

Boddhisattva Never Disparaging

A Sermon Preached by Pilar Millhollen, June 10th, 2018

Readings: "Boddhisattva Never Disparaging," Commentary from Soka Gakkai International – Buddhism in Action for Peace; Karaniya Metta Sutta, the Buddha's Teachings on Loving-Kindness

It seems like every day I open the newspaper, I cannot be more shocked and confounded by the unnecessary chaos that unfolds day after day, week after week in our country and throughout the world. Now more than ever, it is increasingly difficult to hold fast to what is good, and to keep faith that the divine justice not yet realized will actually prevail in the time to come. When I feel this weight upon my heart, even when the sun shines and the earth pulses with life, I begin to recount: I remember the ones who have come before me. That my ancestors, and yours, no matter what corner of the earth they inhabited, what language they spoke and what culture identified them, have had the same struggles, indeed many much worse. And so I go back to basics in order to re-anchor myself in the reality of the historical struggles which are ever unfolding in our time, through our lives, that I might continue to grow in the spiritual struggle toward ushering in that vision that I, and many of us people of faith, so anxiously yearn to realize.

In a nation built on violence and disrespect, where we have taken so many strides forward toward non-violence and mutual respect, so rapidly, it is easy to despair that all is lost, that what we have achieved has been erased and we find must start from square one. This is both true and untrue: I can point to many social issues now that we regard as basic human rights that we have backslid on in the last five decades. For example, we have fewer voting rights now than we did in 1965 when the Voting Rights Act was passed acknowledging the franchisement of Americans of color. Higher education costs about 260% more than it did 40 years ago. Healthcare protections for society's most vulnerable, including LGBTQ populations, are being dismantled swiftly and strategically. Our wealth disparity has increased more than 50%. The rate of incarceration has risen 500% percent, making us the highest-incarcerating country in the world, ahead of Russia and Rwanda. These are all travesties that consume my thoughts on a daily basis, which are real problems that point to where we have lost what we've been gaining over the last few hundred years. Yet if we broaden the scope through which we're gazing at history, we must admit that the pendulum continues to swing more heavily toward the side of moral progress. I can point to the same issues that weigh heavy on my heart, but I must put them into their historical and cultural context: the Voting Rights Act was revolutionary, but prior to it, people of color fought and died for the right to get to the ballot box. Only a few decades prior, women of all colors had to do the same. While education costs soar, there's also been a 240% increase in the number of people actually obtaining a higher education. 50 years ago, LGBTQ Americans were largely forced into hiding their identity to receive any medical care, let alone walk freely in many cities and towns without fear of attack. While income inequality increases, the amount of extreme poverty in America has decreased significantly because of unionization and federal aid programs. And our problem of mass incarceration, while hideous and in need of complete moral restructuring, is a result of the savage history of some human beings legally owning other human beings, a legally-sanctioned act so egregious we cannot even teach the history of it correctly in our schools for the shame of which has stained our collective hands.

What I mean to get at is not moral relativism, but rather point to the reality that all is not, in plain terms, lost. Rather, it is in the arc of our collective human spiritual journey, rather

optimistic. It indicates that though progress is painful and non-linear, there is something deeper at work, something that transcends our moral failings and inherent capacity for evil in order to see a more just world order. We fall short, and then we strive again. In the grand scheme of our written and oral histories, though we've got a long way to go, we've still come a long way. And it is our religious traditions that have actually pushed us further toward communal acts of justice, not further away. Religious doctrines, from the philosophical laws of Confucius to the moral pillars of monotheistic Judaism, were derived from a need for better human relations, not just veneration of spiritual forces. Religion, by its relational nature to human beings, means nothing outside of its concrete effects in practice.

*Which is how the Buddha came to teach his followers about achieving enlightenment. The word Buddha is derived from the Sanskrit *budh*, which means both to wake up and to know, hence the title Buddha, meaning "the awakened one," or "the enlightened one." The original Buddha, who was born Prince Siddhartha Gautama and called sometimes the Buddha Gautama or Buddha Shakyamuni, longed for a way to transcend the pain and suffering that he found came with living as human on the earth. The Hindu traditions in which he was raised fell short for him of achieving these aims, so he began a journey of the soul. Originally he identified suffering as the result of the human being's inevitable march toward death, but his teachings came to focus more on the suffering that occurs in the breaches between human relationships, breaches that he preached could be avoided with proper inward reflection that would result in proper outward behavior. He came to preach an Eightfold Path toward enlightenment, which included these 8 steps: right views, right intent, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. If one devoted oneself to following the Eightfold Path, enlightenment was the expected outcome. But, as all human beings do, many of his followers continued to miss the mark – what in Christian language would be described as sin – and he continued to share different ways in which to keep on the path.*

One story that Buddha told has become a cornerstone for Buddhists striving to use their faith to guide their work as social justice seekers in the world at large. He called it "Boddhisatva Never Disparaging." There was a boddhisatva monk – another enlightened one – long ago, who lived during a time of Counterfeit Law, a time where religious leaders were corrupt and did not uphold correct teachings. This monk chose not to read scriptures and study, but instead to go out and bow to everyone he met and praise them, saying, "I would never dare disparage you, for you are sure to attain Buddhahood!" So they called him Never Disparaging. But Never Disparaging did not get a lot of love back, even from other monks and nuns – some would become angry, thinking he was haughty or insane, and they would insult him and even beat him. Yet while he would run away, he would turn to repeat his mantra, "I would never dare disparage you, for you are all sure to attain Buddhahood!" When he was at the point of death, he heard the wisdom of the Lotus Sutra from the sky, and he accepted and upheld its teachings. He became purified and his life was lengthened so that he could preach and teach the wisdom of the Lotus Sutra. The same people who had cursed and reviled him saw that he was indeed awakened and held wisdom from on high, and they became his followers, preaching and teaching what he shared with them. At the end of this story, the Buddha who tells the story declares, "The boddhisatva Never Disparaging was none other than myself in a previous life, and if I had not gone through that life, I could not have achieved enlightenment now so quickly. So you are his followers now, spreading the Lotus Sutra and preaching and teaching the way."

The moral of the story is somewhat straightforward, though not an exact copy of what we think of as the Golden Rule. According to Mayahana Buddhism, the Lotus Sutra, in which this

story is found, is one of the most venerated scriptures in the canon, and *Never Disparaging* is a classic used over and over again to remind followers of how easy it is to fall short of one's intentions to treat others as we each would prefer to be treated. The publication *Soka Gakkai International, Buddhism in Action for Peace*, explores the impact of this story on its meaning for all of Buddha's teachings, as we heard in our first reading. While fundamentalism in Buddhism, like Christianity, tends to focus most on the practitioner's internal journey with less attention to outward relation in the world, Soka Gakkai, or SGI, follows the interpretations of the scriptures by the Japanese priest Nichiren, who notes that the whole point of the story of *Never Disparaging*, having been the Buddha in a previous life, is that enlightenment can never be attained without relationship. In other words, it's easy to be kind in a void; it's not so easy when we throw real human beings into the mix! In our second reading, from the *Metta Sutta*, the Buddha's teachings about what it means to love, we hear a familiar tone in his words: "Let none deceive another, or despise any beings in any state. Let none through anger or ill-will wish harm upon another." Kind of reminds me of "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses," which the book of Proverbs tells us, or any number of Paul's teachings, including the well-known passage in 1st Corinthians, "Love is patient and kind; it is not arrogant or rude...it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth." These sayings are all quite clear; they do not take great intelligence to understand their meaning. But there's a reason we have such an abundance of scriptures that pay attention to how we ought to treat one another. Because they do take a kind of wisdom that comes with continuous practice and conscientious action; it isn't easy, and we constantly fall short, oftentimes without even realizing it. This is what makes it so difficult, for it is, I believe, a multi-layered practice: it becomes both about intent, and action. The people that *Never Disparaging* would meet and praise each day were all kinds of people, described as believers in the sutras, even monks and nuns. One would think their behavior would reflect their intention to follow the ways of compassion that the sutras taught, but they obviously fell short, as all humans do. The same people who swear to uphold the Constitution of our country and teach Sunday school at their local churches, churches that use the same Bible that we do and hear the same texts that we hear, are also passing laws to incarcerate more people of color for non-violent crimes, dismantle rights for women and LGBTQ persons, and are ripping children away from their parents' arms with the ideology that if you enter this country without citizenship, you are a criminal who deserves punishment and your children are collateral damage. This, all in the name of protecting the country and those living in it.

These are extreme examples. But they matter because they are examples of people who are not likely innately evil, but innately good; and have lost the connection between intent and action. The road to hell is, indeed, paved with good intentions. These are the same people who have families of their own; who want and desire the same things that we do; who, if held accountable by those they loved, and who love them, would likely realize that their behavior does not reflect who they really are inside, and more importantly who they desire to be. Which is why we can never cease to, in essence, get back to basics. To ask ourselves, how do I want to interact with the world? And, am I acting based on that intention? If I am not, how does that impact others – but also, how does it impact me? And if I can be mindful, what kind of impact will I have, for good, upon the world around me? Such questions are the ones out of which revolution is borne. They are the questions that have pushed us ever forward as a human race, despite the many obstacles we have also created. They are the questions that start with how we want to be in community with each other, so that we can do the work of repairing the world outside of our four walls. Recently, upon reflecting on these questions, I was moved to suggest that we at ASBC

create our own covenant, which many congregations adopt in order to more steadfastly fix their hearts upon a shared ethic of mutual respect within their faith communities, with the goal that they might return back to their best selves when they find themselves in disagreement. In so doing, the bonds of love within the community almost never fail to move outward, and our world certainly can't get enough of that. In an upcoming date, we will get to look at a proposed Covenant of Mutual Respect that I hope you will be moved to contribute to and adopt, as a reflection of the incredible love that radiates from within each of you. When we recommit ourselves to that which we hold dear, the kind of regard for each other like that of the Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, like that of Krishna, like that of Moses and the Prophet Muhammad and Jesus, we then become what our faith is there for – not to passively journey through our lives, but to boldly engage in our humanity and the humanity of others. Let's keep going the journey together.