

Unitarian Society of Hartford
Sunday June 24, 2007
The Practice of Compassion

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Good Morning, and thank you for inviting me to join you today.

The theme I'd like to talk about this morning is drawn from parts of the service: from "All Creatures of the Earth and Sky," a hymn celebrating each thing around us *as* bright and beautiful; from "St. Francis and the Sow," a poem in which Galway Kinnell reminds us that everything flowers from within, from *its own self-blessing* – even the sow, the long, perfect loveliness of sow; from "A Still Forest Pool," a Thai Buddhist meditation in which all kinds of animals come to drink at a clear forest pool (that is, our mind), and we watch them, without distinguishing, without pulling any towards us, without pushing any away – we are just watching; and from our invocation, taken from the Suttanipata, an ancient Buddhist text, in which we wish all living things moving (animal) and still (plants) the same happiness and the same well being.

These reflections may seem easy, or not. But they get a bit harder when we turn to the most complex of beings -- "human" "being."

The life of the Buddha began in luxurious excess. Siddhartha Gautama was born into a royal family in southern Nepal and, until he was 29, he lived in palatial splendor, married to royal beauty, blessed with a newborn son and heir, and fully trained in the military and political arts, so that he could, one day, inherit his father's throne. Then it happened he rode through a park and saw four things, an old man, a sick man, and a corpse, and realized for the first time that there *was change* all around him, that that change was "a coming into being and going out of being," and that the life he now knew would, with certainty, come to an end. Experiencing impermanence, and with it the suffering that goes along with losing what we hold on to, the Buddha then saw the fourth sign, a renunciant with yellow robes and a bowl – and, with these visions, he could do nothing else but go home, cast aside his princely clothes, bid his wife and son good bye, and follow the life of the yellow robe, until his fear and anxiety in the *face* of the transitoriness of the world subsided into calm and serenity.

He fasted for six years, but found no satisfaction there at this other extreme. Eventually, he left his fellow yogis and took up a normal diet, settling on "the middle way" as the starting point of the search for wisdom. Under a tree one night, he was rattled by a tremendous experience, marked by every kind of temptation imaginable, and by a review of all the lives he had ever lived. Coming out of this experience with the knowledge of how to live in a world marked by impermanence, suffering, and desire, he began to teach. Thus, around him, a

community grew, and for 45 years he walked throughout northern India teaching people how to see that *all sentient beings* are equally subject to old age, pain, and death, and that the solution is not to *cover these up* with beliefs that say otherwise, but to see experience for what it is and to accept each little thing in its beauty and transitoriness, for in this – in our beauty and in our transitoriness, in our uniqueness and in our fragility, we are one with all around us.

On the Buddhist path, the practitioner often needs to turn his or her back on some part of the world (family, friends, a job, some kind of commitment) in order to see the world more clearly. This separation, this move into some kind of aloneness (as the Buddha did in leaving his wife and child), can last a long time, but in the end, most often, it results in a return home. The Buddha found that the women and men who followed him into the forest and then, with him, came back to the town, however, often found themselves in a muddle: either the experience of liberating wisdom was so strong that it left them *aloof* from family and friends around them, or it was not strong enough to keep them from “*falling back*” into the old ways of the householder, with no remnant of the wisdom that they had so carefully cultivated. That is, there was no “middle way” to follow once they returned to ordinary life. In order, then, to help these disciples of his, the Buddha developed a practice called “the four divine abidings,” or for us “the **practice of compassion**” – whose goal is to bring a person to the point of being “**dispassionate but compassionate**” – a paradox indeed. Or, in other words, a practice that would allow us “*to hold but not to hold on.*”

Practice of the “divine abidings” allows an advanced Buddhist follower to be “in but not of the world,” to live among the ordinary folk, but to not be caught up in the distracting web of “the dusty path” of the layperson. This goal is admirable for a monk or nun, but may not be exactly what us ordinary folk want for our lives.

Most of us live with others in small and large communities and the concerns we face are not so much how to bring our liberating wisdom unscathed into the ordinary world, but how to live in the ordinary world among all the great variety of people in a way that keeps us sane, centered, and actively responsive to world around us.

So, this old meditation becomes new in just the way we need it. The “divine abidings” meditation centers on four stages: the first develops a skill, the second and third apply that skill to specific experiences, and the last allows us to be in the world as best we can for others.

1) normally called “**loving kindness**,” the first practice actually develops something more like *empathy*, the ability to put yourself fully in the place of others, to experience the world as if you were them. To be able to do this, the meditation takes us through several stages: we begin by loving our self, then by loving *one* other (otherness), by loving *all* others (universality), and finally, by

loving all others equally (impartiality). The next two move this skill of “empathy” on to the specific experience of other beings.

2) “compassion” – the application of empathy to the *sufferings* of all sentient beings. To (a) experience the sufferings of all beings as each one of them experiences it – in the past, in the present, and in the future, and to (b) act towards all beings out of your experience of their sufferings.

3) “sympathetic joy” – the application of empathy to the *joys* of all sentient beings. To (a) experience the joys of all beings as each one of them experiences it – in the past, in the present, and in the future, and to (b) act towards all beings out of your experience of their joys.

4) “equanimity” – having empathy for *all* beings, in all of their experiences, fully and compassionately – but with no preference for one being over another, and with the view that, though you wish all beings well, those beings ultimately bear responsibility for their own actions.

The meditations, then, transform our actions towards others, by transforming our view of others, and then, hopefully, transforming these others as well. So, for example, if we feel more tolerant towards others, and then act accordingly, those others may well feel more accepted and affirmed.

We’re going to try **a short version of this practice.**

1) We are going to do **#1** “loving kindness or empathy” and **#4** “equanimity.”

2) And, in each case, we are going to choose **a loved one, a neutral person, and a difficult person.**

The Four Brahma Viharas (“divine abidings”)

Loving Kindness or Empathy (*metta*)

May (person you have in mind) be well, and free from internal and external harm.

May be happy and peaceful.

May live with ease.

Compassion (*karuna*)

May be free from pain.

May be free from suffering.

May be at peace.

Sympathetic Joy (*mudita*)

May happiness increase.

May good fortune continue.

May know joy.

Equanimity (*upekkha*)

May accept things as they are.

May be at peace with the coming and going of things.

I care for but cannot make choices for her/him.

I wish well, but cannot keep from suffering.

Suggested sequences: self, mentor, **loved one, a neutral person, a difficult person**, groups of people, beginning with small close ones, and enlarging to the whole world.

End with passage from **Martine Batchelor's** *Meditation for Life*, "**Equanimity in Compassion**"

The challenge and the paradox of compassion is to be fully involved and responsive without being so colored by circumstances that you lose yourself. However terrible pain and suffering are, they are not the only conditions of life. Pain and suffering, peace and joy coexist in your own flow of conditions and in the flow of conditions of other people. Help people recognize this in themselves and others, and help them see the beauty and serenity in things as they are, right here and now.

and

As **Emmylou Harris** says, "though we may sail the oceans looking for the secret key to truth – it's actually right here, 'in a cup of kindness, all the time.'"