will look at the homeless for just a moment, and quickly turn their attention to something else. For some, the sight of those who own nothing more than they can carry makes a deeper impression, and it can be depressing to think about any long term problem where there is no easy solution.

As it is with the racism in this country, and its inequality, its endless wars, neglect of the poor and our home, none of these can be addressed in shorthand. As much as we may have advanced, we have not yet given enough of our time, energy and intelligence to solving these problems. Instead, in 2016, we are a largely distracted, immature, and self-absorbed consumer culture. Worst of all, too often, those free and educated enough to effect change look away to the next party, the next game, the next escape.

I take solace here in the fact that there are many conscientious people, who work each day to make a difference, but it is not easy. When we meet what seems like an insurmountable challenge, it's tempting to give in to despair, both for this generation, and for our future. Fortunately for us, there are inner resources we can tap into to help us respond more effectively. Compassion is that unique human quality that expresses our kinship, and that gives us strength and hope.

Compassion is not despair

On the surface, compassion may look like despair. In both cases the initial feeling is one of sadness. But where in despair we are overwhelmed, and made weak as a child, with

compassion there comes the energy to work. There are times when some indomitable force rises up in us. Just look at those workers, mothers and fathers and friends and strangers who go out each day to do what's needed, and when there is some crisis, new strength enters their limbs.

When I think of those activists who marched, and who wrote, and who spoke out over the years, I know they did it both for themselves, and for the coming generations. That strength they had to begin, and to keep going was the perennial strength of compassion, and this is something we can all use now.

Where despair feels like surrender, compassion has no quit in it. The doubting mind is also closely tied to fear, and it is a small and contracted state, but the mind of compassion is broad and clear and fearless. It imagines great things, such as clean water, and people being fed and housed, and gets to work to get them done.

When we are in a state of doubt and despair and distraction, we are shut down. We are confused and only using a small part of our inherent wealth. By contrast, compassion helps us to know just what is essential about our being here: to care for one another as best we can. A light wakes up in us. It is great love and compassion that begins in response to the great and small needs; it is compassion that has us continue; and it is this same power in us that goes on for as long as it takes to complete the works of justice, healing and peace.

I praise the dawning of compassion in each and every one of us today, and all of its works. May it flourish in us all.

Our Roots Go Deeper Than We Know –

A Reflection on the Power of Gratitude

In every traditional culture, we find parents and elders teaching their children gratitude, and the essence is always the same, that of cultivating a sense of appreciation for what we've received. Parents don't do this for their own sake, instead they do it as a gift to their children. They do it because they've known these blessings themselves, and know that this is what will sustain future generations.

When I compare how I feel when I have gratitude for my teachers, for my ancestors, and for the natural world, with those times when I lose this sense, there's a great difference. When I'm not aware of these gifts in any kind of tangible way, I feel impoverished, and living in a shadow that is the absence of joy.

I think many people feel this way sometimes, and what's more, what it means to have gratitude is not something that is talked about much in this culture, and so I thought to sketch out a few ideas about it here, for those who might like to pick up on this theme, and awaken more thankfulness in their lives. I marvel sometimes at the gift of friendship, and how it is a sustaining power in our lives. We may have only spent a short time with someone, years ago, but our time together was graced with a special quality that has stayed with us. Thinking again of that friendship brings that power to the fore. We are nourished by that love on a spiritual level, and it is this energy that gives us strength for all we would accomplish in the world.

We've received love, support and encouragement from our parents and teachers, and the quality of that love is something profound. Remembering that gift, we can't help but be moved,

grateful, and dedicated to living a righteous life. Thinking of the lives of our parents and teachers, and spiritual ancestors, and of what they have offered us, we can see that they in turn were nourished by their own parents and teachers. This is what they received, and passed on to us, this love, encouragement, strength and wisdom.

When I say our roots go deeper than we know, I'm thinking of how we don't often look into the richness of what we have with us now. Generations have brought us to where we are now, and their sustaining power is here for us to know, and to be upheld and inspired by.

If we forget, we feel weak, easily intimidated by life. When we remember again who we are, and how we got here, we can't help but feel optimistic, and dedicated to caring for the needs of this time, and those of future generations.

To take just two examples of the vision and commitment that has come before, and that has brought us to where we are today, we can think of our modern education, and of the civil rights movement.

A century ago, ninety percent of the people in this country lived in rural areas. The recorded rate of literacy, even then was already high, but the level of education, compared to today was basic. During the last century, access to public libraries and to higher education has increased to the point that we almost take it for granted. Compared to a hundred years ago, many more of us have opened the treasury of learning.

It's only because people in previous generations saw the great value in public education that we have these advantages today, which are almost impossible to measure. All the knowledge of the arts, history, science and technology, and philosophy has come to us because of the efforts of generations of educators. Most of their names have been forgotten, but we

have all this nourishment for our souls because of their love, vision and dedication.

When I look for examples of true heroes and spiritual ancestors in modern times, I can see that there were many great souls who only just recently came before us in the Civil Rights era. People who study that history know the names of Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Ralph Abernathy, Bob Moses, and A. Phillip Randolph. Looking further, we see that each of them were nourished and sustained not only by their fellow workers for human rights and dignity, but also by the labors of people like Ghandi, Emerson and Thoreau.

Every step the marchers were taking during those dangerous, difficult times was moved by love, and strengthened by those who went before them. They were encouraged to keep going towards justice, dignity and equality by those in their past, and by their hope for the future.

This same gift, this same power is what we've received, those of us who are heirs to their legacy. This is something that lives, something that we can touch again, when we remember them with gratitude for their great vision and efforts. And then, considering what we've received from them, how can we do anything other than try to take the next step to advance the cause of human rights in our own times?

It is this way too when we have the great fortune of connecting with a spiritual tradition. All those who have come before us, right down to our own teachers, have not left us. They have passed forward the gifts of their practice to us. Praise and gratitude awakens the sense that this really is so. Something of their power, kindness, compassion and commitment is with us now, and this is something we can celebrate and draw from every day.

Like a tree, through its roots, drawing up the sap of nutriments, breath by breath, we can reach down and feel our

whole body fill with the health and strength, light, courage and love that is their gift to us.

We can remove ourselves from all these virtues when we hold the idea of ourselves as separate from all this – from each other, and from all our ancestors. This mistaken concept isn't something we would ever consciously plan to do – instead it's the character of a delusion – a result of miseducation, that persists, until it is unlearned, seen through and discarded.

There's a scene in the movie Amistad, where the character of John Adams is talking to an African man he is representing in an American court, and telling him how there's been a setback in the trial. At first the man, Sikey, doesn't understand, but then, when he does, he goes into a frenzy, and it's not until days later that Adams can talk with him again. When he does, he sees that Sikey is relaxed and smiling. He tells John Adams that he knows everything will be alright now. I remember he said,

'I spoke with my ancestors last night'
'I called them all into myself, and they assured me of our victory'
'I am the whole reason now that they lived'.

We can assuredly say the same thing about our spiritual ancestors – those who came before us and struggled to make this world a righteous place. The power of their work did not end with them, but is with us now. They had their work, the work of their time, which was not our work; and now we have our own work to do, in order to pass this same gift forward to our children, and the coming generations.

When you look at religions throughout different cultures and over time, you often see this gesture of looking back with admiration, and appreciation, with love and rejoicing at the gifts we've received. This brings it more clearly into the

present, as a palpable force, as a revered energy and direction, by which we can live our lives. From gratitude, naturally comes works, effortlessly in a way, as the overflow of our heart of love.

I mark now as something really unfortunate when gratitude is glossed over, its depth and power as a practice and way of life not recognized. I think of jaded children and adults, having only superficial lives, with little joy to them. It doesn't have to be this way.

If we say we have counted our blessings, but then somehow remain unmoved, not uplifted and strengthened, then I know we've missed the vital point of gratitude. We've all received many gifts, by being here, and they are alive, and with us now.

May we all know the true measure of our heritage, to be living now, on this extraordinary earth; and *all* our noble ancestry, and with this energy, may we continue to work, in our own way, for the sake of our children, and our children's children.

I Become We – A Confluence of Rivers

I was surprised recently to hear the phrase *'I become we'* and it reminded me of something important, especially in these times. This is an idea that's been made use of for generations in the Civil Rights and Labor movements, as well as in religious teachings. Whether we hear it as '*There is strength in numbers'* or *'Together we will be heard',* or, '*when two or three are gathered in my name, I am with them',* the phrasing may change, but in one sense the message is the same. When we shift our identity from being an isolated self, struggling against the forces of the world, to one of a part of a great body moving through time, with a purpose that has brought us this far, and will take us forward, all the way home, we are reclaiming something essential.

Though I don't often think of myself as a Christian, I do appreciate many of the deep teachings that are found in that tradition. As a Westerner, I recognize the humanist values laid out in their canon to be the foundation for our culture. Along with other religions, Christianity invites us also to reclaim our noble heritage, with language that may sound mysterious, until we see it at work in our own lives.

It's reported that Jesus said to his disciples, who he was sending out into the world to teach, *'he who receives you, receives me; and he who receives me, receives Him who sent me...'*

In this verse, I find all that is essential in understanding the profound nature of transmission, where a tradition is communicated across generations.

My father was the great social documentary photographer, educator and activist, Frank Espada, and my mother, who is still with us, is a deeply spiritual person. For these reasons, my brother, my sister and I grew all up in what I would call a socially conscious household. We were aware that there was

injustice in the world and that we each had a responsibility to stand for people's rights. We may have processed what we heard from them as children in our own way, but those ideals were certainly there for us from an early age.

Whether loss of a parent or teacher results in our renewed working for others, I think depends on the relationship we had with them before their passing. In my case, with my father, the three of us were each given something precious by him.

I think the word that best describes the feeling of receiving a gift that carries some responsibility is 'legacy'. It's not just something we can place on an altar and forget. We have to do something to honor that gift. My father's life was all about art and activism, and the struggle for human rights, and that is something I inherited and intend to continue in as many ways, and for however long I can. I think my brother feels the same way, and my sister too, in her own way. He's a poet, and she's a lawyer.

My father said,

"The purpose of showing my work is to get young people thinking, to stimulate their minds and hearts, to make conditions known, and to attack injustices wherever they exist."

Now that he is no longer here, who will continue the essential work he was part of? Who will stand up for the exploited and abused, for those who are pushed aside and forgotten by society? Because my father is not with us physically to do this anymore, it's imperative, now more than ever, that we continue the work.

In 2014, one of my teachers, Thich Nhat Hanh, had a stroke that rendered him unable to speak. We have to ask, who will speak now that our teacher is silent?, and I have to answer that all of us who received his wisdom will speak. Thay will continue through us.

The movements for human rights this last century has suffered so many losses, from environmental activists, to social justice leaders. In some cases, they lived long lives, but so often their lives were cut short. In each case, those of us who were inspired by them felt the need to continue their message and their work. *We take the part that does not fade.* When we look at what we lost, we are bereft, and desolate. But when we look at what we were given by them, their great gifts of vision and courage, intelligence, and powerful commitment, we can't help but be lifted up by it, and empowered to take the next step on the path, and the next, together with our brothers and sisters. When we really see things as they are, we break down the imaginary barriers between 'I' and 'them'. I then becomes *we*, and we are empowered to continue this work.

When we are part of a tradition, it's a great gift, a privilege. The traditions of progressive social activism and true human values we have received continues with us, and through us.

I have no doubt now that when someone meets me, and we talk politics and social justice issues, they are meeting my father, and my teachers, and all those who came before them and taught, and nurtured, and inspired them. All this is being shared. *Truth be told, we are a confluence of rivers, meeting one another.*

This is true of me, and I know that it's true of you as well. We have each received great and precious gifts that have been passed down to us through the generations. We are each part of a noble heritage, and this is what we share now with one another.

To Be An American Buddhist - The American Ground

There are two ways we can talk about Buddhism. First, we can repeat, in our own language what we've received from teachers, and from our studies, trying to express these ideas as precisely as we can in our own idiom.

Without a doubt, there's a place for this kind of transmission, where we're trying to represent as faithfully as possible what we've heard from our teachers, without adding anything to it, or leaving anything out. When a tradition is moving from one culture to another, for a time, this way of communicating teachings is essential.

Then, another way of talking about Traditional teachings is through the interpretation of our own culture and experience. To be clear, the first kind of language that's needed to communicate a Tradition that's coming from another culture is one where we're trying to understand what's being said, as much as possible, from the other's point of view. This means understanding the country of origin's culture and use of language. As we can tell from some of the early translations of teachings, where this isn't done, what we get is then very much a filtered expression of those ideas. At some point, however, we need to be able to view and appreciate and transmit teachings from our own unique perspective.

As Americans, or as Westerners the last fifty years, we've received teachings from the Tibetan, Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese and Japanese traditions of Buddhism. Many of these cultures, historically, have held the explicit view that Westerners were barbarians, not likely to be able to understand teachings, and certainly not having anything to offer of their own philosophy and culture.

Some of this has traveled along with the teachings, in the form of their being a one way communication. This may have

been suitable in their own culture, where they were the educators, or when the teachings were entirely new, but it overlooks the fact that Western culture is also rich, and that the American culture I'll speak of has its own cherished history and honored ethical ground.

This is a broad land, a vast landscape, and when we draw back from it a bit, it can look only like a great mosaic, made of many different parts, that we've merely taken to calling 'America'. Yet overall American culture, at its best, has some distinguishing characteristics throughout it that need to be recognized, and appreciated. Here, at its best, there is not only a celebration of diversity, but people here are enriched and formed by it.

As a people, we also have a history of continual struggle for advancing the causes of human rights – from the abolitionist, suffragist, labor, women's and minority rights movements, to the modern day voices calling for peace and environmental justice. All these testify to what is here in this culture, at its best.

It can be argued that we are the opposite – a nation that needed to have a civil war to get rid of slavery, that is militaristic, wasteful, self-obsessed, but this is not the majority, nor does it speak to the virtues and the best part of character of the people here; American people are diverse, independent, creative, socially conscious, intolerant of bullshit, fair minded, optimistic and generous; We have our own rich culture. We may have often overlooked, denied, suppressed or rejected this fact about ourselves, but at some point, doing so serves neither ourselves, nor the teachings. It is from exactly this shared cultural ground of ours that the Buddhist teachings can grow in a unique way, one that is both true to its heritage, and a distinct expression of the Dharma.

For a time, people studying Japanese Zen would often learn the language, eat the food, wear the clothes, furnish their homes in that style, tell the stories and recite the scriptures as it was done in that culture. All this was just the cultural layer though, and not what is essential. The same was true of people learning Tibetan Buddhism - as much as possible, those forms were brought over here and taken on. But you can only take on so much of another culture. Culture is a very deep thing, and it's not something that a person can replace, one for another, nor should we.

This very ground we can know, intimately, as our lives here, has all the virtues we need to build on. We may not have seen that, when we looked for meaning and sources of sustenance, and found them in other culture's traditional teachings, but it is here. Teachings and culture have a relationship, and a profound one at that, but they are different. The culture can transmit the teachings, but whereas culture changes, what is taught through their religion is of a more enduring nature.

Dharma is like the rain and the sun, that can go anywhere and bring benefit. Culture is the necessary ground that receives and is transformed by the teachings. It has never happened any other way. From their unique ground flowers the realization we know as Thai, Cambodian, Lao, Burmese, Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian and now American Buddhism.

It's inevitable that after receiving and practicing well the teachings from the great Theravada, Zen and Tibetan Traditions, we will want to offer something from our own honored perspective, not as an independent ego trip, but because this perspective has genuine, home-grown worth, and can be a vital, unique and necessary contribution to the body of teachings in this world.

The best I can hope for, from this American culture where I am now, is that it assimilate the best of the teachings from the traditions it receives, learns them and implements them fully, and then transmits them faithfully, adding its own quality. Perhaps then some day in the future, we will be able to communicate these very same precious teachings to another culture, and they in their turn will have an opportunity to make them their own.

Dis-engaged Buddhism? or,
Where is the passion for social justice?

When I hold the idea of 'engaged Buddhism, and turn it over in my thinking, it brings to mind it's pointed opposite – a Buddhism that is dis-engaged from the concerns of the world. To be disengaged can have two meanings, and for the sake of clarity, I'd like to separate out the disengagement that is like what we would call in these times, 'unplugging', or stepping back from involvement with others for a time, to reflect, or to heal and strengthen ourselves. This is one kind of removing ourselves from society that has a time-honored place in contemplative traditions.

The other kind of dis-engagement is more 'not knowing, and not caring'. We find this attitude in people set on just making money, or in finding some sense gratification. They don't know, or care to know, how others are effected by their actions, or how others they share this world with are living and struggling now.

This kind of attitude is something we've almost come to expect from the average person these days – driven by fear and the self preservation instinct, or what one psychologist called 'the will to power'.

Where this is surprising and distressing to find though, is in our religious traditions, including Buddhism. Again, I'm not referring to stepping back from activity, but to the 'don't know and don't care' state of mind that is far too common in American Buddhism. People talk a lot about kindness, and even universal love and compassion, but tell me, where is the passion for social justice?

Who has the courage to step forward these days? Who is willing to call out politicians or corporations or government

policies by name? Who is willing, in 2016, to publicly denounce our current president and his militarism? Is this not a great matter, of morality and conscience? I suppose the real question, when you get right down to it, is, Why is there this disconnect between Buddhist ideals, and how they are applied in this time, in this culture?

I have to say, for me, one of the most radical methods in all of the Buddhist teachings is the cultivated practice of the heart of loving kindness. In it, we go from the person we're closest to, and gradually aim to extend that same care and sympathy to all others. When this works, (and it does work) it removes the barriers to regarding their joys and struggles as anything other than our own. It has the potential to take us past race, economic status and nationality. It can bring us right up to what Dr. King called 'a global perspective'.

Now, interestingly, in the teachings, the state of impartiality is described as having both near and far enemies, or opposites. The far opposite, which is much easier to see and deal with, is bias, or giving preference to our own race, or clan, above all others.

The near enemy, on the other hand, is much harder to see, and, if not recognized can do as much or more harm, because we may think we've reached some inclusivity when all we've done is fool ourselves. The near enemy of inclusivity is 'just being caught in the concept of impartiality'. This is the kind of mind that would say, unfortunately only half-kiddingly, 'I love everybody - it's people I can't stand'. It is a mere abstraction, 'straying into conceptual compassion'. This false coin is what we often mistake for being impartial, and all embracing.

In this country, so far, Buddhism has made its way mostly to the middle class. It helps people who need a deeper sense of ease and meaning in their lives, to relax, and to open to the riches of this world. The image we most often have here of a

Buddhist is someone sitting quietly by himself, or herself, or in a group, together in attentive repose. At the same time, throughout our country's history there has been inequality, and the continual struggle for human rights.

If the purpose to religion is 'to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict (as in to stir the conscience of) the comfortable', then, I'd say Buddhism so far has only done half its job here. And yet, there is great potential. We have in this culture a real foundation of social activism. The elements are here for whoever would pick up on them, to continue the work of social justice.

What Buddhism can add is insight into the deeper causes of suffering, and methods of personal transformation. Out of enabled intelligence and compassion then, I'm sure that new social structures can develop, creatively and organically, as needed. Of this I have no doubt at all.

The question is, will Buddhism as we know it here be engaged, or not, with the real needs of the community and nation, and our greater family? This remains to be seen. Will we be able to feel the joys and struggles of others as our own, and to act on that?, or will we remain isolated, or worse, hemmed in by our 'high ideals'?

I wish I could say which way this will go. I so seldom hear any real passion in the voices of teachers that would make me think they are suffering the pains of our world. I wish someone would tell me, How is it possible to be lukewarm about these things? And still, I have hope. As with all great traditions, Buddhism has so much to offer to this needful world. Because it's the tradition I'm most familiar with, I see its potential most of all. There's real healing and insight to be found here.

Whether or not we make use of these ideas to clear away confusion and to ease the suffering of our greater family

is the urgent matter before Buddhists today. To be or not to be dis-engaged? The world cries out for our answer.

'Come Hell or High Water' – A Mahayana Take on the Fourth Immeasurable

There are a number of ways the fourth of the Brahma Viharas, or divine abodes, can be interpreted. These Four Immeasurables are Universal Love, Compassion, Joy, and Equanimity. The first three, in all interpretations, are clear expressions of love, as love, compassion, and altruistic joy, but when we get to the fourth, some interpretations lean in a way that then has to be explained as not implying indifference.

When Equanimity is heard that way, as 'beings are owners of their karma, heirs to their karma', it can seem aloof, disengaged, and maybe even concerned only up to a point, and then others are more or less on their own.

Another interpretation, found mostly in the Tibetan reading of the Four Immeasurables, has what's called Equanimity translated as 'Impartiality' – meaning that we don't favor one person or group over another, but that we see them all as equally deserving our consideration, and care.

This leads me to think of calling this Immeasurable, 'Equality of View', as in, 'In all situations, and at all times, all are equal in deserving our love…'

This brings with it a kind of equanimity, steadying the mind and heart in our appreciation of others. This is because it is not dependent of how someone is towards us, or who someone is – the reference point is within us as our own consistent motivation.

Leading on from this, lately I've been thinking of this fourth Immeasurable as the strength of our vow to help others. In that consistency, in that reliability, we can find a strength that, when it is present, brings calm and clarity to our mind, and also to others.

I imagine that when a person who is deeply committed to a cause shows up, it can settle and encourage other people as well. People like this are trustworthy. They carry with them a peace, born of their deep determination.

In Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, they speak of 'Vow Power'. This is quite different than having just the occasional upwelling of some feeling of dedication – vow becomes the ground of all we think and do in this world. As such, it has all the attributes previously referred to as equanimity: it is stable, reliable, steady, and loyal; it is immutable; it is empowering, encouraging, unwavering in its determination, and readiness to work. This is Equanimity born of our strength of purpose.

I woke up today with the hymn from the Civil Rights era, 'We shall not be moved' in my mind.

We… shall… not… be…
we shall not be moved
We… shall… not… be…
we shall not be moved
Just like a tree, standing by the water,
we shall not be moved!

This is a song of steadfast courage, and it's what I'm thinking of here as this Immeasurable, Upekkha, this Divine Quality, the strength and peace that comes from dedication.

Earlier, when going through the different facets of metta, this fundamental wish for others' welfare, I saw that when it met with suffering, it turned into compassion. When it saw others success, it was delighted, and manifested as joy. Now, when deep love is called on to show itself, when it is challenged, I can see that it reveals the qualities of steadiness, or imperturbability; it doesn't draw back; it doesn't waver.

When determination is solid, it has a characteristic that is bold, and fearless. Witness the examples of Martin Luther

King, Nelson Mandela, and the Dalai Lama. It is exactly their strength of commitment that imparts strength and confidence and peace to others.

Taken together, Love, Compassion, Joy, and an Equanimity born of the dedication to others, can be understood all as truly divine states, committed to positive action in the world.

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.

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, 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 our responses to 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

Power and Love – A Buddhist perspective

We fear power because we associate it with aggression. It's there in everything from militarism to abusive husbands and boyfriends, to those we say are 'drunk with power' – implying control, domination, and injustice. But power in itself is neutral. Power can be turned any way, and this is something we need to know, for our own sake, for that of our community, and world.

The rising up of energy when it's needed is natural to us. This we all know. When there's some crisis, or even just a need at home, say, a pipe breaks, and water starts to fill our study, getting closer to books and papers; right there, we'll find more energy arise in us to deal with the situation.

The challenge of power is that we need intelligence, and a wise heart to guide it. I know why so many people are suspicious of all expressions of power, such as strength, courage and boldness – it's because they equate these qualities with deluded aggression, which is power without wisdom.

The problem is that we then go on to associate kindness only with the soft, gentle side of it, when we also have a profound need for love that is empowered to act in whatever way is necessary to help, or to protect others.

The energy that arises when seeing a real need often gets 'hijacked' at a very early stage. It can get subverted by fear, or by the tendency to strike out. Because this is so often all we see in our culture, in the media and when we engage other people, we can come to see aggression as the only kind of power. This is a dangerous mistake.

The expression of power can take many other forms, from the very gentle, and patient and far seeing, to very wrathful, all born of love, along with wisdom guiding it to the outcome we hold in our heart. A mother has power; someone on strike

for a living wage, so he can feed his family, has power; the editor of a community newspaper has power, and the discipline to shape his message; a minister has power…

I'm thinking of Martin Luther King here, who was without anger, or hostility, but full of the grace of the strength of love. This kind of power is not to be feared, but taken up, and embraced.

Other examples come to mind: the courage of those protesting against war, the love and strength of those who marched for civil rights, and the courage we express every time we stand now in solidarity with a just cause. In every case, this is answering a call, creatively acting for the healing of the world. This is what we need much more of in these times. Without strength when needed, love is weak, and ineffectual, and remains incomplete. Just passively wanting things to improve is not enough. We also have to have the courage to speak, and to act in whatever way is called for.

Handling power is no easy matter. Impatience may assert itself, saying, 'There is no time to lose'; anger clouds the mind, making people confused; seeing suffering brings with it a sense of urgency, such that we could then just react in a short sighted way, leading to mistakes. Right there is where we see the real value of having a strong center in our life, such as what we cultivate when we have a deep contemplative practice. A stable center is needed so we don't get pulled off balance, so we can act clearly, compassionately, and efficiently.

One of the benefits of being part of a tradition is that we are not alone in our exploration of what it is to be a human being. We can look at how others have handled similar challenges of power in the past, and how they are holding them now. We can ask questions. Often just bringing a teacher to mind communicates more than words. They embody what they have learned. I think now of Thich Nhat Hanh, who faced what for

most of us are unimaginable difficulties during the war on his country. I look to him as someone who was able to respond to the needs of his time fearlessly, compassionately, without losing his cool, and without giving reign to anger. Because of his strong practice, dedication and clarity, he was able to do a great amount of good, and his example continues to inspire.

The Dalai Lama also comes to mind here, as someone who for the last fifty years has responded to the aggression in his homeland out of deep wisdom and strength, with nothing but compassion. Their responses may seem inconceivable, but it's because they have great love in them that they, and other activists for the cause of human rights, such as Aung San Sui Kyi, and Nelson Mandela, are able to stay committed to their ideals.

These teachers show us how it is *just* as Joanna Macy has said, that, 'The capacity of the human heart-mind to look into the face of suffering and pain has everything to do with its awakening it its full dimensions, joy, and power.' They demonstrate important lessons for us all.

The Thought Training teachings in Tibetan Buddhism say that we should respond to a great need with great energy, but that the arising of that power in us should be guided by compassion. They tell us we need both vigor, and knowledge of the means to alleviate the problem. It is this kind of long range thinking that is missing in mere anger, or aggression as a response to some problem. Powerful though aggression may be, it is destructive. It accomplishes nothing of lasting value. I find these teachings especially helpful in difficult times, when it seems that no answer can match the needs we see in our world. They tell me to never give up, to keep the ideal in mind and to act with boldness, trusting our inner resources, and a responsive world.

Love leads someplace very different from greed, or the will to control or exploit others. Everywhere we find it, love goes beyond what the ego wants. It takes love manifesting as courage to look at our own mistakes, and go beyond them; it takes that same kind of courage to step out of the circle of what's familiar to us, and to follow our conscience.

Whereas aggression divides people, and puts up barriers, love dissolves boundaries. It removes the sense of separation between ourselves and our neighbor, between ourselves and the natural world, and, finally, between ourselves and those who cause suffering, which is both the highest precept in Christianity, and the most advanced practice of love in Buddhism.

The well being and suffering of others *then becomes our own well being and suffering, and our own responsibility*. With that comes an indomitable strength of will to do our work.

Reading history, it seems that every generation feels like theirs is facing the greatest challenge I remember something of the 60's and 70's, and the urgency of those times. It's hard to compare, but what we do know is that there is so much at stake now, especially for the coming generations. These are needful times, in many ways like never before. *How will we respond?*

With so much going on in this world, the extent of political corruption, the desecration of the environment, the militarism and inequality, and more, so much that calls for our attention and our strong response, it can be overwhelming. We often ask, How much can one person do? It seems we can never do enough by ourselves alone to fight against injustice, and the abuses of power, and yet, being taken hold of by love, I'm surprised to say, I have reason to hope.

In love, there is strength that an aggressor could never imagine. It's been described as a hidden power, a spring of

creative action, as wine, and bread, delight and sustenance. And this love is what we share, the power that accompanies an awakened heart. It is, as Dr. King has said, that

'Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.', and, *'Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness.'*

In Buddhism, the iconic form of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, has an eye in the palm of each of his many hands. This is the eye of wisdom and love that guides his actions. This tells me that such power, when we meet it, or feel it rising up in us, is not something to be avoided, but taken up; this is what finally removes fears.

As Shantideva said:

It's a protector of the helpless,
a guide to those wishing to cross over,
or a bridge, or a raft…

Dr. King again:' *In the final analysis, love is not this sentimental something that we talk about. It's not merely an emotional something… Love is the understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all men.' 'It is the refusal to defeat any individual. When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. …'*

Love challenges us then to look at our own lives. This is the compass. *'Let love be without hypocrisy'*, as it says in one of Paul's letters.

Whether we call ourselves religious or not, moving from our ideals to actualizing these aims, *has to* be a kind of awakening, of both vision and strength in us. It may not always be comfortable, but this is just what is needed now, more than ever.

May we all be empowered by love,
May we walk without fear,
and advance the work of our Noble Ancestors in these very times,
to create the beloved community

The Thought of Enlightenment

I imagine a community gathering of compassionately motivated people; different groups are represented, all voicing their views, all needing to be heard: there are those who advocate for the homeless, those who stand up for animal rights, others raising their voices with urgency to protect our shared environment; some speak for the need for greater visibility of the poor, and working class; some speak out against endless corporate greed and the endemic corruption of politicians; others, against war, and nuclear weapons; and still others on the issues of fundamental human rights; somehow, these are not entirely discordant, they don't completely clash and drown each other out;

I can imagine with all the heat in that meeting place, a lull where someone stands up and says, 'What about enlightenment?' I think if we don't bring this into it, we're missing something crucial to our survival, and flourishing. Every week, really every day, the news underscores the need for us to think differently, and to think more deeply and creatively.

'I mean, we 're all gathered here wanting substantial changes in the systems we live in, not wanting to settle for mere deceptive, cosmetic changes, so why not address the foundations of ignorance, hostility and greed that are the common roots of the problems we're up against?'

Without this, if people care at all, often they just go from the extreme of reactive, passionate emotion, to that of depression about our world, when something more is needed. We can do better. In fact, we have to do better than that.

Almost right away, a self proclaimed radical in the group will say, 'We don't need any more religion – religions are the problem!'

Good point. I'm not talking here about religions either, but wisdom and compassion.

How capable are we of sustained involvement with the suffering and the institutions we want to change? How many of us at times have felt we lack for resources, material and spiritual, to do our work here?

'Describe what you mean by enlightenment! It sounds like a savior-guru ego trip, catching people up in a mindless fervor – divorced from hard realities, and irresponsibly pinning our hopes on agencies outside ourselves. Spell out what you mean, man!'

Right on all counts – all the shadow sides of what religious traditions have been, and still are in a lot of places have to be seen for what they are, and renounced. That's not what I'm talking about at all.

What I'm talking about here as a greater enlightenment is getting free of our misconceptions, of our limited and limiting conceptions, of ourselves, of others, and our world; of really knowing our own depth and value, and that naturally of others and this planet; and of having greater access to resources of strength, intelligence, courage and love where it's needed most;

'If we wait for that, the world as we know it will have collapsed, taking you and everyone you so self-righteously claim to love with you! Ech! I don't have time for this, and neither do you!'

I'm not talking about anything far away, though some people may want to spend their whole life looking to understand things more deeply. And more power to them, I say. What I'm talking about here though is simply a greater awakening, that we're all capable of, a deepening of insight that can serve us well in days to come. There are degrees of awakening, and any of them would be a help to us now.

'Aw - Pop-psychobabble!', said a priest who had come to the front of the group. 'Where is God in all this I hear about 'degrees of awakening', and 'being a little more kind'? Leave out the might of the Creator and it's a weak, watered down, ego centric pseudo religion, that leaves us worse off than before.'

Well, Reverend, you have a point, but, believe it or not, not everyone can relate to your church, and its metaphors. You have your own means, but we need all the approaches to solving our problems we can get our hands on. Isn't it so?

What I'm saying applies to you here also – you know, not everyone who claims to be Christian goes deep with it. What I'm calling enlightenment applies to them also – in their case, it would be a Christian enlightenment, and one that we would all be better off because of.

Imagine if all those people who called themselves Christian, or followers of the teachings of Jesus, actually practiced what he taught- it would be a far different world than what we have now. Instead people settle for what institutions dish up as their version of religion, and then don't go any deeper than that. It's often divisive, claiming to be the only way to truth, excluding everyone who doesn't agree with one narrow interpretation.

Another thing – I don't think we can begin to measure the value of one – even slightly more realized - person for our community; one with even a little more vision, we know, is a great help – how much more so someone with real wisdom, far-sightedness and compassion? Such people do exist, and we only need to look for them to find this is so.

What I'd like to advocate is a deeper understanding of our own chosen tradition, whatever that may be, until we touch universal water, our common humanity and bond with all life, and then thinking, speaking, acting and teaching from that.

An Orthodox Buddhist spoke up and said, 'You water down what Enlightenment is – and that's not what the Great Teacher pointed to. The scriptures are very clear about this. Not every path leads to the same goal – so why are you muddying the waters with all this universalist new age sounding talk about just having more of what we know as ordinary wisdom and compassion being the goal? It's a little too touchy feeling for my likes- the 'everyone let's just get along' message, which unfortunately is not enough, not nearly enough…'

Friend, I think you limit even your own religion to say there's only one way – and that other paths couldn't possibly lead to the freedom and capacity of the Founder of your religion. I, myself, don't subscribe to that belief – it's too narrow for me, and goes against the evidence of there being saints, as in - highly realized beings - in all traditions of the world, as well as unassociated with traditions at all.

Another spoke up, and said, 'But isn't it selfish, with so much going on, to just go off somewhere and reflect?'

You're right that we need to keep a sense of our commitments. But we also have to think carefully about how we're going to respond. If we just act out of emotion, we could miss a chance to do something really effective, and plant the seeds of change.

Ani Tenzin Palmo said something that comes to mind here. She said, *'The best thing you can do for the world is to recognize and develop your innate wisdom', and I have to agree with her. There's nothing selfish about that at all. In fact, this is so important, for all of our sakes.*

'What about methods then?', someone else asked. 'I mean, deeper realization sounds good and all, but what is the way? Hasn't this been asked for ages, and look at where we still are – I don't need to tell you…'

The methods have been there forever, what's lacking has been the willingness to pick up on them. Sometimes a crisis will drive people to religion, or to teachers, but that kind of emotional motivation only gets us to the door of the temple, or church. Better to think this through carefully and then act.

Think about it: If what we really need is a greater depth of understanding, of ourselves in our confusion and in times when we are right; if this is what we really need for the more substantial changes we all want to see to have a firm foundation here, then we can start to seriously look for what methods suit us individually, and then to faithfully, and devotedly apply themselves to them.

This is something we should think about, just this possibility.

The Bodhisattva Vow

There is a way of orienting ourselves to the world that many people over time have found to be greatly life-affirming. Based on universal love and compassion, and understanding the source of problems and their resolution, it is the intention to help others as much as possible. Included in that intention is freeing ourselves from whatever would keep us from offering such service. In traditional Buddhist language, the dedication to help others with both wisdom and compassion is called 'the Bodhisattva Vow'. Bodhisattva means, literally 'an awakening being'.

There are ceremonies for taking the Bodhisattva vow, but the true vow comes from our own heart. When we have this motivation, it is a breakthrough, no matter how many times it happens. It's the dawning of a new awareness. Finding the Bodhisattva vow in ourselves, re-affirming and strengthening that can give a person much courage and energy for their whole life. It clarifies everything, and helps us to have a feeling for our place in this world.

When we hear the cries of the world, we must be engaged - Mahayana Buddhism

The term 'Maha-yana' in Mahayana Buddhism means 'Great Vehicle', and this refers to the aim to work for the benefit of all. Being Buddhist in origin, the Bodhisattva vow includes the thought of enlightenment. In this and other religious traditions, the cause of our many problems is seen as ignorance, and the remedy is wisdom, or insight, which taken to its furthest point, is enlightenment. The vow is then taken to cultivate the highest wisdom, and to lead each and every one to that same state. Quite the expression of love, compassion and understanding of what we all need!

Two Traditional Verses

In the Zen Tradition, the Mahayana motivation takes the form of the Four Great Vows:

Beings are numberless, I vow to save them;
Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them;
Dharma gates are limitless, I vow to enter them
The Buddha's way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it

In the Tibetan Tradition, a verse for taking refuge and generating the highest motivation, bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment, is recited before many of their diverse practices:

I take refuge, until I attain enlightenment,
in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Supreme Assembly
By the merit I have accumulated by practicing Generosity and other Virtues,
may I attain Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings.

Here, the phrase, Generosity and other Virtues, refers to what are called the Six Perfections. These are the path of the Bodhisattva, as described in Tradition. They are Generosity, Ethics, Patience, Effort, Meditation, and Wisdom. This Vow is the vibrant central principle of the Mahayana Path.

Yes, but how much can one person really do for another?

It has been asked many times – how much can one person do for another? What is this about someone vowing to do something so significant for another, such as 'carrying a person to the other shore', and freeing them from suffering?

While it is true that ultimately every person has to understand and to actualize the causes of health and happiness for himself or herself, there is so much that can be

done for another. I only have to think of what others have given me for this thought to become real.

We all need support and encouragement; freedom from fear and hunger; we all need to have medicine available, and enough warm clothes. Most of all, we need respect, love and clear teachings, in the form of good human examples, and in some language we can relate to. These are very great things, and the Bodhisattva vow is the intention to give all these things, all needful things, to all beings, our family.

Skillful Means

Once we arrive at the Great Way – the Mahayana, with its strong central motivation to serve all beings, and to liberate all living beings, we will utilize every resource, we will do anything to communicate the Dharma, take any form to meet people's needs, to benefit them, to speak in a way they can understand, and lead them step by step to freedom. Because of the great sufferings and needs that are here, we *must* search until we find the methods that work for us, and that are effective in helping others.

In Buddhism, over generations, a diversity of forms have developed from this very motivation to benefit self and others. These are called Upaya, or Skillful Means. Out of compassion, teachers and translators are not attached to any one way of doing things, or saying things. Although the forms may change, as long as we keep to essential principles of wisdom and compassion, then it is Buddhist Dharma. Skillful means are just what are necessary to help and to reach people.

When I think of loneliness, death, suffering, and all that is unpredictable and tragic in this world; the inevitable separation from friends and loved ones, the cruelty and madness, all the absurdity and waste – all of it – this one factor is the only thing I can think of that makes life livable. This one

great vow reveals the capacity we have to help each other. It reminds me that there have been in the past, and that there are now, people who are working to help others, and aiming to do so, and that we can also take up this aim and this work. That, for me, is the glory of being alive. Now and forever, we can actually do something of real value with our lives.

This intention makes it possible to live with an awareness of all the amazing good and all the terrible things, and to live with resolve, commitment and joy. This is the only thing, really, that gives me the courage to face whatever life may bring. If fear is the feeling of not being capable, then right here is where resourcefulness, blazing true confidence, and solidity are found. This one aim, this one intention, tips the balance, in favor of life.

Think of the Great Aim: bodhicitta *is the aim to become a Buddha, in order to bring the greatest benefit to all sentient beings*

Vow

From this point forward,
I dedicate myself to removing the suffering of all living beings,
and to bringing them happiness

I dedicate myself fully to their healing and awakening;
to their all having comfort,
strength of body, mind, and spirit,
most excellent nourishment, health, longevity
every level of protection,
shelter, food, clothing, medicine, education,
joy and wisdom

In order to accomplish the needs of living beings
in the most effective way,
I will develop my wisdom and compassion
just as my teachers have done
I aim to become free of all faults, and complete in all qualities
and, day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment,
to always offer as much help as I can

In this way, I will make a gift of my life
In this way, my own life will be fulfilled

I dedicate myself fully, leaving nothing out,
to the complete healing, fulfillment and enlightenment
of all living beings

No matter how long it takes
no matter how difficult it may be
no matter what it costs

With all my heart and with all my strength,
I vow to always serve all living beings
in every way that is necessary for them
and in every way that will bring each and every one of them
true and lasting health and happiness

Two Selections on Thought Training ~

Buddhist Thought Training describes methods for turning adverse circumstances into causes of healing and awakening, so that instead of being oppressed by conditions, we can be empowered by them. When things are especially difficult in our lives and in our world, compassion can manifest even more strongly. The Thought Training teachings then show us how we can use everything we meet to benefit both ourselves and society.

A Practice that Thrives in Difficulty

The following is based on a Traditional Tibetan Buddhist teaching for transforming suffering into the path to freedom and peace.

'When the world and its contents are filled with evil, transform this into the path of awakening' – from the Seven Points of Mind Training, by Geshe Chekawa - 12th Century, Tibet

'Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love…' - From the Prayer of Saint Francis

The idea throughout the Tibetan Thought Training teachings is that when things are difficult, these very conditions can motivate us to change things. They can be the fuel that drives us on, making those factors into a source of constructive action. The teachings call this 'transforming poison into medicine'. When I'm feeling overwhelmed by the news I find this idea to be especially helpful. Even just the thought that there is a way to be strengthened by the perception of suffering, instead of being stopped cold by it, is inspiring, and useful to think on.

There's no denying that these are needful times. For all our wealth and technology, education and diversity, there is still war, a tremendous amount of injustice, poverty, and violence in our world. We're often in a state of shock, and traumatized by events, but instead of just reacting, endlessly, at some point we are going to want to speak of healing, and of finding a deeper resolution to the continuing threats to both ourselves and our children.

Now, there are basically three ways people respond to suffering and what's tragic: one, they can be overwhelmed by it, or, two, they can turn away from it and ignore it, and third, they can use that experience to bring something positive out of it. Clearly, in these times, in this culture, most people choose one of the first two ways of dealing with what's difficult. When people are overwhelmed, they look for ways to numb out. They self-medicate, drink, use sex, shopping, tv, and other mindless entertainments. Or else they live in denial of what's too hard for them to hold. Isn't this so?

When I first learned about the Thought Training teachings in the early 1990's I thought it was *exactly* what I needed to hear. I was living at the time in San Francisco, and seeing so much that I felt I couldn't do anything about, such as homelessness. I felt I had to somehow include these things in my thoughts and meditations, and way of living.

One of the main texts in this tradition is called The Seven Points for Training the Mind, and what drew me most to this set of teachings is the idea that it says we can actually use that suffering we know to eventually bring some greater benefit to our lives, and into the lives of those we love. One of its key phrases is 'When the world and its contents are filled with evil, transform these conditions into the path of awakening'.

There are two practical methods offered in Thought Training. The first makes use of compassion, and the second

Wisdom, as it's understood in Buddhism. As for compassion here, there is a practice called 'tonglen' or 'taking and giving' where a person relates whatever they are seeing or experiencing to others having the same or similar problems. They consider this one problem as representative of what others are going through, and then offer prayers, or a visualization that others be free of this pain or difficulty. So, for example, if a person is fatigued, or is lonely and afraid, they can think of others having this same experience now, and, breathing in and out, send forth the wish that all of us be free from this pain and sorrow.

I think something like tonglen happens when there is an event such as a shooting in the national attention for a time. Writers and public figures begin to think and speak of it as representative of all of our gun violence – and of the dangers that we live with in this country, where over 10,000 people a year are killed by deranged people with access to weapons.

Part of the reason we relate one single event to the larger issue is because we tap into a greater purpose, and we get more energy than if we were just dealing with one tragedy alone. Look, for example, at gun violence here. We call to mind again Columbine, the movie theatre in Aroura, and others, and now Sandy Hook elementary school. We ask, how much more do we need to suffer before we uproot the causes of gun violence? How many more grieving parents do there need to be?

We all dream of a just world, and when we can touch that greater motivation then this suffering comes to us as an empowerment to work. We can learn to direct our fully human responses of despair, and anger, and outrage, and compassion into useful channels. Of course, from this point forward, it's all a matter of skill.

We don't have to look far to see that we live in a superficial, materialistic culture. It is also hyper-violent, in its history, in the media, in its militarism, and in its neglect of the poor. How can we hold all this, if we are of a mind to, without being overwhelmed by it? If we just go along with how most people who watch the news absorb whatever is being served up, we won't get very far, and this is why I mention being skillful at this point.

It's not natural that we should be exposed to so much misery. A human being can accommodate only so much trauma, before needing to recover fully. The news, as it is, is out of balance, and this is where we need to exercise not only our best motivation but also our full intelligence to find a balance that works for us. Many people miss this step, but this is so important, for all our sakes.

Turn off the tv and the computer. Go for a walk. Take breaks and retreat time to restore yourself, and fill yourself with the needed strength. Learn to nourish yourself with the arts and with inspiring stories. Connect with the Traditions and teachers and healers of this planet. Then return to the difficult work that needs to be done.

When we use thought training wisely, the result is that we know the connection between what is healthy, uplifting, inspiring and nourishing, and all that needs our attention and care. We find with thought training that nothing we do is separate – and that the best way to be of service is to care for ourselves wisely and then act to bring help wherever it is needed. It should go without saying, but a lot of people get stuck here, and so I'll say it plainly: there is nothing selfish about caring for ourselves well. This is just doing what is needed to bring well being to others. Thought Training is then a whole person making art. It enables us to integrate all areas of living into a meaningful whole.

The urgent call to wisdom

After the empowerment of compassion, the second essential application of the Thought Training teachings is wisdom. In Buddhism and in other religions, compassion and emotion alone are not enough. We need wisdom to see into the root causes of suffering, and to bring relief. We can say then that developing wisdom to share with others is the ultimate expression of compassion.

Part of what I, and others like me are never satisfied with when it comes to how the media usually treats complex issues is that it's almost all emotion, with little or no deeper, dispassionate thought about causes, or possibilities for change. If the tragic tells us anything, it's that we urgently need greater understanding of ourselves and others, and that we need to pass along this knowledge to our children. For our grief to be fruitful, it's got to result in more than just our continued suffering. We have to make something positive come from all of this.

Where do we start? Do these perennial problems even have solutions? Yes, and they are perennial solutions that need to be actively applied. What is it that all religions and philosophies teach, if not this: that we are more than we know ourselves to be, and that others and this world are more than we know *them* to be. They tell us that freedom from suffering is possible, and they all teach us the preciousness of life. If our traditions are functional, they offer methods for awakening this knowledge, and grounding it in our lives.

In the Buddhist sense, wisdom means not grasping at concepts as being what's actually here. When we undertake the training in clear seeing, we become able to enter into the fullness of life, not bound by our ideas. When we are not caught in limited views of how things exist, a world of possibilities opens.

Albert Einstein said something very true that applies here. He said, 'We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.' We need to see more in order to deal with things more deeply, and we need to have that sense of greater resources that letting up from contracted thinking and feeling allows. This is exactly what the practice of the Buddhist Wisdom teachings, and the Wisdom teachings of all Traditions are for.

All our Traditions insist that until we know ourselves and others in our true light, there's simply no end to our problems. But with this knowledge, the New Jerusalem, heaven on earth, is always within our reach.

Just look at what our lives together now are when greed, mistrust, fear and aggression are in full swing: it's an endless, oppressive cycle of exploitation and retribution. There's a powerful need for a fresh perspective, something other than what's taught in soulless materialist philosophy, or in business school, or upheld by the corporate propagandists in the media.

What will we do with all our culture's aggression, with its self-centeredness, indulgence and waste in our world full of human needs; with all the immaturity, corrupt values, vulgarity, cruelty and neglect? Will we be overwhelmed and turn away? Will we blow a fuse trying to hold it all? It should be writ large that these are not the only choices for well intended people. If we train ourselves, we can use these very conditions to make this world a more righteous place.

In these times especially, it's truly hard to accomplish any degree of wisdom, but that is only reason to have even more compassion, and even more dedication. It takes so many of the right conditions coming together; it takes integrity, and it takes a great deal of work. It's for this very this reason that we must help each other, to this end, to the end of suffering and the fulfillment of our lives here.

With the coming together of wisdom and compassion in this way, Thought Training becomes a complete practice. In fact, we can say it's *a practice that thrives in difficulty*. This is a path for the courageous, and dedicated, and skillful.

Once we see the great need for this and future generations for a spiritual perspective, with its sense of the preciousness of all life, then our vows can only get stronger and more clear. There is no obstacle to such a practice. With commitment and with insight into the awakening of mind and heart that is needed in some form by everyone, and with the dynamic taught in Thought Training working, then whatever circumstances there are, easy or difficult, or even tragic, over time, there is only progress.

Whenever there's a terrible event, such as a school shooting, for a short time we see more clearly than ever the great need to think about, and talk about the present day threat to ourselves and to our children. We have an opportunity within reach for just this short time while the news is still vivid in our mind, to gather increased energy and commitment to look more deeply and work to change our present day culture of violence.

We can use this event to change our tremendous ignorance about and neglect of the mentally ill in America, so that, even with the presence of firearms, fewer and fewer would even think of using them. However hard it is to hold, we are empowered for as long as we have the fresh knowledge of what's at stake here. When this feeling begins to fade, we'll again be back in the mode of ignoring the threats to our families, such that future tragedies will be inevitable.

When the world and its contents are filled with evil, this is exactly the time to change these very conditions, into the path of awakening, and into a world we can all be safe in.

The Metta Sutta, the Buddha's teaching on Loving Kindness says:

Even as a mother loves and protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings…

From what I can tell, the religions of Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and others, all aim at helping us to awaken our conscience, and then to be as inclusive as we can in our thoughts and responsiveness to those around us. There's a deep logic at work there. Again and again we can see the consequence of selfishness, or, of what only seems, to misguided people, like the self interest of leaving anyone out, of cutting them off from our society, and our care.

We may feel that the scope of the work that is needed to change the culture of violence is beyond us, but what we can do, personally and in small and larger groups, is to aim, more and more, to go in that direction. The results of not doing so are too many, and are terrible to know. It becomes clear, at last, in caring for each other, and for even the least among us, that it is *our own life* and *our own children* we are protecting.

From 'A Deeper Response'

When we set ourselves to change an injustice, right there is another fork in the road. There are more and less effective methods to deal with the personal and collective problems we face. The less effective methods come from a genuine, heartfelt reaction that something should be done, but where this approach fails again and again is that there hasn't been enough thought given to changing the causes in a way that could bring greater relief. There is some benefit to protesting, no doubt, but I don't see it going as far as it could go.

The other alternative is to respond in whatever way is necessary to bring more lasting change, and I do mean in whatever way – retreat, silence, activism, protest, organizing, writing, prayer – any and all of these.

If what all the world's main spiritual traditions teach is true, then essentially, when we're deluded, we're not who we think we are, and the world and other people are not who we think they are either, and that ignorance leads to self denigration, to the exploitation of others, and the desecration of this beautiful earth.

Starting from the wisdom that understands the preciousness of all life – not as a theory but as a lived experience, what we do and how we live and respond all follows from that. So wisdom is the starting place, and it's what we need to keep a living sense of, whatever we do.

Two Essays on Retreat

There's A Reason People Go On Retreat

When I hear best selling authors saying that we don't need to step back from our everyday life in order to gain the advantages of meditation, I want to give them the benefit of the doubt. Really, I do. A few of their points are sound, that what is found in time apart is also available here, and that ultimately we need to bring the practice home, and I give them credit for saying this much. But when they deny the value of retreat, they go too far. Their message then, at best, is incomplete, and at worst is misleading, and their methods ineffective for their readers. There is a reason people go on retreat, and that is to gain experience that is not easy to have in a busy work and family environment.

As modern Westerners, we place a lot of value on our being educated. It appeals to our pride to be told that we don't need anything more than intellectual understanding, but book learning alone, as most teachers tell us, is not enough to free the mind. We need to understand ourselves in greater depth, and that takes time, and focus, especially in the beginning of practice, but also throughout a person's life.

People go on retreat because it enables them to have insight, and access to inner resources, of creativity, intelligence and love that they can't reach as easily at home. This has proven itself from generation to generation, and in every culture where Buddhism has become established. When on retreat, we 'dig a channel to the ocean', so to speak, and then our daily practice is a matter of keeping this channel open, and drawing forth resources we all have available to use in our daily life, relationships, and social work.

The Buddha himself not only continued to practice meditation after his enlightenment, but he also established a tradition of retreat each year for his monks and nuns. He is recorded as saying that where there is respect for meditation, his doctrine would continue, but when that respect became less, the teachings would fall away.

Which brings me to the main problem I have with modern teachers proposing that we don't need to step back from our day to day life to get the full benefits of meditation – which is insight and freedom of mind. From there it's just a short step to thinking that we don't need any formal meditation at all to reach the same freedom, peace, and capacity – and *that* would be a huge mistake. This is implied in the such sayings as 'my life is my practice', and 'everything I do I am meditating' – all very hip and zen sounding, isn't it? But while this is worthy as a goal, it needs to be complemented with both retreat and daily practice to really mean anything.

The result of not having a deep practice is that our delusions continue unabated. That transformation is possible by practicing intensively is excluded from such a picture, while people posing as teachers say only that 'right where you are is your practice place'. True as it is, it's a false presentation of the truth. Usually I don't bother taking the time to write if it's just to criticize, but the confusion these days about something so basic weighs on my conscience.

Just as there is a reason people go on retreat, there is a reason people have a daily meditation practice. With it, they can effect transformation on a day to day basis. Just as in Chinese, Indian, and Tibetan medicine, the teachings on meditation have been put to the test in each generation up until now, and what's of value in our traditions has been passed on to us to verify.

Connecting with a tradition, we have the benefit of generations of people's experience of what works to free the mind and heart. It seems to me that we'd be wise to take advantage of that knowledge, especially when there's so much agreement on the need for retreat and for maintaining a practice. This has been the path people have taken for generations. Of course, it's true that someone may find a new and better way, but ultimately the result is all that matters.

If we plant a seed of interest, the result will be that we'll eventually find the time and energy to do what we set our hearts on. Without that intention as a motivating force, nothing moves. And this is where the idea that we don't need to retreat or practice is a harmful one – in that it discourages what most people need to flourish in their spiritual life. It's hard enough for lay people to find the time for the contemplative dimension without being dissuaded from it by modern authors who show only part of the Way.

As for myself, I will keep on praising those people who make the time to retreat, and to have a daily practice, of any kind. I celebrate this because I know that with good teachings, and with these elements as a part of a persons life, they will certainly grow and mature on the path.

People practicing and gaining good results for themselves is what keeps the teachings viable. Think about it. Test these ideas for yourself and then tell others what you find.

There's A Reason People Do Long Retreats

I don't think most working people in America even dream of going on an extended retreat. Vacations, if they're taken at all, are more to recover energy, or to see someplace new. The idea of stepping out of society for weeks or months at a time is not thought about, or seen as desirable to most, but only because they don't know the advantages of it.

For the most part, we accept our lives in the City, and try to make the best of them. A few people add a spiritual dimension to their living, and that can help tremendously. But what to make of those few who don't just get away for a weekend, or a week, but who decide to go off to a monastery, or to the mountains somewhere for months or years at a time? Why would a person even think to do such a thing?

Any retreat time we can do will help our time with others. We can become more stable, grounded, and clear minded – qualities which are universally helpful. What's more, when we step back from our involvements, we can take whatever study we're doing deeper, and make connections we didn't notice before.

The idea of a longer retreat is something else though. It comes from a feeling of restless dissatisfaction that doesn't let up – that there is more to our study or spiritual practice than we're able to access when we're just living in the world. There's an intuition that greater clarity, health and peace is available, and that it's what we need the most to help ourselves and others. There's no alternative.

If it were enough to just take this course, or read that book, that would be fantastic. Lots of book titles promise we can have both our full, active lives, and profound awakening, but that's just a lot of …marketing.

How to say this? I remember the first time I met my teacher in San Francisco, Lama Lodro Rinpoche. One of the things I can remember him telling me was that 'a scholar dies with a pile of books on his chest, when you only need one verse to get enlightened.' We rely so much on the intellect in our culture, that consciously or unconsciously we associate book learning with wisdom. But what's the result?

One of the things I appreciate most about Buddhism is that it's so practical. It says, 'try this and see for yourself if it works', and, 'the results of an effective practice is that suffering will lessen, until it is uprooted altogether'. As Lama Yeshe said, 'Check up!' See for yourself if it's true.

This is not a common concept here – that sufferings of greed, anger, jealousy, fear, and sadness are rooted in ignorance, and that we can become free of these. I'm more sure than ever now that we put up with oceans of dissatisfaction because of not knowing this. Not to say it's at all easy to get fully liberated, but we will not accept the avoidable sufferings in our lives and in our world if we have an intimation of freedom. And this is where retreat comes in. When the dissatisfaction with what we are able to do for ourselves and others is strong, and we can sense that there are real advantages in transforming the mind and heart, it's natural to want to go and devote ourselves to cultivating our practice, as much as we need to.

In America, in the first part of the 21st century, that fact is that longer retreats are not a part of our culture. When I first set out to find a place to do a longer retreat here, what I found is that all the centers charge way too much for the average person. What most people end up doing is going to Asia, to either Nepal, India, Burma, Thailand or Sri Lanka, and retreating there, which is what I did in the late 1990's.

I eventually found a place in the mountains of Washington State where I could stay and practice, but this experience really

impressed on me the need for more affordable centers here in the States. It could happen, but not before more of us here see the real need for longer, more substantial retreats. By this I mean retreats that are more than a weekend, or a week, or even few weeks, helpful as those may be.

I spent the first few months there just focusing on settling down, and adjusting to a different rhythm of living, and I mostly cultivated calm meditation in that time, because I knew that having a deeper experience of what I was going to study would depend on it. I had read enough over the years, and seen the results vary with how much of what I read I could actually put into practice.

I remembered how, a few months into traveling in Asia, my energy shifted, and how I slowed down, and I knew something like that would happen there as well. What surprised me though was to find myself feeling like I was still hurrying, even after a couple of months of being away. I became aware of a sense of hurry, and of tensions I carried, unconsciously. I remember walking on the long, quiet back roads, and thinking of how it's been this way for so long, and feeling compassion both for myself and others, that we often don't know the suffering we carry with us, and that we can set down.

Most of our life in the world is the mind directed outwards. For most of us, this is how it needs to be, but we know there is this whole inner world of ours that is the foundation for the quality of our entire life, and all our relationships. If that inner life is thriving, healthy, enriched, liberated, illumined, then everything we do gets that benefit. But we're not born with saintly qualities in full bloom, at least not most of us. Instead, the ground experience is more likely the common one of fears and self doubt, aggression, comparison, and so on, all of what are called in Buddhism the kilesas, or defilements. These can

be attenuated somewhat through aiming to live a kind and ethical life, but the root causes remain intact until they are dealt with more substantially through meditation.

Most people take up a religious or spiritual practice because of the suffering in their lives, and to help make sense of the world. At some point though, we can see how our practice is the best gift we can offer ourselves, our family and this earth. The positive side of it comes though.

What then would an ideal life look like, that balances work, family and social obligations, with time away in retreat? It's surely a personal question, but I think it's one we should all be asking. Even if we are not able to live that way yet, to have an ideal in mind, over time, is a powerful, creative force. Some things are what they call self-revealing, and I think long retreats are in that category. The most we could know about the experience from our home and work life is a glimpse of the benefits that could come from it, and what we may hear of it. We seldom, if ever, talk about this, and so I offer these few words.

I hope other people who've had the chance to retreat for months or longer, and who have returned to society will also tell of their experiences, and encourage others to aim to take as much time as they need on retreat to live with the greatest possible freedom and ease, joy and resourcefulness. So much is at stake here, for all our sakes.

Political Essays

Getting on the Same Page When it Comes to American History

(An extensively referenced version of this article can be found on jasonespada.com)

It's almost impossible these days for people with different political views to have a meaningful conversation. Each side is so committed to their point of view it seems there's no basis for communication. On one news program after another, there is very little dialogue, and expressions range from bewilderment, to contempt and insults.

I had to ask myself why this is so, and after a while I started to have the feeling that the people on the left and right in this country have a very different sense of our history. This is important because the history we tell ourselves and teach our children informs our identity. It effects how we see where our country is now, and where we need to go. Many of the people supporting the right wing candidates have one narrative in mind about who we are as a country, while people on the left follow a very different narrative. We may never get to complete agreement about who is right or wrong, but when it comes to history, I have faith that a good many of us can find common ground. A majority of people do still have the capacity for critical thought, and most people do want to live in peace.

It's been pointed out quite a few times in this election cycle that people on the left and right have a lot in common. Both are dissatisfied with the status quo. The left feel betrayed by neo-liberal, lying corporate democrats, and those on the right feel they have been sold out as well. Both sides feel they are not represented by establishment politicians. There is more

and more recognition that the system is rigged, as Bernie Sanders puts it, and that the 1% are profiting at the expense of everyone else.

Where left and right, independent and libertarian differ is in the story they tell of how we got here and who we are now as a nation. I was encouraged, actually, to hear the phrase 'low information voter' used. I like the term because it is not insulting. It's not calling anyone stupid or incapable of learning. There's a warning in the phrase however. We all know that people that have 'low information' can be misled. They can be manipulated.

A few months ago I started looking for something in print on general Western history that I could refer to when I compare the current left and right narratives. I'm sure there are many fine books and articles out there, but most go into more detail about particular countries and time periods than I feel is most needed at this time. My sense of it is that Americans do not agree on our general history and that this needs to come first. Then this week, I finally found the kind of summary I was looking for. A friend posted an interview with a socialist named Brian Becker where in a few minutes he covers

I. Western history prior to the 20th century,
II. the world wars, and
III., our world since then.

Over the years, I have found this general framework useful in understanding politics, and my place in the world. I see now, more than ever how important it is to have a historical perspective. It's very difficult if not impossible to understand where we are now if we don't know what came before. So I was grateful to find such a clear and concise history.

Here is a sketch of the history that Brian Becker laid out, with a few details added:

I. The period of Colonialism

From the 14th to the 19th centuries the colonial powers, the Dutch, British, Spanish, Portuguese and French expanded their empires over the entire earth. The phrase, 'The sun never sets on the British Empire', could be have been equally applied to the other powers. All of them had global reach and became incredibly wealthy through exploiting the labor and taking the resources of the colonies.

To give one example of the collusion between world powers in the 19th century, at the Berlin Conference in 1854, 13 European powers took out a map and agreed divide the entire African continent into sections they would respectively rule. In less than 20 years, 90% of Africa was under colonial domination.

This much is generally agreed on. What is easy to miss in such a dry telling of this history is the extent of the racism was a part of colonialism. It was a given that the rulers were inherently superior, and with that as a starting point, all over the world, taking land and exploiting the people there was justified. See for example King Leopold's Ghost, on the Belgians in the Congo; Rudyard Kipling's 'The White Man's Burden', the Monroe Doctrine, or the so-called 'Doctrine of Discovery' that was used to justify taking indigenous peoples' land.

These days, most of us in the West would not support or invest in products made by sweatshop or slave labor, and we likely would not stand for it being done at all, if we knew about it. Starting in the last century, there's been a sea change in our values, but remnants of the old economies and old racist

ways of thinking are still with us. They are hidden from the consumer, but they still function.

II. The World Wars

In the socialist interpretation, after five centuries of colonial expansion, in the 20th century the colonial powers fought each other in two world wars, which were wars for power and influence, and control of resources. This is a simplified telling of events, to be sure, but the point here is that these wars did not happen in a vacuum, divorced from the past, and the re-structuring of the world after the war, economically and politically, brings us right to the present day.

III. The Post World War II world

Following the world wars, the former colonial powers joined together to struggle against workers movements and anti colonial revolutions. The Russian revolution of 1918 was followed by civil war in China in 1945, and by armed struggles for self determination in Eastern Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Power and influence in the world since the second world war has been divided between the old colonial powers on the one hand, and those who fight for fundamental human rights on the other.

Here in the United States, we characterize the post WWII conflict as being between democracy (read: capitalism) and communism, or socialism. Framing history in that way, I'm thinking now, has been used as propaganda. Socialist revolutionaries, such as Castro, and Che Guevara did advocate anti-imperialist revolutions everywhere they were needed, but, from what I can tell, neither the Soviet Union or China sought an unhindered global empire, as capitalist forces do to this day. The megalomaniacs that ruled in those countries in the 20th century turned tragically far from their ideals, but the

principles behind the founding of those political systems remained.

In his essay, Eugene Debs and the Idea of Socialism, Howard Zinn wrote: "To see the disintegration of the Soviet Union as a sign of the failure of socialism is to mistake the monstrous tyranny created by Stalin for the vision of an egalitarian and democratic society that has inspired enormous numbers of people all over the world."

After the Second World War, the US and Great Britain overthrew democratically elected governments and installed or supported dictators in Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, Chile in 1973, Nicaragua, Vietnam, Africa and elsewhere. These dictators have acted as surrogates for imperialist power. They become extremely rich themselves (for example Suharto in Indonesia, Marcos in the Philippines, and the Duvalier family in Haiti, to name just a few) but they are still part of a larger power structure.

I learned last year of the work of a professor in Santa Barbara, named William Robinson, which I think highlights they way the world is functioning today. He speaks of a transnational capitalism, that has no allegiance to any one country, despite what politicians might say about trade, and that has no respect for people or the environment anywhere. Their only motive is profit. They are essentially at war with people everywhere and with the entire planet.

It's quite common to hear on the news, rich vs. poor analysis of events being dismissed as calling for 'class warfare'. What this shallow, knee-jerk criticism would have us overlook is that there is already a class war going on, and that with each passing year, rapacious capitalism is causing great harm to people and to this earth. For more and more of us, it's becoming more clear all the time that it's the rich, the 1%, with

all their political and public relations power, verses everyone else.

A humanist, socialist reading of history gives us a framework to understanding past events, the wars, past and present, and the motivations of politicians right up to this day. With this in mind, you can sometimes know the lies a politician is going to tell even before they say them. It so obvious if you have an idea of who they represent.

Now, I can imagine a split screen – on one side a person who knows at least this much, and on the other, a person with a different narrative in their mind, one of believing this to be essentially a righteous country, with all its actions past and present noble and just. Both people may be relatively low information, as the phrase goes, but the second can be deceived and turned against their own interests, against humanity everywhere, and the planet.

I know that once a person becomes invested in their point of view, it's very hard to change their opinion about anything. Once it becomes part of their identity to be a republican or someone who is pro military, or pro business, free trade, or any other deceptive euphemism, it's almost impossible to encourage critical thinking. Still, I have hope because we all do have the capacity for reason, and we all do share the common wish to live in security and in peace. In those rare moments when we are not stirred up emotionally, either with fear or anger, some light can get through. The majority of us do want a just and peaceful world for ourselves and our children. Now, how will we make our way there?

Left, right, center, independent and libertarian, all these groups can disagree on many things and still find common ground. A basic education in our shared history, though, is essential. Without it, though we may have common aims, we are fighting each other, instead of the forces that oppress and

threaten us all. People vote, or write, or go to war based on their beliefs in the righteousness of their cause. They invest in or tolerate corporations, or denounce them, participate in or fight against the destruction of our environment; profit from other's exploitation, or work for social justice. All this turns on our sense of history and therefore how we see ourselves.

It's not good enough now to argue or debate just because we have a point of view we identify with and take pride in. We have to do better. History is being written and there is too much is at stake these days for all of us. We each have an obligation to become educated, and then to share what we have learned with each other, and to teach the next generation.

How Will We Hold Our Collective Past?

How will we tell these stories, of how we got to where we are today?, of what had to be overcome; of the struggles and trials endured to get us this far? Will we just recite them like a list of grocery items?, or will these events means something more to us? Is history just something that happened to some other people, at some other time, in some other place?, or are these *our* stories?

These are important questions because, if it's told in the right way, history can reveal to us truths about our lives, and the lives of those we can see around us now, today. If we don't know our story, it may seem as if we just suddenly appeared, from nowhere, with no inheritance, and with no momentum carrying us forward. On the other hand, if we can claim the past as our heritage, where we are standing now comes into focus, and we can re-inherit our family's wealth, of courage, determination, intelligence, and endurance.

I see the image, as old as time itself, of people sitting around a fire at night, listening to their stories being told. People in the past have always known the importance of passing down these memories. This is done everywhere, in every culture. The histories are well chosen, from all that could be told, not just as entertainment (though it was that too) but to illustrate, in the most vivid terms, the dangers that were faced, and only sometimes overcome, and, most importantly, to let people know who they are now.

The heroic and the tragic both are preserved, to move the hearts of those who hear them, and to inspire them to pick up where their ancestors left off, to continue building this world for their children, and coming generations.

We also learn vital lessons from the other side of these stories – the legacies of injustice that lead right into modern

times. We may resist seeing that, especially if our forbearers were on the wrong side of history, or if we're attached to the comforts of our lifestyle, but this is part of the story too, undeniable, and needs to be seen if we're to have any true understanding of who and what we are now, 'this house we were born into'.

In 'The Lessons of the Iraq War Start with US History', Howard Zinn writes, '… we must face some facts that disturb the idea of (our being) a uniquely virtuous nation.' 'We must face our long history of ethnic cleansing, in which the U.S. government drove millions of Indians off their land by means of massacres and forced evacuations.' 'We must face our long history, still not behind us, of slavery, segregation and racism… It is not a history of which we can be proud.'

History can be a light on the times we live in. It can delineate those exact dynamics we see playing out in contemporary politicking, in economics, and in broader social moments. Of course, some few people would rather we not look at how we got to be where we are today. The vile injustices of the past, of racism, colonialism, slavery, expansionism, Jim Crow, or the era of the Robber Barons, from our perspective now, were so blatant, so obvious from this distance, that any connection to them would mark a person or group as no less inhumane, no less exploitive. But some people do want to understand, and we can make our way forward together.

To account for the past in the present is to know something of the current latent biases of our culture. For example, it was not long ago – through much of my father's lifetime, and in my lifetime, in fact, that the idea of racial superiority of white Europeans was enshrined in law. It took wave upon wave of advances in Civil Rights to change institutionalized, legally legitimized discrimination. The struggles of race and class are

not only two themes you see everywhere you look in history, they are also very much a part of our times.

The world as we continue to know it now

How are we to understand what's called neocolonialism, unless we understand this legacy of what got us to where we are now that was known as colonialism? How are we to understand modern economics, injustices and exploitation, without knowing this past? These modern manifestations didn't just appear out of nowhere – clearly, they have their roots in our recent past. We have a much better chance of addressing and remedying these modern injustices if we understand their long history.

Looking at history with twenty-first century eyes

If I think back a hundred years ago, the biggest change between now and then doesn't seem to me to be the invention of the automobile, or the computer – as much as those technologies have effected all of our lives. The greatest change I can see from here is that we now have the idea of universal human rights.

Look back a century ago, and women did not yet have the right to vote, an American apartheid was in place, and, well into the 20th century, the idea of sending troops to other countries to 'protect the interests of American business' was never questioned. Back then, an unquestioned sense of racial and class superiority and entitlement was at the foundation of society, not only in America, but also in Western Europe. It was taken for granted by kings, the landed gentry, and prime ministers, and the politics, economics, and education of the time followed. Compare this with the ideal of human rights that has become, not only more widely known, but accepted world wide by educated people. This is a completely different starting point.

The coming together of these legacies of inequality, and racism, and this new idea of respect for all people, are what we see in the struggles we live with today, in economics, the in opposition to militarism, and in all our efforts to make this a more just and humane society.

That we seldom hear the words, 'economics', and 'human rights' spoken in the same breath, is only because these been kept separate for so long, but when we begin to join such terms as health care, education, work and housing with a fundamental respect for the worth and dignity of each individual, then every policy, every elected official, every news outlet will have a clear standard to meet. Hypocrisy and the brutalities of neglect will find no place to hide.

If we don't know history, as Howard Zinn reminded us, those in power can tell us any story they want, to justify what they do, and we'll have no defense against their common deceit and treachery. Know history, on the other hand, and expose these modern day frauds for what they are – lackeys and henchmen for that same class we've always had with us, who manipulate and set people against each other, the barbarous class, controlled by greed.

In these times, we don't have slaves fighting for masters any more, or conscription, and so the only way a corrupt government can get people to do their bidding is by deception. This includes the modern twist on it, of making the US military into a front for mercenary forces. The same deceptions need to be in place, or no one would fight for them. Change this dynamic though, by introducing knowledge, and the edifices fall away. They will have nothing left to stand on. A tall order, I admit, but there it is. That's the work ahead of us, to dispel these shadows, and take the next step in our long journey together, of making this a righteous world.

Hope and Betrayal in the Age of Obama

When it comes to the legacy of Barack Obama, the Left is divided. Some see him as a heroic figure that did his best for the country, despite Republican opposition, while others see him as a traitor to progressive values. With Trump's election, it's essential that we understand what took place during Obama's presidency because it's only in knowing our recent history that a unified progressive movement can make it's way forward. We owe ourselves and the coming generation of activists at least this much.

To understand what I see as the tragedy of the Obama era, we have to look back to where we were in 2007. We have to also have a sense of this country's history as it relates to black and brown people. We were coming out of the Bush-Cheney years, the 'post 9-11 world' as Cheney called it, that saw an illegal war protested against, and the shredding of the constitution. The neo-cons had their sordid legacy dating back to Reagan, and the extreme rightward lurch of the country these last 30 years: minority disenfranchisement, the environment without a protector in office, looting of the public treasury, and jobs shipped out of the country. To say that working class people of all colors needed an advocate to step forward is an understatement. Into this huge void stepped an African American man. The country was at first incredulous, then amazed that he could actually get the nomination, and then thrilled by the possibility he could win the presidency.

The black progressive tradition is a force of nature and everyone in this country, and many abroad knew it, and knew that someone from this tradition was exactly what was needed to counter not only the crimes of the previous administration, but also the historical injustices dealt to people of color. Obama knew this and played it to the hilt. Imitating a

Southern accent on the campaign trail when it worked for him to do so, he knew exactly what kind of archetype he was projecting, even if he didn't have a whit of the same progressive humanist values and aims in him.

In a way, Obama represents another tradition in America, that of the professional politician who will say and do anything to get elected, but then once in office will show his true colors. The tragedy of this particular person however is in the hope that was placed in him, in the great needs of the time, and in his utter failure to address any of our 21st century's profound problems, of militarism, racism, economic inequality, environmental desecration or the anti-democratic influence of corporate wealth.

My father, the documentary photographer Frank Espada, referred to Obama as 'a Manchurian Candidate' - someone who once in office suddenly turns in the opposite direction. He is the quintessential traitor to the left, to progressives, and to all those who elected him believing that the time for social justice had come at last. This is a man, let's remember, whose arrival on the international scene was welcomed rapturously, representing hope for justice not only in America, but worldwide. He was given the Nobel Peace Prize not on the strength of anything he had done, but in the hope that he would fulfill the promise of a humanist, progressive vision. That he turned out to be the drone president, a war criminal, the deporter-in-chief, and enabler of unbridled neo-liberal corporate power completed the betrayal.

The left, however, is resilient, as seen by the rise of Bernie Sanders the last two years, and yet there will be much work to do, to see fully and to undo the harm done by this one man who exploited the hopes of so many, as well as the precious legacies of genuine civil rights and human rights activists.

I came the conclusion a few months ago that while Barack Obama is intelligent and ever articulate, his thinking is shallow. This was a surprise for me to finally be able to see. Some teachers would call the way he uses his intellect 'clever', and they don't mean that as a compliment - it is deceitful, vain and manipulative. The only way to counter such a display is with a sustained, thorough, and dispassionate analysis of what he actually said, as well as his motivations, in light of his actions or inactions, seen in the policies that effected so many of us.

The anti-war movement in 2017 is almost non-existent, and yet the Middle East is on fire. That there is almost no protest against our wars there at all can be attributed to Obama, and the confusion he's sown on the left. He still pretends to represent democratic values, and he is widely believed, in part because of his color. Because of that, in the minds of too many, he gets a pass. We have wrongly believed that to be a black public official in America is to represent progressive values, and the needs of the people, especially 'the least of these'. By now we should all know better, but it will take years for the disempowered anti war left to recover.

The loss of opportunity represented by his presidency also falls especially on people of color. They had the most to gain if he was legitimate, and not a fraud, and they have suffered the most from his failure to address the systemic injustices they in particular face, of mass incarceration, the pathologies of poverty, environmental and economic injustice. We thought collectively that perhaps someone had stepped forward who would advocate for restorative justice for people of color, black, latino, and native, from the inside, and as one of them. He knew this has long been the great need, and great hope, and he exploited it to the full. That chapter has been written. So much for him.

My one consolation at this time in history is in knowing that the neo-liberal democratic party is being exposed for what it is - a party that represents militaristic corporate interests at the expense of everyone else, here and abroad. It's more clear now than ever that we need a populist, third party movement in this country. This too is the legacy of Obama, if we are willing to claim it.

Postscript: Now that Trump has been elected, the rejection of the mainstream democratic party has been writ large for all to see. Obama, and the democrats' callous disregard for the working class is one factor that has brought us to this moment: A neo fascist movement has rushed filled the void left by what used to be the people's party.

From Bill Clinton through Barack Obama, the democrats over the last 30 years have abandoned unions and the working class, and made it inevitable that millions would look for leadership elsewhere, however facile and reactionary.

Naomi Klein put it this way: *"Here is what we need to understand: a hell of a lot of people are in pain. Under neoliberal policies of deregulation, privatization, austerity and corporate trade, their living standards have declined precipitously. They have lost jobs. They have lost pensions. They have lost much of the safety net that used to make these losses less frightening. They see a future for their kids even worse than their precarious present."*

Now we have someone as president who promises far worse for our country and world. Trump won't deliver on his claim to represent the disenfranchised, the billionaire class alone will profit, and many of our hard won civil liberties are bound to suffer. Much of this can be laid at the feet of the last president and the democrats, and what they have tragically become. Those who love and admire the man won't see it this way, of course, which is a reflection of the deep confusion on the left

in 2017. He leaves us in this sorry state, and with a great discord between his popular image and substance of this actions.

{A fully referenced version of this article can be found on jasonespada.com}

The New Extreme of the American Left

As American soldiers returned from Vietnam in the late 1960's and early 70's, they were met with scorn, spat on in airports, and called "baby killers". The anger directed towards them came from an enraged and educated opposition that had gradually become aware of the injustice and sheer criminality of the wars being waged[1].

In their passion, progressives in those times went too far in blaming the soldiers, yet were entirely right in insisting that the men and women who pulled the triggers, who opened the bay doors of the planes and dropped the napalm, were also responsible. Carnage doesn't just happen by itself, and the criticisms and accusations back then were calls to awaken the conscience of the soldier and the nation- they were cries for justice, for humanity, and for an end to the cruelty and abomination of wars of aggression.

Many veterans themselves, aware that they had been deceived, turned into activists against the war. The picture that emerged over time was then one of a public, reunited with the foot soldiers, against the American empire that had used our resources and men and women's lives for geo-political ends, in immoral and unjustified wars. There was a period of grief, and of remorse for blaming the soldiers, for criticizing them so harshly when they too were among the manipulated. The administration didn't care about their lives either. Looking back, we can say those in the armed forces in that time were victims as well. These military men and women, however, were not held up then as heroes, or exalted for their sacrifice.

---

[1] For those who disagree with this statement, see Confronting Revisionist History - On the Vietnam Veteran Experience, on jasonespada.com

Fast forward to 2015. Since the end of the Vietnam War, the United States government has continued to be the aggressor in one war after another, and there is now a new extreme in what remains of the American Left. Whereas before we had soldiers vilified for their actions – today there is no criticism of them at all. Instead, many of the leading voices of the public Left are either silent, or have nothing but reverence for the modern soldier. They praise their courage and sacrifice, as if these were virtues all by themselves.

In the American Left, there is now a vast gulf between opposing modern wars and any sense that the military men and women are responsible for heinous, criminal acts. The pendulum has swung in the opposite direction –from condemnation of deceived victim-soldier all the way to praise and honor and deference being given them for their dedication, as separate from the particular wars we are now engaged in in the Middle East.

Look at Michael Moore, or listen to everyone from Cornel West to Rachel Maddow and Jon Stewart – the public voices of the Left. They extend unconditional respect to the people in the military while supposedly being against war. Things were more clear when Bush II was president, yet even then, there was little or no denunciation of soldiers, or of the armed forces as a profession in these times.

When the wars are wrong, each action of the military is an extension of that injustice. It is possible to point to an action and say unequivocally that it is wrong, unjust, immoral, without condemning the person, and I think that is the lesson to be taken from the protests of the 60's and 70's. The American Left, as it is now, has lost its voice, its courage, its moral clarity. It sees no connection between benighted foreign policy and the actions of the young men and women today who are in the armed forces. When we are not willing to speak

out against their destructive acts we have lost some part of our soul.

Educated or not, believing in an American superiority or unquestioning in their allegiance, the men and women in the Marines and Navy, Air Force and Army today all have a moral responsibility for their actions. If we oppose the wars this country is engaged in now, seeing them as unjust, as extensions of empire, as barbarous, then while our political leaders deserve the greater part of the blame, the manipulated, the deceived of this generation have also earned their share.

The real danger in this new extreme of praising the military men and women who carry out American foreign policy is that another generation will think there is nothing wrong with this as a profession these days, and that it is something to be celebrated. A new generation will follow and be the victims the predator class we've always had with us. They will carry out acts of aggression, as their predecessors did. They will go without knowledge, and without conscience to their mission, and innocent men, women, and children will die and be maimed because of it.

American Sniper was the highest grossing film of 2014. This jingoistic tale of a psychopath was seen by millions of people with a radically different national history in their minds- one in which a killer such as Chris Kyle deserves to be celebrated. These same people either think Vietnam was justified, or they don't think about it at all; they think all our wars now on the people in the Middle East are righteous as well, and once you cross that line, then anything can be justified. Right here we can see that history is literally a matter of life and death. We forget history that isn't told in each generation, and when we forget, we have no reference point for where we are now.

What is this country about now? Where have we been these last decades, and have we been on the right side of history?

The American war in Vietnam was initiated and sustained through a succession of lies to the American public. Eventually a collective opposition brought that tragic and criminal chapter to a close, but this is not how it is always taught.

Our country can learn from how South Africa has tried to reconcile with its past. An American Truth and Reconciliation Commission would go a long way towards healing the divisions in this country over its past wars. We can also learn from how Japan and Germany regarded their soldiers who fought in their wars of aggression - since the Second World War, both of those countries have turned away from Nationalism, and uniformly renounced the extremism of that generation.

By comparison, time and again, America has not come to terms with its past. Columbus Day is still a national holiday, for crying out loud. Andrew Jackson is still on the twenty dollar bill. We still have memorials to Confederate soldiers and Confederate flags "the American swastika" - all over the South, and there is still disagreement about the morality of what was done in Vietnam. We are still a divided nation when it comes to that history, and it's one reason men and women have been willing to fight in subsequent wars, still naively believing the United States to be a force for good.

In Japan they have a war memorial called the Yasukuni Shrine, and whenever a Japanese Prime Minister visits to pay his respects, there are protests from Singapore to Korea, Taiwan and in China. Not only are the soldiers who fought on the aggressors' side and committed atrocities denied praise, even those who would give them respect, such as media figures and politicians, are repudiated.

Wars are and have always been a descent into madness. Again and again, ordinary people become capable of great

brutality. If violence, or wars are necessary, they should only be entered into as a last resort, when every other effort to secure peace has failed. That is the standard on which the entire spectrum from left to right agrees. Where we part ways now is in the struggle over telling our history. This is what brings us to where we see ourselves today, and to what we feel is either justified, or a grave violation of human rights.

One biography of the humanitarian photographer W. Eugene Smith is entitled Let Truth Be the Prejudice, and it is only if we can arrive there in our dialogue that all of our interests will be served. We do not have a venerable tradition of debate in this country of ours – instead we have the left and right each preaching to their committed choirs, so sure of themselves, and having nothing but insults for the other side.

I've given up on trying to change anyone's mind about anything politically. In all my years, I've never seen it happen where someone changes their point of view because of an argument. Instead, what I continue to hope for is that people will make an effort to become educated, and not just cling to their opinions, or blindly believe what they have been told. In each generation where there is dis-illusion about what the government sold us, we advance. There is anger first, yes, and there is grief, but there is finally redemption.

Praising the modern soldier faces in exactly the opposite direction; it faces away from justice, away from healing. By this action, the left has become the right in it's support of war carried forward by innocent hands. This new extreme, well meaning but misguided, is a cataract, a moral blindness that serves neither the soldier, nor his or her victims. It is the opiate of Nationalism that needs the radical cure of respect, love and care for all humanity. In this, true scales are set, we teach, and actions have consequences on every level, from president to private.

Was Anyone Thrown Out?

{Written after reading "Buddhists Go to the White House", published in Lion's Roar, on May 15th, 2015 - so you might want to read that first}

Here is another chapter in this tragic story
of weakness in the guise of religion
that began decades ago,
and now if you want to see
just what the shadow of the 60's -
aversion to creative conflict where necessary -
looks like, here it is:
all soft 'round the edges, disempowered,
a neutered, falsetto activism
almost, almost, but not all that's left of the left

I'm sure in their own day
church leaders vied jealously
for the chance to have tea and a photo op
with Pinochet, Somoza, Mugabe, Nixon, Bush – brutal men all
and yet, somehow, they competed to be the official voice
and National Image of their religion
and to run cover for crimes being committed then

Not speaking out against them right in their presence,
it is code, don't you see
that you acquiesce, and worse,
that you then can be used to say,
"Look here how allied we are with the just!"
But Buddhists too?,
and today, when we know so much more?

So here is all I really want to know:
Did anyone adamantly refuse to enter?
Did anyone remain outside the White House
tears streaming down their cheeks, bearing witness?

because those are the teachers that I would follow,
their dialogue far more penetrating and eloquent
in these cruel times

Didn't you see the sign
The Great Maw Welcomes You,
and once inside,
weren't you reminded at every turn
that only hushed, reverential tones would be permitted?

Sometimes you need to call a person's name sharply
to draw them from their deep unconscious mania
and so, once inside,
did anyone dare to raise their holy voice
and call for the arrest and trial in the World Court
of our Drone President, and his predecessors?,
did anyone get thrown out?,
or, did you all somehow forget just now,
how unprovoked wars of aggression
are the supreme international war crime?

What? No? No one spoke out!?
Then leaders, you can keep your titles today–
I am finished with such weak tea as this -
and even the word Buddhist -
you can keep it
if it's to be emptied of even common sense,
or skill,

if it would court polite discourse
with mass murderers and sociopaths,
be ignored, and call that progress

O, how far we have fallen
from the days of speaking
for those who have no voice,
and doesn't even everyday compassion
let alone of those who would call themselves religious
demand more of us all?

You may not want to hear this, I know, I know,
but even if it is difficult,
and even if it goes against my being sociable with all of you,
when you are on your cushion today,
I will plead with you again
to take the measure of what courage might be

A Different Response to War

People fall into three camps when it comes to America's wars: there are those who unquestioningly accept these as necessary, and unavoidable, if tragic; a second, much larger group wants nothing to do with our nation's history – having divorced themselves from any association with it, they feel removed from any responsibility for it at all; a third group sees the evils that have been committed by our government, with our tax dollars, wasting lives and depleting resources that are needed here;

Many in this last group bay for blood when new or old information comes to light about the crimes of government officials in the past, such as those of Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon, LBJ, Reagan, Bush and Cheney, right up to Barack Obama, our current president. Yet I would like to propose another response to war making that is not covered in any of the above. I would like to suggest the idea of *finding guilt without punishment*.

I know this may sound very strange, impractical, unjust, and impossible to achieve, but if there is a thread of truth to what I'm about to say, then this may offer another possibility when faced with crimes of the magnitude of what was done in South East Asia in the '60's and '70's, in Central America in the1980's, and now in the Middle East, from the early 1990's to present.

When Obama ran against John McCain in 2008, much was made of McCain's status as a 'war hero'. This was never challenged, by Obama or in the media. If it was analyzed anywhere, it was well off the radar for most Americans. I said at the time that if he wanted to run with that as one of his qualifications to lead the country, then it should be brought

out into the open. The man dropped bombs on people. How many did he kill?, and *was he fighting a just cause* in doing so?

The right or wrong of Vietnam is a debate we have not finished in this country, and, as I would like to describe here, not seeing this through on a national level leaves the way open for still more deception, for the depravity of more wars where innocents are killed abroad, and young Americans maimed and killed for no good reason.

The left is so weak now, that what passes for a public progressive here has no criticism of the modern 'good soldier', but only unalloyed praise. Just where did those on the left lose their moral courage? If the cause is wrong, unjust, and the government immoral, then have pity for the soldier, but don't exalt his or her so-called 'heroism', or try to separate what they do from the barbarity, illegality and destructiveness of their actions. Popular newscasters and spokesmen on the left are confused, wanting to side with the soldier, and yet also wanting to oppose these wars.

When former president Ford passed away, I took it as a chance to look at his legacy. Ford pardoned Nixon, and the highest ranking criminal in our nation walked away, not only without being punished in any way, but, what was worse, with some ambiguity in the minds of American people about what he had done. In the years that followed his resigning from office, there have been schools and libraries named after him.

After Nixon, we got Reagan, who went much further than Nixon in the Iran – Contra scandal to subvert the constitution, and establish a new code of executive level immunity from breaking the law. After Reagan we got Bush and Cheney, who again went exponentially further than their predecessors, shredding the constitution and robbing the treasury to give to corporations.

Today, Obama continues the shameful legacy of authoritarian criminality.

I know there are a lot of well meaning people who want to avoid thoughts of revolution, as the only way to change a system. In the history of revolutions, we can read the same story told over and over again, of people being pushed and exploited without limit, and exhausting every legal option, before taking up arms.

The neo cons play on people's respect for the law and the reluctance to fight back. Yet there is nothing ethical about them. They hide behind laws, but then overrule, or find ways around them altogether. The uninformed, the misinformed, the deceived, support them, and carry out their orders. It would seem that only in playing their own game better than the right could we hope to change an unjust system.

I see one factor though that has the potential to slow, and change the course of the rule by the few, at the expense of the many; I can think of one method that can take apart the machinery of war, and that is – to tell the truth about this country's past.

Right there, as soon as I say or think this, the thought rises up, of how what we may call justice is so often linked to retribution; that most of the time, people want those who caused suffering to suffer; we want to see them in jail or worse. This is opposed naturally by those who just want to live in peace now; the past is past, they will say, let us move forward;

It would also, without question, be opposed by everyone who had anything to do with war making – from the generals and their families, going back generations, on down to the pilots and soldiers and their families and friends; from military contractors to the politicians who were their advocates, and all those who were complicit; few would be

exempt, and so there's the fear of where this would lead, were we really to open that Pandora's box.

This shows a lack of imagination, and what's worse, it leaves intact the roots of the crimes this country has committed in the past. With these factors still in play in public consciousness, political leaders and the profit driven forces they represent can again exploit and manipulate people into wars of aggression. Finding our country's leaders guilty, without seeking merely to punish those few individuals may not be emotionally satisfying for those who have felt wronged or betrayed by them, but the aim goes much further than singling out a handful of people for revenge. Admittedly, there's no 'thrill' here, if you could call it that, but only what could be a fruitful grief over the inhumane actions done by this country. Veterans against the war show how this is possible.

If people in America had really come to terms across religious, economic and geographical lines with what was done in South East Asia; if we had really known the extent of the lies and the atrocities that were committed there, there would have been less willingness to take the government's word on anything after that, or to go to war. Maybe then the aggression against Central American people, and the people in the Middle East would not have happened as it did.

The interesting thing about both lies, and the truth is that they are perennial - always in season. Governments need people to believe in the righteousness of their cause, or no one would follow the drum beat. By the same token, telling history as it actually happened is always what we need to do, opposed as it will be.

Tell me - What other force can disarm the generals?, what other creative, non-violent power can stop the machinery of war?

Who were the Hitler's, the Mao's, the Kissingers, the Reagans, and the Bushes, the Obamas other than incredibly deluded men who went on to lie and deceive a great number of people? Without the consent of the public, they would have been no more dangerous than a lunatic raving in a dark alley. To paraphrase the constitution, they derive their power from the consent of deceived people. Take that away, and they have nothing, no troops, no armaments industries, no dock workers willing to load and unload munitions, no foot soldiers.

We can look for examples of finding a person or group guilty, without seeking retribution. It has been done before. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa comes to mind here. It's purpose has been to make a way forward out of a violent past. It did this not by ignoring what had happened, but by holding it up for everyone to see, and to remember.

This is our best protection. Without knowing our history, we're at the mercy of those who would perpetuate the long night of war for profit, the holding on to and building the wealth of the few at the expense of the many.

Some may argue that it's always been like this, and that nothing is going to change, but great changes have happened, in fact we're living them now. This may be hard to see, without reflection, and without a study of our history, but we're right in the middle of it.

For just one example, consider how much we as a nation have turned away from racism. We still have a long way to go to erase this stain, and to entirely eliminate racist views, true, but compared to a hundred years ago we can only describe the difference in attitudes here as a sea-change.

One sign of how far we've come is that we elected a black man president in 2008. Quite apart from the crimes he's committed since coming to office, in the 50's, 60's, and 70's,

and even later than that, this would have been inconceivable. Just ask anyone who lived through those decades.

My point is that if views on race can change so substantially, in less than half a century, so can what we think about the past and present militarism of this country. Who knows what we're capable of?

Just as what we are taught about race has changed dramatically, so can we change what we teach about war, and the cruelty and violence that some Americans have done, and continue to do, right up to today. We suffer, and wars go on, for lack of any historical memory.

Another place we can look, for a response to war that goes beyond mere retribution, so that no generation repeats the crimes of the past, is to late twentieth century Germany and Japan. They institutionally, and extensively teach the immorality of the men who committed the ultimate crime of going to war. This is the best protection against it happening again. This is what we need here, though it would seem we're far from it now.

Many people here are indulgent, self-centered, unconcerned, or feel disempowered, but this is only part of the story. Remember February 15th, 2003. I'd like to see it become a national holiday, commemorating the best that's in us. That was the day when millions of people across this nation and in cities all over the world protested against the war the American leaders were getting ready to launch against the people of Iraq. To my mind, this was an incredible event, almost unbelievable, and something that deserves to be marked on the calendar and celebrated every year.

When in history have people every protested, on such a scale, *before* a war even began? Not only that, but the protests took place all over the world. Overwhelmingly, as a group, as a species, we were of one mind, of one heart. That the war went

forward anyway, with catastrophic consequences for the Iraqi people is a terrible fact we're all still living with now. But we shouldn't forget that, on that day, people worldwide stood up, and stood together, against militarism, and wars of aggression for profit's sake. This gives me hope, because you don't kill a thought like that – this is what is redeeming in all of this, when I remember that our story is still being written.

Can we hold up Abu G'rhab and say, 'never again'?

Can we look at drone warfare and call it immoral, and call those who bomb innocents war criminals, and, more than that, say, *we stand against this, forever?*

I want more than retribution. I want to see the end of blind allegiance to the flag and militarism in this country. We're so much better than that.

So let the truth go out. Find someone who still hasn't made up their mind on what was done in our name to the people in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, or in Central America, or in Iraq, and tell them it's important to cross that invisible boundary and be able to repudiate unjust war on innocents.

I know why people defend this government, against all reason, and it's because they still have an all or nothing mentality when it comes to war, or crimes against humanity. But how can we move forward if we don't acknowledge the past, all the right and wrong of it, all the good and evil of it? 'To move forward' means we don't repeat the mistakes of the past, forever, because we have been able at last to learn our lesson.

{reading now: A People's History of the United States, by Howard Zinn; listening to: Mozart Flute Concertos, and The Speeches of Martin Luther King; also recommended: Lies My Teacher Told Me, by James Louwen; and Confessions of an Economic Hit Man, by, John Perkins, and the documentary

films 'Why We Fight', and 'You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train'.}

How to End War

I have great faith in our intrinsic potential to solve our problems down to their very roots, even those that seem deeply entrenched in our psyche and culture. What we need to do is use all our resources, and we must be without fear to be able to do so.

For the most part, up until now we have dealt with war by reacting to it, with fear, anger and aggression. By the time we have Hitlers and Maos, Assads and Cheneys and Obamas, it's too late to do anything more than try to stop their destructive acts. When the history of this world is little more than such reacting, it's clear that we need something more. We need to look deeper, and move towards resolving violence and the organized violence we call war in more substantial ways.

In Buddhism they say that everything that arises is due to causes and conditions. To look into the causes of violence in ourselves and societies we need to be able to do more than react blindly. We need to look dispassionately and over a sustained period of time into the causes of aggression. We can then gradually transform the roots of violence, if we make the effort. There are models of health and sanity bequeathed to us by many Traditions and the wise who have come before us, and those who are with us now. In their own language, they each tell us that there are ways to live free of war in ourselves and this world, and in their own way the traditions also show us how this can be done. As evidenced by the saints each tradition has produced, their methods work, but only if we apply ourselves.

If we are to arrive at a world without war, it will be necessary at some point for a critical mass of people who embody wisdom and peace to tip the balance in our collective lives, and if this is to happen, it can only start with individuals, with you and me.

When I look at this beautiful earth, and our beautiful, inspiring children, I can only speak of peace, and the universal wish that this planet last a long time, for this and future generations. I enter into and reawaken in me a timeless song, and I sing out, inviting you to join us. The way is long, and hard winds move over the face of our earth, but there is no other way.

From Ending Racism

On the Need for a Spiritual Perspective When Healing Racism

For Cornel West, Chris Hedges, and Thich Nhat Hanh

Homage to all teachings that lead out of suffering

A contemplative of any tradition can offer a unique perspective on healing the effects of racism. They can bring qualities of restorative energy, as well as insights not found in the ideas of intellectuals, and social philosophers. This is something that is denied by materialists, of course, but what we are left with then is often a barren ideology, depressing, abstract, and removed from the earth, the heart and the body.

Most social philosophers are children of the Enlightenment, and they rely almost entirely on reason, denying other means of knowing, and working, other Agencies that can factor into our work. When I think of what spiritual traditions offer to people and to our activism, I see it is the same both for the individual, and the group: they offer us vision, as well as methods to help us achieve our aims.

To me, all contemplative traditions, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, as well as Native and other religions, lead to an experience of depth, the sacredness of this life, our equality and unity with all others. That a practice of a religion sometimes doesn't lead to these experiences, but instead fosters their opposites - pride, exclusivity, mere intellectualization, and fantasy is not the fault of the tradition. It's more accurate to call that the corrupt use of a religion.

The value of this perspective is that it holds all the differences in the larger context of our shared humanity. When this view is embodied, and more than merely an idea, it is a deeply sustaining force for an activist. In addition to the larger, more encompassing view, this is also a greatly life affirming vision; it is joyful, and endlessly dedicated by its nature.

Materialists, or Marxist philosophers may analyze inequality, and the dynamics of class, and even propose egalitarian ideals, but they are often lacking this uplifting view of the preciousness of life. Some people make their way to secular humanism, or to what can be called a 'secular mysticism' - seeing the unity and value of all lives, and base their work on that. The problem comes though when the secular aspect dominates, and there is not enough support to sustain that view. The fact that there are religious and spiritual traditions means that we don't have to go it alone. Traditions and teachers at their best have worked out the ways of knowing deep truth, and living from there. That is their function. If we connect with one or more of them, they should clarify for us what is essential.

The purpose of life is more than material survival and growth, the accumulation of wealth, security and pleasure, as materialists imply. It is the maturation and flourishing of our inner life. This view is quite different from Marxism, Communism or Socialism alone, right from the beginning, and as a reference point in social justice work.

Of course, we don't need religion to reach the truth about ourselves and our being here. Any person of depth and moral substance can reach universal water. What traditions can do is to put us in touch with like minded people, so that the clarity and power of what they have found can become part of our world-view, and our work.

In addition to the view that serves as a basis for activism, contemplatives and religious traditions also offer methods to accomplish our aims. Often books of social analysis will leave methods for the last few pages, and they are often unsatisfying for that reason. They usually leave us with a deeper or more detailed understanding of the problems we face, but without much in the way of concrete steps that can be taken to bring change.

At their best, spiritual traditions are repositories of practical wisdom, the hard earned experience of previous generations, their gifts to us, motivated by love. Although the challenges we face are new in this generation, we should never think we are the first or only ones to ever face threats. We are wise if we are humble and receptive enough to learn from others.

The place of renewal and joy

One of the main differences between how a spiritual person and an academic would approach activism is in their degree of self awareness, and self care. The scholar or protester is primarily turned outwards. By comparison, the contemplative activist, everywhere they are found, has self knowledge, and self discipline as the foundation for their work in the world.

With sobriety and ethics as a basis, the contemplative then gives time to retreat, to reflection, prayer, and renewal, as well as to analysis. They access deep sources of comfort, joy and divine inspiration. The result is that they are more effective agents of social change. They are able to last where others burn out, or have less to bring to bear on suffering. It's well known that someone who doesn't take time to recharge will burn out. Practiced well, methods of meditation lead reliably to deep renewal.

If the value of self care is becoming more well known these days, what is less often talked about is how *joy and being in touch with beauty is vital for us as human beings*. Without it, the world grows dark. It appears in a distorted way to the depressed, angry, and fearful person. Joy is in fact essential to sustained activism, and to a full flourishing of our human intelligence. All this is laid out quite scientifically in Buddhism, and in other traditions that teach psychological causality. More than just a theory though, this idea is offered as encouragement for us to see for ourselves.

Deeply nourished by beauty, the world appears as it is - luminous, enthralling, a sacred place. We live with what Abraham Joshua Heschel called a 'radical amazement'. We are also empowered, more than ever, to meet challenges, and to uplift and inspire others.

Seeing our beauty and the beauty of this world, it is even more heartbreaking when people's confusion and ignorance creates misery, but there is always hope.

Healing racism

Racism, past and present, has left its mark on us collectively, and it is a hurt many individual people of color carry with them. It leads them to doubt or to negate themselves, and to war with others they perceive as enemies. How to do more than just be aware of this dynamic? Where is healing to be found in just repeating, or in forgetting and then not addressing the past?

What is needed now, what has always been needed is the deeper knowledge of the ocean of light that is in the self, this essential freedom we all carry in us, victim or victimizer. If we only know and identify with the conditioned self, there is no end to the blame, and shame, no end to re-living or reacting to the past.

The same view the individual person needs is also what is needed most in our collective culture: the widespread knowledge of this life's profound, and precious nature. Until we have this, we will blindly mistreat each other, neglect, deceive, and strike at one another. We will lay waste to this planet, our only home, and the home to coming generations. All this can only come about as the result of a deeply unconscious people and culture. If we try to heal from within a dream-like terror, we're extremely limited by that very view.

What we have needed all along is the same. What we need as individuals and as a culture to heal and to be made whole is the living knowledge of the deep truth of our being here. Anything less falls short. We each need to awaken fully, and to help all others achieve this very same state.

There is a phrase I've been hearing just recently in the media, 'to be a prisoner of the moment', which a vivid and interesting expression. It means that we can be so caught up in the immediacy of what is happening now that we lose perspective. It also implies its opposite - the state of being not caught, or of being free in this moment. When that happens, we are not having what is going on dictate our reactions.

When meeting with people's indifference, or bias, with discrimination or outright racism, don't let the flaw in their vision become the flaw in your vision, about yourself, or about them. In that moment instead, become the radical knowledge-medicine we all need.

"An incomparable spark of divinity is to be found in the heart of each human being, waiting to radiate love and wisdom everywhere, because that is it's nature. Amazing!" - Eknath Easwaran

"Dwelling deep within our hearts and the hearts of all beings without exception, is an inexhaustible source of love and wisdom.

And the ultimate purpose of all spiritual practices, whether they are called Buddhist or not, is to make contact with this essentially pure nature." – Lama Thubten Yeshe

We find then that a spiritual perspective is unyielding. It is ever a source of inspiration and renewal. It is constant, illuminating all generations.

Racism in 2017 - Looking Forward

I.

Racism in 2017 is not the same as it was in the 1960's, or 1940's, or any other time. It has changed form, in many instances becoming harder to see.

It has also melded together with class and economic discrimination. The results are fewer educational and job opportunities, intergenerational poverty, poor health and cruel and unequal treatment by the law. How to move forward?

Bryan Stevenson said,

"We are all responsible for creating societies that are just, and fair to one another. It doesn't matter who did what to whom - it matters that we deal with the carnage, the legacy of that injury…

"There are festering injuries, there is trauma, and there's suffering, and these violations can't be ignored by *any* of us, black or white, and we have an obligation to move towards something that is just, that is fair, that reconciles us to this history…"

In Buddhist terms, the key to ending racism is bodhicitta - the aim to awaken to the nature and value of all life, and help bring all others to that same state.

When we get free of our own suffering and oppression we start to see more of the world, and its injustice and needs. The reason I would pair getting liberated from our own confusion and suffering, and getting out from under oppressive conditions is that in both cases people are held back from responding to anything more than their own needs.

You wouldn't ask someone who is depressed, or struggling with addiction for a hand up. You also can't expect someone

whose life is being threatened in that moment to think of anything other than their very survival.

When we have greater freedom, it's like breaking open a shell, or coming out of a dank dungeon, and standing under the blue sky. To the extent that we are free we are available to see and to help others. This is why our own liberation and education are so important. There's more than our own personal safety and well being at stake. What threatens me, threatens you. The nature of awakening is to become more aware, and more responsible.

II.

When I look now at the values we hold today, and the daily choices we make in racial terms, I see the vast inequality in how people respond to human needs. This is where we can see the persistent legacy of racism, as the entrenched idea that some lives are worth more than others. Knowing that racism is moral blindness gives us a way both of understanding the past, and of remedying it moving forward, but we have to be free enough, and we have to be fearless, educated, and willing to address it.

Last week, as we prepared for the massive Hurricane Matthew to make landfall in the Southern United States, a few reports started to air on the death toll in Haiti. The figure now stands at more than one thousand, with an anticipated cholera outbreak expected to claim many more lives, and yet the American media is almost silent. If this happened here, to American men, women, and children, it would be declared a national emergency.

It's common in America to be unaware or to turn a blind eye to suffering when it's not happening to fair skinned people, and so we tolerate sweatshop labor filling our stores with cheap goods, we pay too little attention to child and prison

labor, or to forms of modern day slavery. {See the documentaries The True Cost, on the worldwide clothing industry, Dark Chocolate, and Black Gold, respectively on the human cost of our chocolate, and coffee.}

If we want to see what racism - the persistent belief that some lives are worth more than others - looks like in 2016, in each case of unequal treatment, we can simply ask ourselves how we would feel and react if the same things were happening to white people.

Imagine if it were unarmed white people being shot down by police, with no one held accountable;

Imagine if the sweatshops we see pictures of were filled with anglo looking women and children;

Imagine if it were a generation of white fathers, brothers and sons behind bars, serving out draconian sentences for drug offenses…

Imagine if it were thousands of fair skinned people in need of simple cataract surgery to be able to see, {the work of the organization SEVA counteracts this need}

or if light skinned people were the ones walking miles each day for clean water…

It's true that we live in an isolated country, where people are immature and self indulgent. Most people here don't give a lot of time and energy to thinking about these things. Sheer economic forces have overridden what were in the past more overtly racist motivations, to be sure, but the injustices of the past have brought us to where we are today, with the social pathologies of the poor mostly effecting people of color, both here and abroad. How to move forward, except to see racism and its effects exactly for what they are?

Focussing on the one root of the problem

It's easier now than it ever has been to get overwhelmed with what Jonathan Kozol called savage inequalities. We have access to information like never before, and even a few hours of study can make us aware of so much injustice, as well as people's apathy and indifference. How can we hold these truths and at the same time be hopeful?

This is where we really need uncommon courage and commitment, as well as insight. When we are able to take a step back and take a hard look at how we got here, we see it didn't happen by accident, or without a cause. This is important to know, because *everything that comes about due to causes and conditions can be changed*. Where we have gone wrong in our thinking and motivations can be corrected, if we are diligent enough, and willing to work across generations to see this changed.

The best thing we can do to put an end to the effects of racism and classism, root and branch, is to become wise ourselves, and to help others as much as we can. This is the most any one person can do, and I choose to believe that, in time, all our efforts together will be enough.

Spread the Word - the Answer is Love

I first saw what has come to be known as 'the human microphone' during Occupy. This is where one person speaks, and those around him or her repeat it, so that others can hear. They begin with saying 'Mic check!' 'MIC CHECK', the crowd replies. This is a time when we all need to repeat the best things that we hear, a time when we all suffer and struggle together, and whatever wisdom we can gather needs to be spoken far and wide.

Even before we could process what's happened in Orlando, the terrible events in Baton Rouge, and St. Paul, and then Dallas filled the news. And before we could take the measure of what happened there, and respond to it, there is now another horror to try to cope with.

It's not just the single event that's frightening, but the number of them, happening one right after the other that has us at a loss for what to do. Soon enough though, we'll have the renewed chorus calling for revenge.

We're on a long road together, my family, and what we can say for sure is that our past has been a violent one, with fear and anger and hostility marking each generation. Where will we go from here?

It seems to me there are two choices, becoming more plain to see as each week goes by, with just more and more news that is almost too much to take in.

The first choice we can see being played out already - in fact it's brought us right up to where we are today - and that is, we can respond to people's madness and aggression with more even fear, and demonization, and paranoia and violence in return. The other choice is love, and it's what we need if we're going to survive here.

In a flash yesterday I saw how those who would retaliate against ISIS or a racist police state with force have given up on believing there is another way. Their assumption is that love cannot overcome hatred, that only a greater violence can defeat ignorance and viciousness. Someone who thinks that way has already lost. Long before the Buddha said it, it was already true, and it will continue to be so: *'Hatred never ceases by hatred, by love alone is hatred overcome'.*

What happens when we stop grieving long enough to look, and we start to view all these events as showing us the measure of the lack of love in our world? We are looking then at the long road we've travelled to get here, and we're looking at the choices that are right in front of us, now, today.

One way is the road of hatred. It is a reaction, and it makes us contract - it separates us from them. It puts us far from even wanting to understand the other, much less respond to their needs.

In 2001, when the Twin Towers came down, the US went to war supposedly against radical Islam, and unleashed waves of destruction in the Middle East. What has that bought us? In the early years of that war, Greg Mortenson published his memoir, Three Cups of Tea, where he tells of how he came to build literal bridges, and schools in Afghanistan. I calculated the daily cost back then of our war in terms of the number of schools and hospitals, roads and bridges we could have been building, of the seeds of goodwill we could have sewn for generations to come. Instead, this Empire we live in uses our resources to destroy, and to set in motion actions we will grieve for in the years to come.

Love works differently. Hard, or almost impossible as it may seem to be at times, it has a greater faith than this in our potential as human beings. Love is far seeing, both into the

past, and in envisioning a future for us all where there is peace.

We need the wisdom these days of people like Bryan Stevenson, and Michelle Alexander, profoundly compassionate scholars, and people dedicated to their core to the principles of human rights. Last night I caught a small segment on Charlie Rose, where, to paraphrase, Mr. Stevenson was describing how the real problem of slavery wasn't in the owning of human beings, or their forced labor, it was the ideology of white supremacy that was its basis. He said, rightly, that the Civil War didn't end that narrative, and so the struggle for human rights has been going on ever since.

If we believe that a racist cannot change, or that religious fanaticism cannot be altered, we will have no choice but to wall ourselves off from them, to prepare to fight, and even go out to meet them on their terms. That kind of reaction is understandable, after all. It is a reflex, and many people follow this impulse. But there is another way. In fact, there has to be, for all our sake.

We study so many things here, with all our vaunted freedom. Why can't we study the roots of conflict, with the aim of making this a more just world? With the aim of creating peace?

To say what we already know, and bring it to the forefront and go from there: we spend billions on our entertainments, food and drink and the latest programs. We literally spend our time and creative resources on so many things of lesser value, turning away from what cries out, more and more, for our attention.

It's not only that we need to understand, and to love the crazed, and the violent, and the dangerous we're sharing this world with - but we need to address where they came from to the exact measure of what is needed. A thought here and there

for them, between our moments of fear and despair will not do the work.

I can see another version of us - a parallel version - engaged, mature, giving our time generously, thinking deeply and then acting with vision for all of our sake. Can you see it too, in your best moments? If you can, then use your voice. Tell others what you know, and the best things you've heard. We need you. We need each other. Whatever gives you courage and hope, we need to hear it now.

because I can't
we can't
afford to be submerged too long
but in making of these ruins
something altogether new
all this beauty that's come before and that will be
reaches it's hand out to you
and says
won't you come dance now?

I reach for this medicine again today because, like you, I'm hurting, and I'm afraid, and yet, this is not all that is in me, or in you, my dear friends and family. And so I send this out to you all with great love, and with faith.

On the Election of 2016

From First notes; On Being Dis-illusioned ;The short list of ways that we do not live in a democracy; and, A more perfect union?

From First notes

On Election Day, Naomi Klein sent out the idea that only a real left - a progressive populist movement can counter fascism. The need now for a progressive united working class movement is more clear than ever. I would only add that this movement needs to be grounded in the knowledge of all of our innate human worth, and an abiding love for this earth. If we leave this out, but pass every law possible to try to enshrine the principles of human rights, whatever gains we make can be overturned. *This what a regressive movement can do.*

On Being Dis-illusioned

We may have thought that on a whole range of issues, the culture wars were essentially over, that lgbt rights, environmental consciousness, women's and minority rights, if not yet completely established, were well on the way to becoming so. We may have thought there could be no turning back, and that we could live our lives increasingly in relative freedom, self determination, comfort and safety, or that we were at least going in the right direction. We may have believed that living in what is mostly an immature, disengaged, shallow consumer culture would not have consequences for all of us. We may have thought the occasional protest and vote for progressive candidates was enough to assure that we keep moving forward in this country, as far as human rights and the protection of the environment went. Today we wake up, and find it isn't so.

To a common way of thinking, being disillusioned is something we don't want. It has connotations of sadness, and upset, and disappointment. In another way though, whenever it happens, being disillusioned means we are breaking through and seeing something more for what it is, and for that reason it's of real value.

When we resist seeing something, the tension builds, storm clouds gather, and the old ways of seeing are swept away. In the Tarot, there is one card called The Tower that shows what looks like the top of a castle being blown off by a lightning strike. Its lesson is that the things we ignore or neglect gain great power, until we are forced to deal with them. Without a doubt, this is what has happened in America.

Today we learned how much we've underestimated the forces of greed, and the stupidity, and hostility of the right in this country. We also come to see how much we've underestimated the failure of the corrupt democratic left to represent the working class.

For all the things we now have to wake up to, and examine, and trace out to understand how we arrived at a neo-fascist state, I'm glad. It's tragic that it's come to this, of course, but we didn't act before, or our actions clearly didn't go far enough to secure our advances in social justice, or to wipe out the cruel, ugly, and destructive tendencies people have.

This is what it means to be dis-illusioned in the age of Trump. We would have wanted our progress to be smooth and comfortable, but collectively we didn't create the causes for that to happen. Being disillusioned can be a good thing, ultimately, even if it's not at all comfortable. We're now seeing things that we resisted, or that we didn't give enough attention to before. A greater work is set in front of us, a work that is

going to need all of our love and attention, all of our courage, and dedication. This is a time for deeper reflection, and then for action that goes farther than we ever have before to advance the causes we believe in.

The short list of ways that we do not live in a democracy

Democracy is self determination. Do we all have an equal say here in how we organize our society, and how we are governed? Not at all. There are many ways the average person is disenfranchised. Here are twelve:

1. money in politics
2. redistricting
3. electronic voting machines (see the elections of 2000, and 2004)
4. voter disenfranchisement, including those illegally purged from voter rolls, targeting minorities; and including the permanent disenfranchisement of people with a record.
5. disproportionate representation (see the Senate and State populations)
6. The Party favoring one candidate,
7. superdelegates
8. the electoral college
9. corporate control of the media
10. the two party system and the exclusion of alternative views in the primaries and debates (ranked voting is the way to go)
11. primaries that decide a candidate before millions have a chance to vote; mark that, the primary system in general
12. dirty tricks, and propaganda, a deceived and manipulated public

- this includes the well financed intentional deception of the public on climate science, unions, our immigrant population, and health and safety standards

Add to this the lack of an educated population , and foreign interference in elections. After subverting democracies all over the world for the last 50 + years, the shoe is on the other foot now. Corruption of democracy in each case shows a vested interest, and their actions to gain or hold onto power. In each case, these are the opposite self determination. Fix these and we'll have a democracy.

A more perfect union?

What good can possibly come from this country's turn to the right? For one thing, we on the left and on both coasts need to feel the hurt and disappointment of this election keenly, so that we ask deep questions about how we got here, and the work that needs to be done going forward. The extent that we were taken surprise by Trump's election shows how much we didn't know about the people in the states that went for him. Despite his huge personal faults, the evidence of his corruption, and everything that is dangerous and ugly about this man, millions preferred him over Hillary. It's amazing just how many in the working class hate her and more, what she represents. If we wake up now to nothing else, it should be that there are not just a few thousand who feel Trump is their best way forward, but it is millions in the middle of the country and South who feel this way.

Those who cry out for inclusion as fundamental to social justice need to look at themselves now, and where they failed to hold the interests of the working class in other parts of this country as their own. We need to care more about each other, and our sense of identity and solidarity needs to broaden to include those in other states. If this is one result from the election, we can say the sudden awareness of a need for common cause with them has moved us in the direction of a more perfect union.

For today, the oligarchs, represented by the right wing has the upper hand, but those of us who can learn from the immediate past, and who know this moment in its larger historical context know the greater tide is with us. Bernie, Occupy, the millennial movement, the rejection of corporatism, and every advance in human rights and social justice the last 50 years is part of the time we are in now. All the forms of resistance that will now take place are the result of everything that's come before, and the dreams of humanity that in the end will not be denied.

How Things Change

(Number 59 in a Series)

If you set out to write the most optimistic words you can manage in hard times, you have to start with what we're up against. And so, piled high on one side of my desk, I have the latest news about Monsanto, corporate control of the media, puppet politicians, and a shallow and distracted American public;

if we want, we can add the seeds of violence that are being sown every day by the use of unmanned planes dropping bombs, with 'every innocent killed, a victim with family and friends' – I said I was going to write optimistically – I didn't say it was going to be easy.

Actually, it is amazing to me that people face down these facts every day, and put themselves to caring for a world that looks set on self destruction.

I saw how one commenter to a post vented that trying to change a corporation was just an ego game some people play, to feel better about themselves, but that we're 'outnumbered 50 to 1', *and I thought, Are those really the odds? Why not 500 or 5000 to 1?...*

I remember laughing the first time I heard the cut that 'old people don't have to learn history – they remember it'. Well, here are a couple of things I remember:

I remember wars with little or no protest, inequality before Occupy, factory farming and fast food consumed without questioning if it was any good for us;

I remember thinking this county would never in my lifetime, elect a person of color to the white house, and, even if O has been a complete washout, I think, if this is possible, what more can we do?

I have an image in mind, several in fact, just to chart more fully where we are now, on the way to where we want to go.

My father was the great documentary photographer and educator, Frank Espada. In the 1960's, while we were in grade school in New York, my father was helping to organize voter registration, and although it was many years before he launched his career as a photographer and teacher, my dad always had his camera with him.

Recently, I found some of the pictures he took of a voter registration drive and voting machine demonstration. In them, we see a young white woman holding up a sample voting box, and explaining to people lined up how to punch holes to cast a vote. To me, the most amazing thing in these pictures is the determination we can see in people's eyes. Although it was late afternoon and starting to get dark out, something in their look said they weren't leaving until they understood how to take that step toward greater self determination that was in front of them.

It's important to remember other times when things looked impossible to change: America in Vietnam, blacks excluded from lunch counters, parks and libraries, the pre-war apathy of the left and middle America: If we don't remember the world wide anti war protests of February 15th , 2003, for example, and keep it vividly in mind, we have nothing to guide us when things start to feel really oppressive.

History moves slowly, but it does move. Listening to Dr. King's speeches, we can't help but wonder what he'd think of the changes in our country since the 60's. There is still *a lot* of work to be done, everywhere you look, but there are also large and small successes that we need to draw from, and use to build on to move forward.

Take for just one example the development of microfinance. This movement started in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, in

response to the overwhelming unmet need for poor people to have access to small loans to improve their lives. The organization Kiva, and others like it have picked up this simple concept, of directly lending small amounts, and millions of people worldwide have benefited and will continue to benefit.

As I write this, we have a lot of knowledge that wasn't available 20 years ago. More of us know more now about the food we eat, and how it's grown, about our history, and about global economics. We also have the internet, which has immense potential as a tool for social change. I hope to live a while more to see what we'll do with it.

My first reaction when seeing the '50 to 1' comment was briefly one of agreement with it, and despair. But then something else kicked in. It goes back to another family story. This one relates to when my father was a young boy, growing up on the island of Puerto Rico. The story goes that there was a bully who was terrorizing him, and that one day he decided he'd had enough. The next time he saw the bully coming at him he picked up a big rock, and scared the living shit out of him. The bully, he says, was never a problem again for him after that. What's more, as the capper to the story goes, my father went back to the spot where he had confronted the bully the day before, and he says, he couldn't even lift the rock. After hearing this, or repeating it ourselves for the umpteen time, there is usually a dramatic pause, to let it sink in…

Now, I don't know what other kids' parents told them when sending them off to school, but I do remember my father telling us, 'don't take any shit from anybody'. That I do remember. Point being, I see, all these years later, that when you're threatened, you'll have strength that you didn't know you had in you, so don't be afraid. After a while, you go out looking for bullies. This has been the trajectory of my father's

career, and, in our own ways that of my brother, sister and myself.

You want to know how change happens? It starts by looking the bully in the eye, and saying, that's it, I'm not going to back down. This is something bullies are not used to hearing. Nixon wasn't used to it; neither are corporations, high government officials or military men. But they do fall.

If we know ahead of time that bringing life saving changes, or some improvement in human rights isn't going to be easy, we won't give up so easily.

So what if politicians are bought and paid for, while people here are distracted by silly cat videos on their so-called 'smart' phones? or by reality tv, or the latest food and shopping? There are also these days more informed, dedicated people than ever before. I have to remember this, or else reading or even thinking about the news would be too much to bear.

I remember now: Aung San Sui Kyi was released from her second or third extended period of house arrest last year. She lives in one of the most oppressive military dictatorships in the world, and has been their steadfast opponent for decades. This reminds me that things change, not by themselves, but because some people don't give up when it's hard to keep hope. So make your own list of heroes and heroines. Think of what they have done, or are doing now to fix the hurting world we live in. Share what you know with your cohorts.

I was thinking the other day how no one of us gets to work with anything more than a part of the whole, and to think otherwise is just our pride talking, and yet it is important that we do our part as well as we can. This very work we are doing now will be our legacy. Just as we received an unfinished work from our ancestors, so also the work will be unfinished when it leaves our hands. No matter. 'Ours is the labor, but not the fruits thereof', says the Bhagavad Gita.

Just this is how change happens: we hold the dream in our hands, and carry it forward, with all our courage and care.

Twenty-three sixteen – A Letter to the Future

I am writing this to my friends and family in 2316, three hundred years from now. If you are receiving this, it means we have somehow survived the threats to our collective existence, environmental destruction, and large scale war. I've heard only recently that the population of bees has been declining, and in our fragile ecosystem, this effects many crops and other forms of life. We're witnessing the rapid loss of species, mostly due to human beings encroaching on natural habitats. We also seem intent as ever on war, and our weapons now are more powerful than ever. So my writing to you now can be taken as a gesture of hope on my part, that these words will somehow reach you.

Given all that's going on these days, personally and in the world, it might seem that writing a letter to possible descendants, 300 years in the future is the most impractical, irresponsible thing I could be doing just now. From another point of view, however, I'm thinking that it's really the most practical thing I can do, and hopefully my reasons for saying this will become clear as I go.

I am writing this for you, and for myself also, truth be told, because it's of great value to me. I don't know how it will be centuries from now, but in these times, people are mostly materialistic in their aims and how they see themselves and others. I would like to write out at some length how these values express themselves, but first I should say that, in future times, what follows may be of interest not only to anthropologists, but to philosophers as well, those who are seeking to understand the perennial questions of human nature, and how best to live.

Writing and reflecting like this, then, is a relief to me as well, to step out of the narrow confines of how I usually view my life, and see it in this broader context.

One of my teachers, Thich Nhat Hanh, suggested that when we are having a problem with someone, we close our eyes, and imagine them one hundred years in the future. He went on to say that we would open our eyes and see them very differently. We will naturally have more love and appreciation for each other, and much less of a tendency to get caught up in pettiness, or with things that are ultimately unimportant. Contemplating our mortality and the preciousness of our lives here can have such wonderful effects.

Some biography here will perhaps illustrate the values of my era, and my reasons for writing. I am a 55 year old man, never married. I've played classical guitar since my mid twenties, though I don't do this as a profession. I'm also a Buddhist these last 25 years, and this is something I spend a lot of time thinking and writing about. Again, not as a profession. The last couple of years I've managed my father's collection of photography, and earned enough from sales to museums to get by, and help support my mother. My father passed away in 2014, at the age of 83, from a heart condition. Frank Espada was an artist, activist, community organizer, and educator, as well as a social documentary photographer. To me, most of all, he was a noble human being.

My father thought a lot the last few years of his life about his legacy, feeling mostly that he had failed. He had some success as a teacher, and was loved by his students, but as far as his art and documentary work were concerned, he didn't feel it was appreciated or acknowledged as it should have been. In some ways, he felt like a failure for this reason, which at least in part was financial, or the material side of it. Most years, my parents struggled to make ends meet.

I was quite close with the creative side of my father. He took me as his first student when I was ten, and even though I set aside photography when I was a teenager, and pursued music instead, we always had this language of art we could share. He knew I was a great admirer of that side of him.

I've often thought of how he did his photography even though he didn't get paid for it for decades. He did it for the pure enjoyment of it, and because he knew it had value all by itself. He didn't do a lot of marketing for his work, and had a hard time putting a price on his photographs. He would rather give them away, which he often did. When a university curator and his agent at that time came to select photographs for an acquisition, he couldn't bear to be there to see it. These were like his children.

I learned a lot about materialist values, art and the spiritual life from watching my father. There are a certain class of what I call 'gate keepers' in any art – such as writing, music, poetry, or photography. Gallery owners, curators, collectors, agents, publishers and critics, all taken together couldn't produce anything near what a creative person does, and yet in some ways they hold the keys to their recognition, and perhaps even survival as an artist. They can also be antithetical to a person's art. It's no wonder my father wanted nothing to do with them, for the most part. He got by thanks to the support of his most loyal students and friends, and later in his career due to one agent who took up his cause for a while.

I can only imagine my father going into a gallery with a portfolio of his magnificent photographs, and asking permission to show his work. After doing this and getting rejected no more than once or twice, my father withdrew to work on his craft for its own sake.

In this country, when people meet each other for the first time, one of the first things we usually ask is 'What do you

do?' (for work), which is a way of trying to get at how much money a person has, their social status and value as a human being defined by what they are worth materially.

I had a girlfriend a couple of years ago whose parents owned quite a bit of property, and referring to me, they asked her, Why doesn't he like to work? It's a very common attitude to have in these times, and yet it misses so much.

When a person focuses on material gain so much, it narrows their perception of beauty, truth, and any better purpose to our being here, other than accumulating wealth. They gain little satisfaction from their possessions themselves, but it has an insidious way of taking over people's lives. Look at the sad, desperate insecurity of even slightly famous people, and you see the deep poverty of materialism, when it gets to the level of self identification.

One of the reasons I'm writing this, as I said, is to step out of these motions, of seeking personal meaning in work or possessions, getting money or the fear of not having or losing the same. It seems at times like this can crowd out every other human value, and then what a loss it is!

If as a group we've survived long enough for you to get this letter, I'm sure part of the reason is that more of us have been able to go beyond such shallow and destructive views. When we and others are reduced to a number, and our utility as producers or consumers, we lose sight of a transcendent dimension we all share, our common humanity, and our great and noble inherent worth. If we don't know ourselves as we are, how could we ever treat ourselves and others properly?

This morning, shortly before waking, I dreamt of my father. He was sitting in a big easy chair, and we were talking. I asked him, if it was possible before to bring about meaningful changes in our society through activism, shouldn't it be possible to do again?, and he said, yes, it is possible...

Looking ahead 300 years, I know there are some things we would have in common. Although I have no idea how you will communicate, travel, and enjoy your days, what struggles or challenges you will have, I do know there are some ways you all will be the same as we are now. I have to reach down below the level of just this one time I'm living in, but it is here with me now, this common basis for our understanding each other, and being able to share something of our lives with each other.

Three hundred years ago, we had composers like Bach, Handel, Vivaldi, and Corelli, whose music we continue to enjoy. They tapped into something universal, beyond any one time and place. The same could be said of painters and writers, sculptors and deep thinkers from that century, and reaching even further back in time. There is something immediately recognizable in art from any era. It speaks to us on a deep level that we forget too often when we are caught up focusing on work and money. If we identify too strongly with the material side of us as who we are, we miss the depths, the enjoyment, and the purpose of being alive on this earth, which is to delight in the treasures that are all around us, naturally and produced by men and women, and to care for and support one another as much as we can.

I forget, then I remember again, and the whole world changes for me. I write this then also as a warning to you, our descendants, our to-be-born brothers and sisters.

In our DNA we have the full range of options for living here on earth. I know that in the generations between now and when you read these words, out of this fundamental potential, we will have produced artists and businessmen, leaders and followers, saints and criminals, confused people and wise ones too. We have unlimited possibilities, but we forget this, because of how we limit ourselves. We sometimes focus on the wrong things and so we doubt, and despair, feel impoverished

and desperate. We reduce ourselves to something that barely resembles a human being any more, but this too can change. We can regain our noble stature.

It's said in the sciences, that crops such as potatoes and apples have the inherent potential to adapt to circumstances such as a new environment or invasive species. Within the DNA of a plant is the potent ability to change and continue to thrive.

As humans, we have the same creative, adaptive potential in us, if only we knew it, and made use of it. There are things we can do to block our knowing, such as drugging ourselves, or letting our mind relentlessly scatter and become shallow and numb, or succumbing to depression. These are very difficult states to correct, and so we struggle against self fulfilling prophesies of isolation and failure.

Art can remind us of who we are, on a deeper level, as can meditation, if it's done well. There is a level of our being we can know directly that shifts our entire experience, and what we know for ourselves is possible.

This experience of our deeper nature is of something that is not conditioned, and caught up in the reactivity of thinking about our material circumstances. We should all be able to glimpse, at least from time to time, this dimension of natural peace and perfection. Our innate light is how we know each other, beyond the temporary conditions, which are the various guises and roles we take on, or project onto others.

What is called 'the natural sphere of great perfection' is beyond any one time or place, and seeing it, even briefly, shifts what we think of the relative world, of time, of our work and our assessments of self and others. We can find this common, profound identity, free of change, free of sorrow and distress over conditions, and live from that awareness.

I hope that by the time these words reach you, you will already know these things, and you will have been teaching them to your children. Who knows? It may be that way in your future.

In these times, we fear and loathe death so much, seeing it as a total loss, an absolute disruption to our lives here and the lives of our friends and families. This has to be because we don't understand life, and, embracing materialism as our basic philosophy, we turn away from these deeper meanings of our being here together. We have made things much more difficult for ourselves and each other than we needed to, and what's more, we've too often missed out on celebrating each other's beauty and gifts to the world.

Our lives consist both of greater worth and meaning, and that which is only incidental and of small importance to our being here, like what hat we are going to wear today, or perhaps what we are going to eat. If we learn to appreciate our natural and inherited treasures, the provisional right away takes *its* rightful place, as supporting our essentially spiritual lives here.

Perhaps I will write more to you later, my future friends and family, but for now this is all I want to say. I thank you all for being there, in my thoughts at least, and I hope that wherever this finds you, you all are dwelling in safety and in peace. May you all be well and at your ease. May you all have every happiness.

Touch the Present, Heal the Past, Create the Future

"You might think that the present moment is not the past, is not the future—but as you continue to look deeply into the present moment, you see that the present moment contains the past, and contains the future. And touching the present moment, you're touching the past, you're touching the future. And you can even heal the past, and create the future, while you dwell firmly in the present moment." - Thich Nhat Hanh

Whether or not we think about it, the past is a part of who we are now. This is true whether we are speaking about our personal life, or the life and history of our people, or our country. The sum total of our past is what brought us to where we are today. We may not want to think of the past, or acknowledge it, but it is here, and it influences how we see the world, and how we treat each other.

In a sense, the past is fixed. We can't change what has happened. What is not fixed however is how we now understand and choose to carry the past going forward. In other words, the present is not fixed. We have choices, and so the future is not yet determined.

Some people either deny what has happened to themselves or in this country, or they give it scant attention. But this is simple math: if we want to come to terms with something significant in our own life or in our history, we have to give it the time it deserves to understand it, to reconcile ourselves to it, and to remedy and heal its effects going forward. If we don't give these things enough time and attention, choosing instead to move on in a facile way, at best we'll get a small result in terms of health and insight, in the times ahead.

Where is this past to be found? It is found in our very bodies. If we learn to steady the mind, focus in, and look, we can see that so many causes have come together for us to be here as we

are today: magnificent causes, tragic causes, uncountable blessings, unspeakable sadness. Because we all have this natural wish for our own happiness, and that of our children, friends and neighbors, we need to look at what will secure the peace and well being that we seek. Our past, individually, as a people, and as a country needs to be looked into to see what got us here, and so that we can secure the best outcome, for ourselves and loved ones.

Sometimes we may avoid looking at the painful parts of our history because we feel we can't do anything about them. We may feel we are not up to the task of healing it. We think that to look would just be reopening old wounds, and we recognize that sometimes the best thing we can do is to leave things in the past. But there is a whole category of events that don't heal completely by leaving them alone, and *those* we need to understand more deeply. Moreover, *we need to recognize the capacity we all have to heal the past, in the present moment.*

Thich Nhat Hanh said something interesting a number of years ago when talking about the three times. He said, *Touch the present, heal the past.* Clearly, not all the ways of accessing our history has a healing effect, so what did he mean by this? *I think he was talking about touching the past with love, and with the intention to care fully for this body, and for the wounds we have carried so long in our heart, as our heritage.* If we are not to perpetuate the injury and anguish of what's come before, we need to bring our very best resources to bear on this body.

All the past suffering that has come down to us, and that has shaped us and influenced who we are now can be met with mindfulness, and compassion, leading to insight and healing. We don't need to be prisoners of the past. If we train ourselves, we can become free individuals, and pass that on as our gift to our friends, family and future generations.

Past, Present, and Future; Politics taken to the level of Spirit

We may think that we can leave some things in the past, socially or personally and that they will self-correct, or leave us in peace. There are some experiences that are like that, no doubt, but the really formative events don't go anywhere, even when the surface changes. They can be like roots pushing upwards beneath what is seen in our lives or in our culture, waiting for a chance to manifest. Not only does the past live on in us in some way, it can recur, and even take more terrible forms. It also conditions how we experience our lives now, acting as a filter, and shaping our values and responses to what we know. Not only is our own history included in this, the history of our family and ancestors is here with us as well.

Both our personal story and our history are an inheritance we carry, and both can be held and understood and healed in us, if we make this a conscious choice. We do need to step back from repeated injuries, and stop them from happening, and that is an important first step, but by itself this doesn't go far enough.

In the enlightenment story of the Buddha, during the first watch of the night, it's said that he remembered his past. Certainly it was a past that experienced many kinds of suffering and misunderstanding, but that then became the foundation for his wisdom.

Where do we find forgiveness, for ourselves for our own wrong actions, and for others, individuals and groups? I've noticed that for me, whenever forgiveness happens, there are causes behind it, principally those of understanding that it's confusion that leads people to harmful actions, and my own wish for peace. To be more precise, without an insight into *my own* ignorance and suffering, it's likely that I'll put myself down, and that I'll blame others and lash out at them. Being close to and understanding our own evolution out of

bewilderment and misery opens the way to having compassion for others, for forgiveness, and healing, in ourselves and our world, going forward. This takes a lot of courage, and a great deal of faith in our potential to heal, and to become whole.

In the Buddha's teaching on loving kindness, he said that we should extend our care to those *already born, and yet to be born*. This is in complete accord with the First People's view that we should take care of each other and this earth in a way that reaches to the seventh generation. How to do this? How to live now? We must think deeply about these things, especially now when so much seems to threaten our survival.

In this very moment, in this very body
we practice looking deeply,
embracing our loved ones, and this earth
with all our care

We have inherited not only the errors and harms of the past, but also our ancestors' great wisdom, courage, and compassion. Look within - this is also what we carry with us now. These holy gifts have been passed down to us through the generations, to be drawn from especially in times like these. So many times when we want to change our culture we are facing outwards, racing all over, when we should be looking within at what we carry, and our potential. If as individuals we take the healing of our world in ourselves as far as we can go, this is the best thing we can do. We have to take this healing to the level of the spirit, both for our own sake, and for all of our loved ones.

The following is a poem I wrote about healing ourselves and our world, as we have received it, right here in this very body and mind:

All the ancient suffering,
of exclusion, and exile,
of discrimination, and persecution
All the wounded memory, held tight,
and fears -
oh, for there to be ease!

If this sorrow is not to continue
for generations to come,
what is sought,
the vision carried,
needs to be known *now*,
as a balm reaching back
all the way to the first injury,
and forward,
flourishing through the ages

We may have an idea of ourselves as separate from each other, from our natural environment, and even from our past and future generations. This deeply held idea keeps us from knowing ourselves and each other as we truly are. Once we've moved beyond identifying with an ego-idea, understood it as a mere convention and seen through it, the world opens up. Because we are connected in profound ways with our world and with each other in every moment, communication is possible.

Once you have demolished the world which is built on the foundation of ignorance, then wisdom itself moves to build a world based on the foundation of wisdom. - from an oral teaching by Tara Tulku, as told to Robert Thurman

In the Avatamsaka Sutra, a Buddhist teaching from the first century A.D., there is an image called the Jeweled Net of Indra that describes how we exist in the world, and how the world exists in us. It is imagined as a net as vast as the universe, and

on every intersection of the net is a jewel. All the jewels are reflected in each one jewel, and each one is reflected in all the others. We exist in this world right now, and the totality of this world exists in us.

We are not closed systems. Because in this very moment our bodies and minds are permeable, porous, we can breathe, receive oxygen, eat and digest food, and listen to and share knowledge and information with each other through time and space. Communication is possible . How then should we live? How can we best care for ourselves and each other? One of the secrets of this mind of ours is that it is not only an organ of perception, it is also an instrument of transmission. We can receive and transmit blessings and healing energy with our mind. We can heal ourselves, and help to heal our loved ones and our world.

Once we know our connection in this very moment to our world, to one another, to past and future generations, and our own potential, it changes how we view personal and collective problems. Let us then bring the very best qualities of mind to these challenges we have now, and those to come, and heal it all, down to the very roots. We can do this with great love and compassion, with meditation, and prayer, with mantra, ritual, and good works, and in all our relationships.

The following prayers are based on teachings by Thich Nhat Hanh

I carry the experience and wisdom of my ancestors,
and I ask them for their support, protection and strength…

and

I see my teachers and spiritual ancestors in me
and I open myself to their inspiring, positive energy…

I vow to practice to transform the suffering in myself
and in all others,
and to transmit their love and wisdom to future generations…

Resources

1. Journalists, historians, educators, and social documentary filmmakers
2. Progressive news websites
3. Social Documentaries

These are some of the people I turn to, to try to understand our world from a progressive perspective:

John Pilger, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Ralph Nader, Juan Gonzalez, Bill Moyers, Paul Street, John Perkins, Adolph Reed, Glen Greenwald and Jeremy Scahill (see his documentary 'Dirty Wars' on Obama's drone warfare),

Chris Hedges, Cornel West, William Robinson, Abby Martin, and Glen Ford, Bruce Dixon, Danny Haiphong, and others at Black Agenda Report; Robert Scheer, the economist Richard Wolff, Naomi Klein; historian Eric Foner; Chalmers Johnson on American foreign policy; Laura Flanders, and Paul Jay at the Real News Network;

Other journalists I look to to make sense of the world are Jeffery St. Clair, Thom Hartman, and Greg Palast. Eugene Jarecki's documentary Why We Fight is also excellent;

Joshua Wilkey expresses profound truths about life in Appalachia. Michelle Alexander, Bryan Stevenson, Kenan Malik, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor write insightfully on race.

Progressive news websites

1. Democracy Now
2. The Intercept
3.Common Dreams

4. Alternet
5. Truth-out
6. Truthdig
7. Counterpunch
8. Black Agenda Report
9. Mother Jones
10. The Nation
11. Think Progress
12. The Guardian
13. ZNet
14. Consortium News
15. Tom Dispatch
16. Dissent Magazine
17. Jacobin
18. In These Times

Social Documentaries

1. You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train (Howard Zinn)
2. Why We Fight
3. Harvest of Empire (How America's militarism has created refugee and migrant workers here)
4. Dirty Wars (Jeremy Scahill, Modern day, unreported American wars)
5. Food Inc.
6. Cowspiracy - (On the environmental effects of meat production)
7. Black Gold (Coffee)
8. The Dark Side of Chocolate
9. The True Cost (Clothing)
10. An Unreasonable Man (Ralph Nader)
11. The Most Dangerous Man in America (Daniel Ellsberg)
12. Cuba - An African Odyssey
13. The Corporation

14. Eyes on the Prize - The American Civil Rights Movement (9 parts)
15. Lifting the Veil: Obama and the Failure of Capitalist Democracy
16. War on Democracy (John Pilger - Shows hows US intervention, overt and covert, has toppled a series of legitimate governments in Latin America since the 1950s)
17. Loose Change (On the events of 9-11)
18. Race: A History (in 3 one hour segments, made by the BBC)
19. The Illusion of Race (in three parts, produced by PBS)
(both available on youtube)
Henry Louis Gates:
20. The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross (six parts)
21. Black in Latin America (four parts)
22. Black Americans Since MLK (two parts)
23. 13th (on the new Jim Crow)
24. The Untold History of the United States (Oliver Stone - 12 episodes, including the two prequels)
24. 50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs. Kraus
25. The Story of the Jews - Simon Shama (five parts)
26. Seed: The Untold Story (On seed keepers intent on protecting our 12,000 year-old food legacy)
27. We're Not Broke (on the effect of corporations not paying taxes)
28. Capitol Crimes (Bill Moyers, on the influence of corporate lobbyists in America)
29. The One Percent (on unadulterated greed and social inequality)
30. The Black Panthers - Vanguard of the Revolution
31. Grace Lee Boggs - American Revolutionary
32. Forks Over Knives (on the effect of the food industry on our health)

33. Reel Injun (On how Native Americans have been depicted in the movies)
34. Fed Up - on the food industry's effect health in America and worldwide
35. The Yes Men Save the World
36. Shadow World - on the global arms trade

About the Author

Jason Espada is a writer and classical musician living in San Francisco. He is a steward of his father's photography, and the founder of abuddhistlibrary.com. Over the years, he's made a number of recordings of Buddhist teachings, and these days his focus is on the connection between spirituality and social action. His new website is jasonespada.com.

Also by Jason Espada

Living in Beauty - Buddhist Loving Kindness Practice begins with traditional teachings on how we can cultivate metta, or loving kindness, starting from wherever we are now in our lives. This love is the basis for what is known as the Bodhisattva Vow, which is the aim to benefit others as much as we can through actualizing a spiritual path. Metta then finds expression through Engaged Buddhism.

In an era of increasing isolation, materialism, fear and despair, metta helps us to tap into our inner richness, and gives us reason to hope. For this reason, metta is the ideal practice for our times.

A Belief in the Miraculous - Buddhism, Magic, and a Sense of the Sacred goes into the seldom discussed esoteric side of Buddhism. It describes Sacred outlook - the pure perception of our world; Buddhas and bodhisattvas, saints and their miraculous activity, a description of our subtle nature, as well as a celebration of the divine help that can be called on.

Ending Racism - A Buddhist View is a response to the ongoing crisis in this country of systemic discrimination and police violence. It details what Buddhism can teach us about the deep education that needs to take place to remove the roots of racism in our culture.

Where Joy Can Be Found is about the happiness that is essential for each of our flourishing. 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.

A Practice that Thrives in Difficulty - Buddhist Thought Training describes methods for turning adverse circumstances into causes of healing and awakening, so that instead of being oppressed by conditions, we can be empowered by them. When things are especially difficult in our lives and in our

world, compassion can manifest even more strongly. The Thought Training teachings then show us how we can use everything we meet to benefit both ourselves and society.

Poetry

The Life Within the Life

Shadows and Exiles - Made to Receive All the World

Original Waters

Be a light in the gathering light - Selected Poems

Open in case of emergency, New poems, 2017

Audio Recordings
{these can be heard on jespada.bandcamp.com/music}

1. Mahayana Prayers and Poetry

2. The Dhammapada

3. The Treatise on Buddha Nature

4. A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, by Shantideva

5. An Exhortation to Resolve Upon Bodhi

6. The Medicine Buddha Sutra

7. The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines, and It's Verse Summary; The Diamond Sutra, and The Heart Sutra (16 hours)

8. Selections from The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines (one hour)

9. Dharma Readings

Music

1. Classical Guitar to Put Your Mind At Ease

2. Holiday Music for Classical Guitar

3. From the Soul of Spain

About Great Circle Publications

Great Circle Publications is dedicated to sharing the light of the world. While other circles exclude, through identifying with one tribe, nation, or religion, the qualifier, 'Great' refers to another way of living in our world; one that is inclusive, compassionate, social justice oriented, and forward looking.