

**First Parish Unitarian Universalist, Bridgewater, MA**  
**“Desire/Grasping”**  
**Sunday, February 7, 2016 - 10:30am**

**Thought for Contemplation** “Desiring a new Mercedes does not cause suffering; imagining that having a new Mercedes will make you happy causes suffering.”

~Buddha (ish)

**Meditation & Prayer**

May I be free of danger.

May I have mental happiness.

May I have physical happiness.

May I have ease of well-being.

May you be free of danger.

May you have mental happiness.

May you have physical happiness.

May you have ease of well-being.

May they be free of danger.

May they have mental happiness.

May they have physical happiness.

May they have ease of well-being.

May all beings everywhere, known and unknown, near and far, be safe, happy, peaceful and at ease.

**Reading** “The Root of Suffering,” Pema Chodron, *Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion*, Boston: Shambala Press, 2002, pp. 23-24.

WHAT KEEPS us unhappy and stuck in a limited view of reality is our tendency to seek pleasure and avoid pain, to seek security and avoid groundlessness, to seek comfort and avoid discomfort. This is how we keep ourselves enclosed in a cocoon. Out there are all the planets and all the galaxies and vast space, but we're stuck here in this cocoon. Moment after moment, we're deciding that we would rather stay in that cocoon than step out into that big space. Life in our cocoon is cozy and secure. We've gotten it all together. It's

safe, it's predictable, it's convenient, and it's trustworthy. If we feel ill at ease, we just fill in those gaps.

Our mind is always seeking zones of safety. We're in this zone of safety and that's what we consider life, getting it all together, security. Death is losing that. We fear losing our illusion of security—that's what makes us anxious. We fear being confused and not knowing which way to turn. We want to know what's happening. The mind is always seeking zones of safety, and these zones of safety are continually falling apart. Then we scramble to get another zone of safety back together again. We spend all our energy and waste our lives trying to re-create these zones of safety, which are always falling apart. That's the essence of samsara—the cycle of suffering that comes from continuing to seek happiness in all the wrong places.

**Sermon** “Desire/Grasping”

Rev. Paul Sprecher

Herman Hesse in *The Glass Bead Game*<sup>1</sup> tells the story of Dasa, son of a Raja, to illustrate the meaning of the Hindu teaching of Maya, the transience of all of the hopes, desires, and dreams of our experience of life. Dasa's mother died when he was very young. After his father remarried, his step-mother schemed to displace Dasa as heir to his father's kingdom in favor of her own son; A certain Brahman who loved Dasa placed him in the care of a group of shepherds, who raised the young prince. One day, while searching the forest near where the herds were grazing, Dasa stumbled upon the hut of a yogi deep in

meditation. He was moved by the aura of peace and love that surrounded the yogi. The herdsmen advised Dasa to leave gifts of food for the yogi, and he did so for a time until the herds moved to new pastures. He grew to be a man in this occupation and then one day espied the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, Pravati by name. He won her hand and willingly took on all the tedious duties of son-in-law in her family. Nala, the usurper who sat on the throne that was Dasa's by right, came hunting one day with his grand retinue; he seduced Dasa's wife and carried her away with him.

In his fury, Dasa slew his rival and went into hiding to escape the vengeance that was sure to follow. He found himself once again at the hut of the yogi and poured out his tale of woe. The yogi listened calmly and at the end of the story merely laughed and said, "Maya, Maya."

Dasa was troubled by this easy dismissal of all of his troubles by the yogi. He pondered it for many days but finally became restless and declared that he intended to leave – but first he begged the yogi to explain what he meant by laughing at his sorrows and naming them "Maya, Maya." The yogi merely smiled and pointed to a gourd, meaning that Dasa should go to the well and refill the gourd. At the well, Dasa's estranged wife Pravati appeared before him. Such love once again took control of Dasa's soul as she hugged and kissed him and told him that he was to be the new Raja. He dropped the gourd where they stood and went with her. He came into great wealth and pleasure in his exalted

capacity and soon Pravati bore a beautiful son, who became the center of all of Dasa's affection.

But the evil stepmother had taken up residence in a neighboring kingdom and soon its ruler began to carry out little raids on the edges of Dasa's kingdom. Dasa wanted only peace and the pleasure of his wonderful life at the palace, but he was forced to retaliate for the raids. Much as he wished to make peace, the raids escalated until his whole court – and especially his wife Pravati – demanded that he launch a full-scale war against the enemy. As he hesitated, resisting an all-out war, it began to seem as though his wife Pravati's attention was being more and more strongly turned toward the general of Dasa's army. Finally, he struck the enemy with all his force; but he was fooled by a ruse; he returned to his palace to find the city overrun and his precious son dead in Pravati's arms. He was clapped in a dungeon with shackles on his hands and feet when suddenly in his utter despair he found himself standing at the well with his gourd full of water.

This, he realized, was how the yogi had taught him the meaning of the laugh and the word "Maya, Maya."

So Dasa experienced all of the longings and fulfillments of desire, and all of the sorrow of losing what he had desired and cared for; and he realized at last that all of this was merely an illusion. He found peace at last and gladly entered into the discipline of learning from his yogi; he never left the forest again.

I am not commending to you the life of a Hindu yogi!

But the story illustrates the meaning of one of the central teachings of the Buddha – that our lives are fundamentally flawed by *dukha*, often translated as suffering. And that suffering, the Buddha taught, is the result of our grasping onto things and people because we are driven by our desire.

The Buddha found enlightenment as part of his own experience of life – a childhood of privilege and pleasure in his father’s palace; manhood with a beautiful wife and infant son. All of his life he was shielded from illness, and old age and death. But when he realized that none of this satisfied him, he left the palace and his family and sought and found enlightenment under the banyan tree where he sat meditating and resisting temptation.

The Buddha shared a great deal of wisdom with his followers, but here’s a brief summary of the foundations of the Buddha’s teachings, the Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth is that all of life is *dukha*, usually translated as “suffering,” but suggesting also pain, unsatisfactoriness, angst, or anguish. This truth about our lives may be avoided for a time, as in the bubble of Dasa’s or the Buddha’s palace, but it can neither be escaped nor ignored.

The Second Noble Truth is that the cause of *dukha* is our thirst, our clinging consciousness, our desires. Because we try to cling to what is passing as though it were permanent, we are constantly disappointed and frustrated, most of all

because our own lives will also end, and our most violent clinging is to life itself.

The Third Noble Truth is the good news that salvation is possible from this state of suffering if we recognize that our clinging self, our ego, is insubstantial and will one day end; that we are in fact an integral part of all that is, that we are completely interdependent, that we inter-are.

The Fourth Noble Truth lays out “the vehicle to enlightenment and its realization of suffering, its cause, and its cessation.”<sup>2</sup> This vehicle of salvation is the Noble Eightfold Path, which consists of Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Meditation. These eight may be divided into three categories: morality, wisdom, and meditation.

This path sets forth a way of life with clear moral standards, many of which are familiar to us. Where Jesus says, for example, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” the Buddha says “Consider others as yourself.” Where Jesus says, “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also,” the Buddha says, “If anyone should give you a blow with his hand, with a stick, or with a knife, you should abandon any desires and utter no evil words.”<sup>3</sup> If we are completely interdependent, if we inter-are, if we affirm and promote, as our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle puts it, “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,” then clearly we must consider each

of our actions in light of its impact on all those beings and things on which we interdepend – ranging from our best friends to our worst enemies, from the air we breathe and the water that courses through our bodies, even to the earth itself.

The heart of Buddhism, though, is practice, the experience of having a different relation with ourselves and the things around us, of actually abstracting ourselves for a time from suffering. When we meditate, we are cultivating a different mode of experiencing our selves, we are developing the ability to witness our selves without being bound up with our egos. The simplest form of meditation involves nothing more than breathing in and breathing out, 1 as we breathe in, 2 as we breathe out, 3, 4, up to 10, and then starting over at 1.

Soon enough our monkey mind intrudes and does its best to distract us from our practice, tempting us with brilliant insights and tasks desperately awaiting attention. Our monkey mind is a pain in mediation – but in fact it is always working, every second of our lives, distracting us from the here and now, pulling us away from what we have toward what we want, from where we are to where we're going to be, from what we enjoy now to what we fear later. The practice of meditation allows us to tame that wildness within us, to calm ourselves so that we can be present right now, enjoying, giving thanks for what is without trying to make it last forever or rush on to the next thing.

We can welcome both joy and suffering, both satisfaction and sorrow.

Perhaps this state of acceptance of what is and a determination to breath out love regardless is part of what Jesus meant when he spoke about the Kingdom of Heaven that is both to come and already present in the midst of those he taught.

In one of his parables, he spoke of it this way:

The kingdom of heaven is like a man, a merchant, seeking fine pearls; on finding one pearl of extremely great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.<sup>4</sup>

Endless interpretations of this parable have been rendered over the centuries, but what struck me about it most recently is the fact that pearls come into being as a result of a grain of sand – an irritant to the oyster – a bit of suffering, *dukha*, if you will, that ultimately results in a thing of great beauty replacing the irritant, the sorrow. So it often is with our lives. It is precisely from hardship and sorrow and suffering that we often discover our greatest strength, and the overcoming of adversity is not infrequently among the highlights of our lives.

The Sufi poet Rumi from the Islamic tradition tells us to welcome whatever comes into our lives. He says:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.



Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they are a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice: meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.<sup>5</sup>

“Welcome,” Rumi says, and entertain whatever comes. Find a place of quietness, a place of peace removed from the passions of the day and hold in your mind that – ultimately – all is Maya.

We could practice a little right here.

“When I breathe in, I’ll breath in Peace, when I breathe out, I’ll breathe out love.” Sarah Dan Jones wrote this hymn in our Teal hymnal immediately after 9/11, when she found there was nothing she could say, nothing she could do in the wake of the horror of that day. Breathe in Peace, Breathe out Love. Just breathing, in and out, nothing more; just finding a way to live through even the most horrible things life throws at us. Breathing in, breathing out.

The prayer I spoke this morning is based on the Metta Sutta from Pali, a record of the teachings of the Buddha as handed down by his disciples. “Metta” means loving kindness, and the prayer invites us to experience loving kindness and then to spread it. In this way we move beyond the preoccupation with

ourselves, storm-tossed as we sometimes feel, and come to experience ourselves as being part of the whole, at one with all beings.

[Sung] “When I breathe in, I’ll breath in Peace, when I breathe out, I’ll breathe out love.”

You know, there are parts to Sarah Dan Jones’ song. Take a part if you know it. For those of you who refuse to sing because you can’t hold a tune, just do the drone: “Breathe in, Breathe out.”

[Sung] “When I breathe in, I’ll breath in Peace, when I breathe out, I’ll breathe out love.” (repeat)

**May it be so, and Amen.**

---

<sup>1</sup> Hesse, Hermann (2002-12-06). *The Glass Bead Game: (Magister Ludi) A Novel* (p. 529). Henry Holt and Co.. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> James Ford, *This Very Moment: A Brief Introduction to Buddhism and Zen for Unitarian Universalists*, Boston: Skinner House Books, 1996, p. 25, with paraphrases from pp. 23-25.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Borg, *Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings*, Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 1977, pp. 14-17.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 13.45– 46, in Levine, Amy-Jill (2014-09-09). *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (p. 127). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> “The Guest House,” Jelaluddin Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, translation by Coleman Barks, Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1997, p. 109.