Abhaya

On March 4th, 1933 a man with a newly appointed job had the task of giving a talk about what he planned to accomplish in his new post. This wouldn't be any ordinary speech however. The situation was delicate and he would need to choose his words very carefully. In an unusual move, instead of immediately addressing specific issues, he first decided to focus on what he felt was the true root of the problem: the misdirected mind. Carefully considering how and what his audience was feeling, he told them very early in his speech:

"So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." (1)

The man was the newly elected U.S. President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the speech was his Inaugural address to a country in the midst of the Great Depression. All of us know what fear is. Perhaps we can't provide a dictionary definition (2) but we all know what it is because we've all experienced it in its various forms. We also know that fear can drive people to things that they would never do under normal circumstances. So much suffering, great and small, has arisen from fear but how can we begin to understand it? One way is to look at what it means to be free from fear, or abhaya.

Abhaya (pronounced "uh-bhuh-yuh") is a Pali/Sanskrit word meaning "fearless, free from danger, safe, secure, undaunted" (3). It is composed of two parts; 'bhaya' meaning "fear, fright, or dread" (4) and the prefix 'a' which denotes 'not, or non'.

Fear can be very powerful. It can be so powerful that it paralyzes us, as FDR says. Because of fear's potential to paralyze in so many ways; physical, emotional, and spiritual, the Buddha taught many different ways of overcoming it. In the Dhajjaga Sutta (The Top of the Standard Sutta), the Buddha gives advice to his followers on how to overcome fear when they are practicing alone in the wilderness. Imagine what it must've been like to try and meditate alone when there are tigers, wild elephants, cobras, bandits, and many other fear-inspiring things roaming around. In this case, the Buddha recommended the practice of Recollecting (5) the Three Jewels (the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) as a way to allay fear:

"i. Whether in forest or at foot of tree,
Or in some secluded spot, O monks,
Do call to mind that Buddha Supreme;
Then will there be no fear to you at all.

ii. If you think not of the Buddha, O monks,
That Lord of the world and Chief of men,
Then do think, O monks, of that Dhamma;
So well preached and leading to Nibbana.

iii. If you think not of the Dhamma, O monks
Well preached and leading to Nibbana;
Then do think, O monks, of that Sangha,
That wonderful field of merit to all.

iv. To those recalling the Buddha supreme,

To those recalling the Dhamma sublime,
And to those recalling the Sangha,
No fear, no terror will make them quiver". (6)

On another occasion, a group of monks were facing a similar situation; they couldn't practice because they were being disturbed by spirits that wanted to drive them out of the forest (7). When they told the Buddha of this occurrence, he taught them what would become one of the most well-known suttas ever: the Metta Sutta. In Pali 'metta' means loving-kindness, or benevolence (8). The reason for the Buddha teaching metta to the terrified monks is simple: fear cannot dwell in a heart filled with love. A full discussion of metta is best left for another thread but what we should keep in mind is that metta is not merely a psychological comfort: it has real power and can "rub off" on other beings.

One famous story involving the power of metta has to do with a drunken elephant that tried to attack the Buddha. Acharya Buddharakkhita relates this story in his book "Metta – The Philosophy and Practice of Universal Love":

"Once the Buddha was returning from his almsround together with his retinue of monks. As they were nearing the prison, in consideration of a handsome bribe from Devadatta, the Buddha's evil and ambitious cousin, the executioner let loose the fierce elephant Nalagiri, which was used for the execution of criminals. As the intoxicated elephant rushed towards the Buddha trumpeting fearfully, the Buddha projected powerful thoughts of metta towards it. Venerable Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, was so deeply concerned about the Buddha's safety that he ran in front of the Buddha to shield him, but the Buddha asked him to stand aside since the projection of love itself was quite sufficient. The impact of the Buddha's metta-radiation was so immediate and overwhelming that by the time the animal neared the Buddha it was completely tamed as though a drunken wretch had suddenly become sober by the magical power of a spell. The tusker, it is said, bowed down in reverence in the way trained elephants do in a circus". (9)

Another powerful way of overcoming fear is to look deep within ourselves and take a long look at the nature of the fear itself. Noted Tibetan Buddhist scholar, Alexander Berzin says that one way we can do this is to:

"Reaffirm that having Buddha-nature means that we have the basis for all good qualities complete within us. In Western psychological terms, these qualities may be conscious or unconscious (we may be mindful of them or not, and they may be developed to different degrees). Often, we project the unconscious qualities as a "shadow." Because the unconscious is the unknown, the tension of being unaware of it manifests as fear of the unknown and thus fear of our unknown unconscious qualities. Thus, we may identify with our conscious intellectual side and ignore or deny our unknown, unconscious, emotional feeling side. We may project the emotional feeling side as a shadow and be frightened of others who are very emotional. We may be afraid of our own emotional side and have anxiety about being out of touch with our feelings. If we identify with our conscious emotional feeling side and deny our unconscious intellectual side, we may project the intellectual side as a shadow and be intimidated by those who are intellectual. We may be afraid to try to understand anything and feel anxiety about being intellectually dull. Thus, we need to reaffirm both sides as complete within us, as aspects of our Buddha-natures" (10).

As previously mentioned, fear is one of the biggest obstacles we encounter on the spiritual path but what can happen after we move past our fears? According to the Heart Sutra, the answer is liberation. In

this sutra, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (11) describes the liberating insights he has regarding the inherent emptiness (or limitless potential) of various aspects of existence. Towards the end of the Sutra, he says:

"…through prajñāpāramitā bodhisattvas have no obstructions in their minds. Having no obstructions there is no fear and departing from erroneous views and conclusions, they reach ultimate nirvana"(12).

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(1) "History Matters" – The U.S. Survey Course on the Web, George Mason University: http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5057/

(2) Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (http://www.merriam-webster.com/) defines fear as, among other things, "an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger

(3) Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary Online p. 61. Accessed via the "Digital Dictionaries of South Asia" Project. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries

(4) Ibid, p 499

(5) Mindful Recollection is known in Sanskrit as anusmṛti (Pali: Anussati). It was the subject of a previous Language Thread: http://groups.google.com/group/Dharmasight/browse_thread/thread/3191c0846e59cafe#

(6) Dhajjaga Sutta, Samyutta Nikaya Section 11, Sutta 3, translated by Piyadassi Thera. From Access to Insight: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn11/sn11.003.piya.html

(7) Metta-The Philosophy and Practice of Universal Love, by Acharya Buddharakkhita. From Access to Insight: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/buddharakkhita/wheel365.html#ch1

(8) Ibid.

(9) Ibid

(10) "Handling Fear" by Alexander Berzin. From the Berzin Archives: http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level3_lojong_material/general/hand_fear.html

(11) For more info please check out the Language Thread on Avalokiteshvara: http://groups.google.com/group/Dharmasight/browse_thread/thread/3fd8fc24f84f878c# The word 'Abhaya' is also a common epithet for Avalokiteshvara, (the Fearless One) as well as for bodhisattvas in general.

(12) Prajñāpāramitā (Devanāgari: प्रज्ञापारमिता) means the "Perfection of Wisdom" in Sanskrit. It is one of the qualities that Bodhisattvas cultivate on their path to Full Awakening. This translation of the Heart Sutra is from the Bodhi Monastery Liturgy: http://www.bodhimonastery.net/bm/

Anusmṛti

It can be very difficult to go a full today without seeing one. On the news, on people's cars, on shirts, on walls, these objects are almost everywhere we look. What are they? They're mementos, in all their various incarnations; white, blue, red, and pink ribbons, the numbers '9/11', phrases like 'we will never forget', etc. These kinds of objects and the feelings they bring out in us don't always have to be somber however. We can just as easily flip through a photo album and look back on joyous occasions too; birthdays, graduations, weddings, festivals, etc. The kind of emotions we experience depend very largely on what it is we're reminded of. A particular style of black jacket might make you feel sad because it reminds you of the one you wore at a loved one's funeral or a particular pair of sneakers may get you

excited because it reminds you of an amazing concert you attended. Similarly, it is possible for us to remind ourselves about various things relating to our spiritual lives. This practice, going back thousands of years, is known as anusmṛti.

The word anusmṛti (pronounced 'uh-new-smri-ti'), from Sanskrit, is composed of two parts. 'Smṛti', meaning "remembrance, reminiscence, thinking of or upon, calling to mind, memory", derives from the root 'smṛi', meaning "to remember, recollect, or be mindful of (1)". 'Anu' is a prefix meaning 'after' or 'it follows'. Anusmṛti (2) itself implies a reflection or recollection (its most common translation) but in a meditative, spiritual sense as opposed to casually using our memory for something like a sports score. There are many, many objects and lists of objects that one can use for practicing the mindful recollection involved in anusmṛti. One of most common is Recollection of the Three Jewels, i.e. the Buddha (the Teacher), the Dharma (the Teachings), and the Sangha (the community who practices the teachings. This particular practice is praised in the Dhammapada (3), a collection of verses spoken the Buddha:

Always wide awake, Are the disciples of Gotama. Who, constantly, day and night, Are mindful of the Buddha.
Always wide awake, Are the disciples of Gotama, Who, constantly, day and night, Are mindful of the Dharma.
Always wide awake, Are the disciples of Gotama, Who, constantly, day and night, Are mindful of the Sangha. -Ch. 21, v. 296-298

The concept of impermanence (Skt: anātman, Pali: anatta), which tells us nothing is permanent or eternal and that everything is in a state of dynamic flux, is one of central teachings of the Buddha. It is no surprise, therefore that it is also a subject frequently used in anusmṛti. A popular verse for recollecting impermanence (particularly in the Mahayana tradition) is the Admonition of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra. It is usually chanted as part of the evening ceremonies.

The day has passed. Our lives too are closing. Like fish with little water, joy will not last. (Oh Great Assembly!)
Let us practice with diligence, as we would were our heads aflame. Be mindful of impermanence and be careful of idleness! (4)
Anusmṛti is not merely a "devotional practice", nor is it simply a way to relax our minds or keep us grounded. Anusmṛti, when practiced to its fullest extent can lead us directly to the shore of liberation from suffering. In a sutta (5) where the Buddha describes a list of Ten Recollections (which includes Recollection of the Three Jewels), he says:

"One thing — when developed & pursued — leads solely to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding. Which one thing? Recollection of the Buddha. This is one thing that — when developed & pursued — leads solely to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding.
As mentioned above, there are many subjects one can use in anusmṛti and we invite you to share the thing(s) that resonate very strongly in your practice. It can be something traditional (like the Recollection of Generosity) or it can something more modern/personal.

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(1) Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Motilal, 2005 reprint, pp. 1271-1272 (2) Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary Online p. 45. Accessed via the "Digital Dictionaries of South Asia"

Project. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries (3) "The Dhammapada", translated by Gil Fronsal, Shambhala, 2005. pp. 76-77 (4) Taken from the Bodhi Monastery Liturgy http://www.bodhimonastery.net. My understanding is that this verse comes from a sutra but I haven't been able to track down which particular one (is it the Lotus?). Any help, as well as more info on these verses would be greatly appreciated! (5) "The Ten Recollections – A Study Guide", prepared by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/study/recollections.html

Avalokiteshvara

Naming conventions around the world vary greatly but there is one thing that they almost all have in common: names are given to us just after we're born or when we're still very young. Every name has some meaning associated with it but this idea becomes especially important when we look at names associated with our spiritual lives. When people make a commitment to making their spiritual beliefs the center of their lives, quite often they take on a new, "religious" name to signify this. This practice is seen within many religious traditions, particularly when men and women receive ordination. The name that is given is often a reflection of the person's background or aspirations. For example, Ven. Heng Sure, of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, was a stage actor prior to his ordination. When he met his teacher, Master Hsuan Hua, the master decided to give him the Dharma name 'Heng Sure', meaning 'constantly real' in Chinese. The reason for this is that an actor is someone who is concerned with something that's ultimately not real. A monastic however, is someone who devotes their life to discovering and examining the true nature of reality.

A Dharma name is usually accompanied by some sort of title such as fa shi (Chinese for 'Dharma teacher'), sramanera/sramaneri (Pali: novice monk/nun), upāsaka/upāsikā (Sanskrit for male/female lay follower). As you can imagine, there are many names and titles to be had and while some of these may be obscure, others are instantly recognizable. One of the oldest and most well known is that of the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva, Avalokiteshvara.

To begin, let's first look at the title. Bodhisattva is usually translated as 'enlightening being' (bodhi = enlightenment/awakening, sattva = being). Similarly, mahāsattva (pronounced muh-huuh-sat-tva) can be rendered as 'great/heroic being (mahā = great). The phrase 'bodhisattva mahāsattva' as a whole means 'great enlightening being'.

The name of the bodhisattva (pronounced 'uh-vuh-low-kit-esh-vara') has an interesting history. It comes down to us from the Sanskrit and is composed of two parts. The first part, 'avalokita', means (1) 'seen, viewed, observed, looking at, beholding'. The second part, "īshvara", means "master, lord, king/queen, and supreme being". The 'ī' in īshvara and the final 'a' in 'avalokita' change to an 'e' when the two parts are combined. This slight changing of sound is a common feature of Sanskrit grammar called sandhi. We see the same thing in English when we put an 'a' before a consonant (e.g. a car) but use 'an' before a vowel sound (e.g. an apple). 'Avalokiteshvara' therefore means "the lord who observes".

'Avalokiteshvara' however, is a later form of the name (2) and earlier texts use the closely related form 'Avalokit*asvara*'. Here, 'avalokita' has the same meaning but the 'svara' (from 'svana') means (3) "sound/noise". Combining the two parts, we can translate it as "one who perceives/observes sound". This meaning matches up with the Chinese rendering of the bodhisattva's name as 'Guan Shih Yin' (觀世音). We're now ready look at the being behind the name.

Avalokiteshvara is described as the bodhisattva who is foremost in the practice of compassion. This designation is intimately tied to his (4) practice of mindful, deep, unbiased, and insightful listening. In the Shurangama Sūtra (5), he describes this in detail, starting with the following verses:

First, I was united above with the fundamental, wonderfully enlightened mind of all the Buddhas of the ten directions, and I gained a strength of compassion equal to that of all the Buddhas, the Thus Come Ones.Second, I was united below with all living beings in the six paths, and I gained a kind regard for all living beings equally.

Later in the sūtra, the Bodhisattva Manjushri, known as foremost in the practice of transcendent wisdom, praises Avalokiteshvara's deep listening practice:

"I now say this, World Honored One, Buddha, who has revealed the Saha world: In this land the true substance of teaching Resides in hearing the sounds purely. If one wants to attain samadhi, hearing is the best way to enter.

"Apart from suffering, liberation is found. How excellent is he who contemplates the world's sounds!

"Throughout kalpas as numerous as Ganges' sands, He enters Buddhalands as many as fine dust motes. Obtaining great power of self-mastery, He bestows fearlessness on living beings".

It's easy to get lost in the loftiness of the above verses but the message being conveyed is simple: listening is powerful. Perhaps this might involve listening to a friend or loved one. Perhaps it involves listening to the complaints of co-workers. It can especially mean having someone around to listen to us. The kind of listening mentioned here is not simply interpreting a series of noises as words. To deeply listen means not only opening our ears but opening our hearts as well. So much trouble, from petty quarrels to terrible wars, arises simply because no one truly listens. Listening doesn't mean we have to like or agree with what we hear. Listening also doesn't mean that we have to necessarily respond or remain silent. We may have the noblest intentions and a pure heart but before we can act, before we can even begin to think about doing something, we must listen. If we don't, how will we know what to do?

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(1) Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Motilal, 2005 reprint, pp. 103, 171

(2) The word 'Īshvara' is also an epithet for the Hindu god Shiva. It's believed that the shift from 'asvara' to 'īshvara' may have been the result of the increasing influence Buddhism and Hinduism began to exert on each other as time passed in India. For a fascinating study, see Alexander Studholme's "The Origins of Om Manipadme Hum". SUNY Press, 2002

(3) Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Motilal, 2005 reprint, p. 1280

(4) In the ancient Indian sources, Avalokiteshvara is almost always referred to and represented either as a male or an androgynous figure. In East Asia however, the bodhisattva is usually represented as a female in the form of Guan Yin. Because this thread is focused on the Indian sources, the pronoun 'him' will be used.

(5) From the Buddhist Text Translation Society's translation of the Shurangama Sūtra. The full text can be found online at:

http://www.cttbusa.org/shurangama/shurangama22.asp

They also have a number of other sutras posted online at:

http://www.cttbusa.org/sutratexts.asp

Bhikkhu

If someone asked you to summarize an average life, what would say? For many people, an average life consists of the following; being born, growing into a little kid, going to school, finding a job and working, often getting married and raising a family, retirement, and finally death. Most wouldn't argue with this outline of an average life but compressing so many years, memories, and experiences into just a few lines can be very unsettling for some. Why is this so? Perhaps it's because we don't normally think about "the big questions" in life on a regular basis.

When we experience the arrival of a baby, it's natural for us to reflect on the miracle of life. When we experience the loss of someone close to us, we contemplate the sorrow of death. Maybe when we're on a stroll, alone with our thoughts or watching the sun set with someone special to us, we think about our place in the universe. But what about when you're at a friend's house screaming for a bases- loaded hit because you've got 20 bucks on the Yanks?

There's absolutely nothing wrong with not always thinking about "the big questions", in fact its quite normal. The overwhelming majority of us live fairly hectic lives, having to deal with the stress of work/ school, commuting problems, kids, spouses, bills, etc. In the midst of all this, pondering the origin of suffering becomes very low on the priority list. But let's suppose that things were different and we set all of our "worldly obligations" aside. What if we relied on the kindness of others for the basics like food, shelter, and clothing? What if we didn't have a job to earn money, didn't have material possessions, didn't have a home, didn't have a household to look after, didn't have bills to pay, etc.? What if we used all of our newly acquired "free time" to completely dedicate ourselves to living a spiritually based life that focused on investigating the big questions in life? What if we shared the knowledge and insights we gained with others to help them improve their own lives? For the past twenty-five centuries, there have been people who choose to lead such a life. Someone who completely dedicates every fiber of their being to living according to the teachings of the Buddha is known as a bhikkhu.

The word bhikkhu, comes from the Pali. It means* "almsman, mendicant, Buddhist monk". The Sanskrit** cognate is bhikshu and has the same meanings as the Pali although it is derived from the root, "bhiksh" meaning "to wish to share or partake". The female equivalent is 'bhikkhuni' (bhikshuni in Sanskrit). From here on, the words 'bhikkhu' and 'bhikkhuni' will be used interchangeably.

The view towards monasticism varies greatly in the world's religions. In some traditions, like Christianity, monastic practice occupies a peripheral place relative to the "mainstream" practice of householders. Other religions such as Judaism and Islam frown upon the notion of a monk/nun while others (e.g. Sikhism) flat out forbid it. It may seem strange then, that the monastic tradition tradition established by the Buddha has often been called the "heart and soul" of the Sangha. Indeed, one definition of the word 'Sangha' refers exclusively to the monastic order of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis.

One might argue that the central role of the monastic community is "cultural baggage" from the ancient Indian society that the Buddha came from. Back then, renouncing worldly endeavors in pursuit of

spiritual practice was quite normal. However, this kind of renunciation was something that old, retired men would partake in. For someone in the prime of their youth to pursue spiritual practice as a bhikkhu (or even to have the opportunity to do so) was quite a spiritual revolution in the Buddha's time.

In a sense, we could think of the bhikkunis as "professional" practitioners because of their choice to focus and dedicate their lives to spiritual practice but this doesn't mean lay followers are "amateurs". Non-monastics are fully capable of the highest levels of practice and realization that bhikkhus are; in fact some of the most famous sages in history have been householders. So what's the point of a monastic tradition and why make it "the heart and soul" of the Sangha? It is because practicing as a householder is hard. Really hard. It's hard for all the reasons mentioned at the beginning of this thread. To become a bhikkhuni represents an especially precious opportunity for cultivation and practice. Living a life that is solely focused on studying and practicing the Buddha's teachings provides a unique path to freedom from suffering. This idea is reflected in the very name of the monastic code by which bhikkhus live by. It is called the 'pratimoksha' in Sanskrit (pattimokkha in Pali) and literally means "guaranteed liberation".

We should always keep sight of the fact that the order of bhikkhus and bhikkunis exists to benefit EVERYONE, not only the monastic tradition itself. Bhikkhus are often referred to as a "field of blessings for the world". Why? Let's let the Buddha #answer this:

"Monks, brahmins and householders are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, almsfoods, lodging, and medicine in times of sickness. And you monks, are very helpful to brahmins and householders, as you teach them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, with the correct meaning and wording, and you proclaim the spiritual life in its fulfillment and complete purity. Thus monks, this spiritual life, is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering".

The establishment of the monastic community was one of the Buddha's great gifts to the world. Aside from providing people with the opportunity for practice, the bhikkhus are also the "guardians of Dharma". It is they who have passed down, preserved, and recorded the teachings. They have kept the light of the Buddha's word alive. It is they who have traveled far beyond the Buddha's neighborhood, encountering vastly different people and societies and yet still sharing the precious teachings with strangers and welcoming them. For these reasons, we can see just how the monastic community is the "heart and soul" of the Buddha's Dharma.

Finally, there have been many, many people throughout the ages that have seen bhikkhus as drop-outs, leeches on society, destroyers of families, and/or people running away from the "real" problems of the world. Nowadays, there are many who feel that the monastic tradition is obsolete or even part of the "cultural trappings" that have accumulated over the centuries. The closing passage is a response to these criticisms. It is taken from the Therigatha (Verses from the Elder Nuns), a selection of ancient poetry and verses composed by the earliest enlightened bhikkunis. In this passage, a woman named Rohini is being grilled by her father about the monastic community (contemplatives):

[Rohini's father:] You go to sleep saying, "Contemplatives." You wake up, "Contemplatives." You praise only contemplatives. No doubt you will be a contemplative.

Abundant food & drink you give to contemplatives. Now, Rohini, I ask you: Why do you hold contemplatives dear?

They don't like to work, they're lazy, living off what's given by others, full of hankerings, wanting delicious things: Why do you hold contemplatives dear?

[Rohini:] For a long time, father, you've quizzed me about contemplatives. I'll praise to you their discernment, virtue, endeavor.

They do like to work, they're not lazy. They do the best work: They abandon passion & anger. That's why I hold contemplatives dear.

They rid themselves of the three evil roots, doing pure actions. All their evil's abandoned. That's why I hold contemplatives dear.

Clean their bodily action, so is their verbal action. Clean their mental action: That's why I hold contemplatives dear.

Spotless, like mother of pearl, pure within & without, perfect in clear qualities: That's why I hold contemplatives dear.

Learned, maintaining the Dhamma, noble, living the Dhamma, they teach the goal & the Dhamma: That's why I hold contemplatives dear.

Learned, maintaining the Dhamma, noble, living the Dhamma, with unified minds & mindful: That's why I hold contemplatives dear.

Traveling far, mindful, giving counsel unruffled, they discern the end of suffering: That's why I hold contemplatives dear.

When they leave any village they don't turn to look back at anything. How free from concern they go! That's why I hold contemplatives dear.

They don't store in a granary, pot, or basket. They hunt [only] for what's already cooked: That's why I hold contemplatives dear.

They take neither silver, nor gold, nor money. They live off whatever is present: That's why I hold contemplatives dear.

Having gone forth from different families & from different countries, still they hold one another dear: That's why I hold contemplatives dear.

[Rohini's father:] Rohini, truly for our well-being were you born in our family. You have conviction in the Buddha & Dhamma, and strong respect for the Sangha.

You truly discern this field of merit unexcelled. These contemplatives will receive our offering, too, for here we'll set up our abundant sacrifice.

[Rohini:] If you're afraid of pain, if you dislike pain, go to the Buddha for refuge, go to the Dhamma & Sangha. Take on the precepts: That will lead to your well-being.

-from @Therigatha 13.2, trans. by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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*Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary Online p. 504. Accessed via the "Digital Dictionaries of South Asia" Project. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries **Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Motilal, 2005 reprint, p. 756 # "In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon" p. 171, trans. & edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Wisdom Pubs, 2005. @ "Rohini", Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. "Access to Insight" http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thig/thig.13.02.than.html

Brahmavihāra

Let's begin with a little thought experiment. Read each word on the list then note the kinds of feelings and associations that come up for each word:

-mansion

-crack-house

-gated-community

-the Projects

-ashram

-slum

As you probably noticed, each word goes along with another word that is its opposite. What all the words on the list have in common however, is that they're all places where people live. As the saying goes, "home is where the heart is", and the kind of home in which a person dwells in will certainly have some effect on the kind of person he or she is. Using the above examples, we might expect someone living in an ashram to be a bit calmer and focused than someone living in a house where crime is a daily occurrence.

Although the examples just mentioned are physical places, the concept of a dwelling place can be extended to the mental realm too. It's quite possible for us to be on Cloud Nine (ecstatically happy) even though we may be on the subway in the middle of a group of stressed out and disgruntled straphangers. This kind of mental abiding is a common theme in many spiritual practices, especially in the Buddha's teachings. Out of the many different positive states of mind we can dwell in, there is one class that stands out above the rest: the Brahmavihāra.

'Brahmavihāra' is composed of two words from Sanskrit/Pali, 'brahma' and 'vihāra' (pronounced 'V'-haaruh). In Hindu thought, 'Brahma' is the impersonal God; the Supreme Being responsible for the creation of the universe (1). In belief systems like Jainism and Buddhism, 'Brahma' refers to powerful heavenly beings and the also to the exalted spiritual realms in which they exist. It is important to keep in mind that Buddhism (like Jainism) doesn't accept the "supreme creator" concept. Even though the Brahma gods are considered to reside in the highest planes of existence, they're still subject to death and rebirth.

The second part of the word, 'vihāra', means "a monastery/temple, a hall where monks met" (2) as well as "spending one's time, sojourning, staying in a place, place of living, abode, or habitation" (3). The modern Indian province of Bihar gets its name from 'vihāra' and the site of the Buddha's Enlightenment (Bodh Gaya) is, appropriately enough, located in southern part of the state.

Taken together, Brahmavihāra means "heavenly/divine and abiding/abode ". The Brahmavihāras are also referred to as 'appamañña', meaning "boundless or immeasurable" (4). There are four Immeasurable States of Mind or Brahmavihāras, laid out by the Buddha. They are (in Pali):

1. Metta (Sanskrit: Maitri, मैत्रि) – Loving-Kindness
2. Karuṇā (Devanāgari: करुणा) – Compassion
3. Mudita (मुदित) – Sympathetic Joy
4. Upekkhā (Skt: upeksha, उपेक्षा) – Equanimity

The story of how the Buddha wound up teaching the Brahmavihāras as objects of meditation begins in a somewhat unexpected manner: a heated argument. Two brahmins (Hindu priests) were arguing over the ways for a person to be united with Brahma. With neither of the two ready to admit defeat, they decided to take their argument to someone they had heard was wise: the Buddha. Approaching him, the two brahmins said, "Revered Gotama, I have heard them say: The ascetic Gotama knows the way to union with Brahma". (5)

The Buddha replied, "I know Brahma, and the world of Brahma, and the way to the world of Brahma, and the path of practice whereby the world of Brahma may be attained". He then goes to teach to say:

"Then with his heart filled with loving-kindness, he dwells suffusing one quarter, the second, the third, the fourth. Thus he dwells suffusing the whole world, upwards, downwards, across, and everywhere, always with a heart filled with loving-kindness, abundant, unbounded, without hate or ill will".

"Just as if a mighty trumpeter were with little difficulty to make a proclamation to the four quarters, so by this meditation, Vāseṭṭha, by this liberation of the heart through loving-kindness he leaves nothing untouched, nothing unaffected in the sensuous sphere. This, Vāseṭṭha, is the way to union with Brahma" (5).

The Buddha then repeats this above formula for the other Boundless Minds, "Then, with his heart filled with compassion…with sympathetic joy…with equanimity he dwells suffusing one quarter, the second, the third, the fourth. Thus he dwells suffusing the whole world, upwards, downwards, across, and everywhere, always with a heart filled with loving-kindness, abundant, unbounded, without hate or ill will" (5).

Nyanaponika Thera says of the Four Divine Abodes, "The Brahma-viharas are incompatible with a hating state of mind, and in that they are akin to Brahma, the divine but transient ruler of the higher heavens in the traditional Buddhist picture of the universe. In contrast to many other conceptions of deities, East and West, who by their own devotees are said to show anger, wrath, jealousy and "righteous indignation," Brahma is free from hate; and one who assiduously develops these four sublime states, by conduct and meditation, is said to become an equal of Brahma *(brahma-samo).* If they become the

dominant influence in his mind, he will be reborn in congenial worlds, the realms of Brahma. Therefore, these states of mind are called *God-like, Brahma-like.*

They are called *abodes (vihara)* because they should become the mind's constant dwelling-places where we feel "at home"; they should not remain merely places of rare and short visits, soon forgotten. In other words, our minds should become thoroughly saturated by them. They should become our inseparable companions, and we should be mindful of them in all our common activities. "(4)

When practiced to their fullest extent, the Brahmavihāras can lead us not only to divine realms of rebirth but to liberation itself as the Buddha says in the Brahmavihāra Sutta:

"What do you think, monks: If that youth, from childhood, were to develop the awareness-release through good will, would he do any evil action?"

"No, lord."

"Not doing any evil action, would he touch suffering?"

"No, lord, for when one does no evil action, from where would he touch suffering?"

"This awareness-release through good will should be developed whether one is a woman or a man. Neither a woman nor a man can go taking this body along. Death, monks, is but a gap of a thought away. One [who practices this awareness-release] discerns, 'Whatever evil action has been done by this body born of action, that will all be experienced here [in this life]. It will not come to be hereafter.' Thus developed, the awareness-release through good will leads to non-returning for the monk who has gained gnosis here and has penetrated to no higher release. (6)

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(1) For a fantastic discussion, do check out THE classic "The World's Religion's" by Huston Smith. HarperCollins, 1991.
(2) Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, p. 1003 Motilal, 2005 reprint
(3) Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary Online p. 642. Accessed via the "Digital Dictionaries of South Asia" Project. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries
(4) "The Four Sublime States" Nyanaponika Thera. From 'Access to Insight': http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel006.html
(5) Tevijja Sutta, "The Threefold Knowledge", Digha Nikaya, Sutta 13. translated from the Pali by Maurice Walshe . "The Long Discourses of the Buddha, A Translation of the Digha Nikaya". pp. 192-193. Wisdom Publications, 1995.
(6) Brahmavihara Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya 10.208. Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, from 'Access to Insight': http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an10/an10.208.than.html

Karuṇā

The famous scholar, Nobel Laureate, painter, poet, mystic, and freedom fighter, Rabindranath Tagore, was and is still known for his many moving writings. (1) One of his short stories, taken from a collection called "Fruit Gathering" is presented below:

“Upagupta, the disciple of Buddha, lay asleep on the dust by the city wall of Mathura.
Lamps were all out, doors were all shut, and stars were all hidden by the murky sky of August.
Whose feet were those tinkling with anklets, touching his breast of a sudden?
He woke up startled, and the light from a woman's lamp struck his forgiving eyes.
It was the dancing girl, starred with jewels, clouded with a pale-blue mantle, drunk with the wine of her youth.
She lowered her lamp and saw the young face, austerely beautiful.
"Forgive me, young ascetic," said the woman; "graciously come to my house. The dusty earth is not a fit bed for you."
The ascetic answered, "Woman, go on your way; when the time is ripe I will come to you."
Suddenly the black night showed its teeth in a flash of lightning.
The storm growled from the corner of the sky, and the woman trembled in fear.
.....
The branches of the wayside trees were aching with blossom.
Gay notes of the flute came floating in the warm spring air from afar.
The citizens had gone to the woods, to the festival of flowers.
From the mid-sky gazed the full moon on the shadows of the silent town.
The young ascetic was walking in the lonely street, while overhead the lovesick koels urged from the mango branches their sleepless plaint.
Upagupta passed through the city gates, and stood at the base of the rampart.
What woman lay in the shadow of the wall at his feet, struck with the black pestilence, her body spotted with sores, hurriedly driven away from the town?
The ascetic sat by her side, taking her head on his knees, and moistened her lips with water and smeared her body with balm.
"Who are you, merciful one?" asked the woman.
"The time, at last, has come to visit you, and I am here," replied the young ascetic”. (2)

The above story shows that sometimes it is easier and perhaps more powerful to feel an idea from the heart instead of logically understanding it with no personal experience. One such idea is that of compassion (3). Compassion plays a large role in just about every religion on the planet and is especially prominent in the Buddha’s teachings where it is called “karuṇā”.

‘Karuṇā’ (pronounced ‘kuh-rue-nuuh’) is a Pali/Sanskrit word that means “pity or compassion” (4). An explanatory note on the translation further elaborates, calling karuṇā “the desire of removing bane and sorrow (from one's fellow men)” (4).

To call karuṇā a vital and necessary component of the study and practice of Buddhadharma would be a gross understatement. Karuṇā appears in so many places and is such a big concept that an entire tradition, the Mahāyāna (Great Path/Vehicle) has it as its basis. Perhaps the most well known bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara, is seen as the embodiment of this virtue (5). Because karuṇā is such a massive topic, we’ll focus our discussion on karuṇā as it appears in one particular series of teachings: The Four Immeasurable Minds or Brahmavihāras (6).

Karuṇā, along with the other Brahmavihāras, are teachings we can use to open our hearts and minds. Although we start out small, when fully cultivated, our hearts and minds become immeasurably receptive to whatever situation we are in.

As part of wishing that all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering, another transformation occurs within us: we begin to understand others better. In other words, karuṇā lets us "walk a mile in someone else's shoes". This is particularly practical when dealing with those that we are not on good terms with. In a sutta called "Subduing Hatred", the Buddha tells the monks how they can use compassion to practice patience:

"Ownership of deeds in a person with whom you are annoyed can be concentrated upon thus: 'This good person is owner of his deeds, heir to his deeds, his deeds are the womb from which he is born, his deeds are his kin for whom he is responsible, his deeds are his refuge, he is heir to his deeds, be they good or bad.' This too is how annoyance with him can be removed". (7)

Shantideva expresses an idea related to above sutta passage, in "The Way of the Bodhisattva":

"Although it is their sticks that hurt me, I am angry at the ones who wield them, striking me. But they in turn are driven by hatred; Therefore it is with their hatred I should take offence" (8).

Nyanaponika Thera further clarifies the connection between compassion and understanding the situation of others:
"Beings, sunk in ignorance, lost in delusion, hasten from one state of suffering to another, not knowing the real cause, not knowing the escape from it. This insight into the general law of suffering is the real foundation of our compassion, not any isolated fact of suffering.
Hence our compassion will also include those who at the moment may be happy, but act with an evil and deluded mind. In their present deeds we shall foresee their future state of distress, and compassion will arise". (9)

We'll conclude this thread with a brief meditation on compassion traditionally used as part of a meditation on the Brahmavihāras. As you read, recite, and/or chant these words, let your heart open to the boundlessness of karuṇā.

"I will abide, pervading one quarter with a heart imbued with compassion;
likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the forth;
so above and below, around and everywhere; and to all as to myself.
I will abide pervading the all-encompassing world, with a heart imbued with compassion;
abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill-will (10)".

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(1) Wikipedia has a great article on my main man Tagore: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tagore
(2) "Fruit Gathering – XXXVII" by Rabindranth Tagore, 1916. Available online from Sacred-Texts.com: http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/tagore/frutgath.htm
(3) In the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas "I would rather feel compassion than know the meaning of it".
(4) Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary Online p. 197. Accessed via the "Digital Dictionaries of South Asia" Project. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries
(5) 'Avalokiteshvara' was the topic of a previous language thread:
http://groups.google.com/group/Dharmasight/browse_thread/thread/3fd8fc24f84f878c#
(6) 'Brahmavihara' was the first thread of this series:
http://groups.google.com/group/Dharmasight/browse_thread/thread/6ea5486d6e89e9
To Review, they are:

1. Metta (Sanskrit: Maitri, मैत्रि) – Loving-Kindness

2. Karuṇā (Devanāgari: करुणा) – Compassion 3. Mudita (मुदित) – Sympathetic Joy 4. Upekkhā (Skt: upeksha, उपेक्षा) – Equanimity

(7) Aghatavinaya Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya 5.161. Translated from Pali by Ñanamoli Thera. Available from 'Access to Insight': http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an05/an05.161.nymo.html
(8) "Way of the Bodhisattva" Chapter 6, verse 41. Composed by Shantideva and translated by the Padmakara Translation Group. Shambhala Classics, 2006, p.83.
(9) "The Four Sublime States" by Nyanaponika Thera. Available from Access to Insight: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel006.html
(10) Taken from the "Abhayagiri Chanting Book", available online from: http://www.abhayagiri.org/index.php/main/book/288/

Kusala

We humans love a good struggle. Titanic clashes between the dark villains of evil and the benevolent heroes of good are found in almost every aspect of the human experience. In nearly every major religion, the struggle between good and evil occupies a central place. If person is aligned with the good side, he/ she will enjoy happiness, bliss, and peace. If, however, a person is on the bad side, he/she can expect things like pain, torment, and agony. It is certainly a very stark choice but, interestingly enough, one that is not at all prominent in the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha taught a rather different way of looking at the relationship between the negatives and positives in our lives. In contrast to the ubiquitous good versus evil motif, we are instead given the ideas kusala and akusala. In this week's thread, we'll focus on the word kusala.

According to the The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary (p. 223), kusala is defined as; skillful, cleaver, expert, and meritorious especially in a moral sense. The Sanskrit equivalent is kushala and has the same meaning(s). Kusala can also be understood in terms of its opposite, akusala, meaning wrong, bad, improper, demerit, etc.

According to the Buddha, there are no divine laws laid down by a creator deity to be followed (Gooood!) or violated (eeEEEvuul!!). Instead, there is the idea of natural laws (one definition of the word 'dharma'). We can think of dharma in this context as meaning "Law of Nature" much like the laws of gravity or thermodynamics. How much sense would it make to call gravity "evil" or "good"? Gravity is simply part of the way the universe operates. It is not a conscious entity forcing apples to fall on our heads; it is only a description of one of the universe's many laws.

When we begin to seriously engage in spiritual practice, our minds become clearer and we become more aware of both our inner and outer worlds. With this increased awareness, we can more carefully observe how and why things work in the context of natural/spiritual laws (like karma for example). To use this knowledge in ways that are beneficial to ourselves and those around us is the essential idea behind kusala. If we perform deeds that bring harm to ourselves and those around us, this is considered akusala.

Thinking in terms of "good" vs. "evil" is not useful because, from the Buddha's perspective, no being is truly evil in the sense we normally use the word. Granted, there are people who have done, are doing, and will be do truly horrific things. We can and do label things like genocide and slavery as evil but a more accurate description would be unskillful, or akusula. Many might immediately object to describing

something like slavery as simply "unskillful" but we also have to keep in mind that some actions are MUCH MORE unskillful than others. The consequences of murder for example, cannot compare to the consequences of spilling milk on a table.

Another reason the Buddha taught in terms of kusala/akusula is that when we get caught up in dividing the world into "good guys" and "bad guys", we generate tremendous negative qualities like hatred, aversion, and combativeness. As mentioned above, no being is fundamentally evil. In fact, the Buddhadharma teaches us that all beings possess Buddha Nature; the potential to awaken the perfected qualities of wisdom and compassion and blossom into a fully enlightened Buddha. Beings harm themselves and others because they are deluded and misguided, NOT because they are "bad seeds". In his classic treatise, "The Way of the Bodhisattva", the great master Shantideva expresses this idea, saying:

Although it is their sticks that hurt me, I am angry at the ones who wield them, striking me. But they in turn are driven by hatred; Therefore it is with their hatred I should take offence.

Ch. 6, v. 41 (trans. by Padmakara Translation Group)

Finally, the idea of kusala is also a reminder of the preciousness of human life. To be reborn as human is a considered very auspicious because as humans, we are capable of making great spiritual progress. Buddhas are perfectly awakened HUMAN BEINGS. To be fortunate enough to be born as a human means we engaged in many meritorious (kusala!) actions in previous lives. As humans, we are blessed with an opportunity to practice the Buddha's teachings and cultivate the qualities of the heart that can lead ourselves and those around us to liberation. A famous passage from The Dhammapada reminds us of this:

Yathaa'pi puppha raasimhaa kayiraa maalaagune bahoo Evang jaatena maccena kattabbam kusalam bahum.

Just as from a heap of flowers, Many garlands can be made, So, you, with your mortal life, Should do many skillful things. Dhp Ch. 4, v. 53 (trans by. Gil Fronsdal)

Mālā

In Shakespeare's classic, "Romeo and Juliet", Juliet says to Romeo:

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet;" (1)

There's just something about flowers and their beauty that transcends language and culture, as Juliet alludes to. Flowers as are as common the human experience as they are in nature. Comparisons to flowers, in all their various incarnations, are ubiquitous in art, literature, science, philosophy, and religion. It's no surprise then, to find flowers as a prominent symbol within the Buddhadharma. One of the most common flower-related words found in the ancient texts is mālā.

Mālā (pronounced maalaa) is a Pali/Sanskrit word meaning "wreath, garland, or chaplet" (2). In popular spiritual usage, it refers to stringed prayer beads. A full discussion of prayer beads covering their origin, usage, and varieties is far beyond the scope of this thread. It is however, worth mentioning that prayer beads are found in many other traditions including Hinduism (where they originated), Islam, Christianity,

Sikhism, and the Bahai Faith. The word ‘mālā’ appears in a famous verse from the Dhammapada (3). The chapter that this verse comes from is, appropriately enough, entitled Pupphavagga (Flower Chapter; puppha = flower) (4).

*Yathā'pi puppha rāsimhā kayirā **mālāgune** bahū Evaṁ jātena maccena kattabbam kusalam bahum.*

“Just as from a heap of flowers, Many garlands can be made, So, you, with your mortal life, Should do many skillful things”. Dhp Ch. 4, v. 53

A specific flower that is synonymous with the Dharmic religions is the lotus flower. The Pali word for lotus is paduma (5) while the Sanskrit is the more familiar, padma (6). Particularly in India, lotuses have long been regarded as symbols of purity and perseverance. Growing from muddy, opaque pools of water, lotuses rise up and blossom into beautiful flowers. Lotus flowers have the ability to remaining clean, with dust and water being unable to stick to the petals. The scientific explanation for this phenomenon is called “superhydrophocity” but is also more conveniently known as the ‘Lotus Effect’ (7).

One of the earliest references to the lotus occurs in the Sutta 26 of the Majjhima Nikaya (8). In this sutta, called “The Noble Search” (Pali: Ariyapariyesana), the Buddha recounts his spiritual quest as well as the time immediately after his enlightenment. According to this sutta, just after his great awakening, the Buddha was initially hesitant to teach the Way of Awakening because he wasn’t sure if people could understand it. He says:

"Just then these verses, unspoken in the past, unheard before, occurred to me:
'Enough now with teaching
what
only with difficulty
I reached.
This Dhamma is not easily realized
by those overcome
with aversion & passion.

What is abstruse, subtle,
deep,
hard to see,
going against the flow —
those delighting in passion,
cloaked in the mass of darkness,
won't see.'

At this point, a cosmic being name Sahampati, who comes from the “highest” realm of existence, the Brahma realm, appeared before the Buddha. Sahampati exhorted him to teach, concluding with the lines:

Rise up, hero, victor in battle!
O Teacher, wander without debt in the world.
Teach the Dhamma, O Blessed One:
There will be those who will understand.

The Buddha (thankfully) decided to teach the world his path to liberation. He then compared the different stages of living beings to lotuses:

"Then, having understood Brahma's invitation, out of compassion for beings, I surveyed the world with the eye of an Awakened One. As I did so, I saw beings with little dust in their eyes and those with much, those with keen faculties and those with dull, those with good attributes and those with bad, those easy to teach and those hard, some of them seeing disgrace & danger in the other world. Just as in a pond of blue or red or white lotuses, some lotuses — born & growing in the water — might flourish while immersed in the water, without rising up from the water; some might stand at an even level with the water; while some might rise up from the water and stand without being smeared by the water — so too, surveying the world with the eye of an Awakened One, I saw beings with little dust in their eyes [as above]…*some of them seeing disgrace & danger in the other world.*

Finally, no discussion of flower symbolism in the Buddhadharma would be complete without a mention of the Avataṁka Sutra (Devanāgari: अवतंसक सूत्र). Avataṁsaka (pronounced 'uh-vuh-tum-saka') means 'wreath' or 'ring-shaped adornment' (9) and is usually translated as "Flower Adornment/Ornament". This scripture is known as the "King of the Sutras" not only for length (~1600 pages for the complete English translation) but also for the range of practices, ideas, stories, and teachings it conveys. As expected, it is full of flower analogies. One such example occurs in the fifth chapter of the sutra, entitled, "The Flower Bank of the World" (10). Here, the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra (English: Univerally Good or Universal Worthy) is praising the origin of all Buddhas: Bodhisattva Vows. This is not a surprise considering that Samantabhadra is the bodhisattva known as foremost in the practice of Great Vows. Invoking imagery that the Avataṁka Sutra is so well known for, he says:

That ground is level and utterly pure,
Firmly abiding, indestructible;
It is adorned with jewels everywhere,
With various gemstones interspersed.

The diamond earth is most delightful,
Embellished with jewel rings and nets,
Spread with lotus blossoms in full bloom,
With exquisite raiment covering all.

Enlightening beings' celestial crowns and jewel necklaces
Are spread all over the ground as decoration;
Sandalwood-scented jewels are strewn about,
All radiating pure, exquisite light.

Jewel flowers flame, producing subtle light;
Flames of light, like clouds, illuminate all.
These flowers, and myriad jewels,
Are strewn over the ground for adornment.

Dense clouds rise and fill the ten directions

With tremendous rays of light that have no end,
Reaching all lands in the ten directions
Expounding the Buddha's vivifying teaching.

All the Buddha's vows are in the jewels
Revealing boundless, vast eons;
What the Supreme Knower did in days gone by
Is all seen within these jewels.

Into all the jewels of this ground
Come and enter all the Buddha-fields-
And into each atom of those Buddha-fields
Also enter all lands.

In the Flower Bank world, adorned with wondrous jewels
Enlightening beings travel throughout the ten directions,
Expounding the universal vows of the Great Hero:
This is their power of freedom in enlightenment sites.

The ground arrayed with beautiful precious stones
Radiates pure light replete with all adornments
Filling the cosmos, equal to space;
Buddha's power naturally manifest like this.

Those who master the vows of universal good,
Those of great knowledge who enter the Buddha's realm,
Can know, in this ocean of lands,
All such mystic transformations as these.

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(1) William Shakespeare, "Romeo and Juliet"
http://shakespeare.mit.edu/romeo_juliet/romeo_juliet.2.2.html
From 'The Complete Works of William Shakespeare' @ MIT (http://shakespeare.mit.edu/)
(2) Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary Online p. 530. Accessed via the "Digital Dictionaries of South Asia" Project. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries
(3) Gil Fronsdal's translation of "The Dhammapada", p 14. Shambhala 2005
(4) Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary Online p. 467. Accessed via the "Digital Dictionaries of South Asia" Project. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries
(5) Ibid, p. 410
(6) Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, p. 584 Motilal, 2005 reprint,
(7) Wikipedia has a good write-up on the Lotus Effect as well as references to the scientific research papers: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lotus_effect
(8) Arthur Anthony Macdonell. 'A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary'. p.29. Oxford University Press, 1929. Accessed via the "Digital Dictionaries of South Asia" Project. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries
(9) 'The Noble Search' Ariyapariyesana Sutta, from 'Access to Insight'
http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.026.than.html

(10) Thomas Cleary's full translation of the "Avatamsaka Sutra (Flower Ornament Scripture)", pp. 205-206, Shambhala 1993.

Mettā

If someone asked you who the most popular poet in America was, what would you say? Robert Frost? Whitman? Shakespeare perhaps? Wrong, wrong, wrong. The answer is actually a Persian Sufi by the name of Mawlānā Jalāl-ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (1). Part of the reason for this is that much of Rumi's writings, like Sufism in general, is centered on a really big concept: love.

The English word 'love' can be ambiguous because it encompasses so many different feelings, each with tons of nuances. Just take this poem from another famous Sufi master, Amir Khusro of Delhi (2) for example:

If you haven't been touched by love's burning flame,
how could our hearts ever really be close?
But if your heart isn't burnt, maybe its best to just stay away-
We set fire to every heart that hasn't been cooked (3).

Love, in its various incarnations, is one feeling that defines the human experience. It's no surprise then, to find teachings on love every culture and religion in the world. The Buddha too, taught about love of a particular kind. "Love", as it's known in the Buddhadharma, is called 'mettā'.

'Mettā' (pronounced 'met-uuh') is a Pali word that means "love, amity, sympathy, friendliness, and active interest in others" (4). The Sanskrit equivalent is maitrī (Devanāgari: मैत्री, here, the 'ai' is pronounced 'a' as in 'hat' giving us 'mai-tree') also carries meanings of "friendship, benevolence, and good-will" (5). Maitrī is etymologically related to the word 'mitra' which means "friend". The most common translations for mettā are "loving-kindness" or "loving-friendliness".

Of all the various qualities of the heart the Buddha taught about, mettā is unique in that its associated with the person that all traditions accept as the next Buddha: Maitreya (Pali: Metteya) (6). He is often referred to as the "Buddha of Love" because of his name. In the Theravada tradition, mettā appears as the ninth of the Ten Perfections (Pali: Parami) that bodhisattvas cultivate on the path to Awakening.

Mettā is best known as being one of the Four Immeasurable Minds or Brahmavihāras (7). Interestingly enough, mettā is perhaps the most prominent and widely practiced of the four. So just what does mettā mean on a practical level? Bhante Henepola Gunaratana (lovingly referred to as 'Bhante G') explains it in terms of motherhood:

"When a young women finds out she is going to have a child, she feels a tremendous outpouring of love for the baby she will bear. She will do everything she can to protect the infant growing inside her. She will make every effort to make sure the baby is well and healthy. She is full of loving, hopeful thoughts for the child. Like mettā, the feeling a new mother has for her infant is limitless and all embracing; and, like mettā, it does not depend on actions or behavior of the one receiving our thoughts of loving-friendliness" (8).

A phrase like ‘loving-kindness’ might conjure up feelings of an artificial and sentimental mushiness but mettā is far deeper and more profound than a mere “feel good” exercise. When practiced to its highest extend, mettā can lead to liberation itself as the Buddha eloquently describes:

“Bhikkhus, whatever kinds of worldly merit there are, all are not worth one sixteenth part of the heart-deliverance of loving-kindness; in shining and beaming and radiance the heart-deliverance of loving-kindness far excels them.

Just as whatever light there is of stars, all is not worth one sixteenth part of the moon's; in shining and beaming and radiance the moon's light far excels it; and just as in the last month of the Rains, in the Autumn when the heavens are clear, the sun as it climbs the heavens drives all darkness from the sky with its shining and beaming and radiance; and just as, when night is turning to dawn, the morning star is shining and beaming and radiating; so too, whatever kinds of worldly merit there are, all are not worth one sixteenth part of the heart-deliverance of loving-kindness; in shining and beaming and radiance the heart-deliverance of loving-kindness far excels them” (9).

The best way to learn about mettā is to cultivate it ourselves and we’ll end with a brief guided meditation on mettā by noted Vipassana teacher, Sharon Salzberg:

“Take a few deep breaths, relax your body. Feel your energy settle into your body and into the moment. See if certain phrases emerge from your heart that express what you wish most deeply for yourself, not just for today, but in an enduring way. Phrases that are big enough and general enough that you can ultimately wish them for all of life, for all beings everywhere.
Classical phrases are things like, "May I live in safety. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I live with ease."You can gently repeat these phrases over and over again, have your mind rest in the phrases and whenever you find your attention has wandered, don't worry about it. When you recognize you've lost touch with the moment, see if you can gently let go and begin again.
May I live in safety, be happy, be healthy, live with ease.
Call to mind somebody that you care about--a good friend, or someone who's helped you in your life, someone who inspires you. You can visualize them, say their name to yourself. Get a feeling for their presence, and then direct the phrases of lovingkindness to them. May *you* live in safety, be happy, be healthy, live with ease.
Call to mind someone you know who's having a difficult time right now. They've experienced a loss, painful feeling, a difficult situation. If somebody like that comes to mind, bring them here.

Imagine them sitting in front of you. Say their name. Get a feeling for their presence and offer the phrases of lovingkindness to them."May *you* live in safety. Be happy. Be healthy, live with ease."

Think of someone who plays some role in your life, some function that you don't know very well, that you don't have a particular feeling for, or against. Maybe the checkout person at the supermarket where you shop, the gas-station attendant, somebody that you see periodically. If someone like that comes to mind, imagine them sitting in front of you, and offer these same phrases of lovingkindness to them.

May you live in safety. Be happy. Be healthy, live with ease.We connect into these phrases, aiming the heart in this way, we're opening ourselves to the possibility of including, rather than excluding, of connecting, rather than overlooking, of caring, rather than being indifferent. And ultimately, we open in this way to all beings everywhere, without distinction, without separation.May all beings live in safety, be happy, be healthy, live with ease.All people, all animals, all creatures, all those in existence, near and

far, known to us and unknown to us. All beings on the earth, in the air, in the water. Those being born, those dying.May all beings everywhere live in safety, be happy, be healthy, live with ease.You feel the energy of this aspiration extending infinitely in front of you, to either side, behind you, above and below. As the heart extends in a boundless way, leaving no one out, may all beings live in safety, be happy, be healthy, live with ease" (10).

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(1) Rumi (1207 – 1273 AD), aside from his poetry, also founded the famous Mevlevi or "Whirling Dervish" Sufi tradition. Wikipedia has a great writeup: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rumi
For more info on Rumi's popularity and influence see in modern America see:
"Rumi Rules!" Sept. 30th, 2002
http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,501021007-356133,00.html
"The Roar of Rumi – 800 Years On", Sept 30th, 2007:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7016090.stm
(2) The awesomely awesome Amir Khusro (1253 – 1325 AD) was a famous Renaissance Man from Delhi. He is venerated as the "Father of Hindustani Music" or Classical North Indian style, which incorporates elements of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish music. Wikipedia's article is good:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amir_Khusro
For lots more info on Amir Khusro and Sufism in South Asia, check out "Amir Khusro's Garden of Cultural Plurality": http://www.alif-india.com/
(3) "Burned Hearts" by Amir Khusro, from "Love's Alchemy: Poems from the Sufi Tradition" by David and Sabrineh Fideler. New World Library, 2006. p. 128.
(4) Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary Online p. 540. Accessed via the "Digital Dictionaries of South Asia" Project. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries
(5) Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, p. 883 Motilal Banarasidas Publishers, 2005 reprint
(6) For an insightful discussion of Maitreya as the next Buddha check out "Faces of Compassion: Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and Their Modern Expression" by Taigen Dan Leighton. Wisdom Publications, 2003, pp. 241 -270
(7) 'Brahmavihara' was the first thread in this series:
http://groups.google.com/group/Dharmasight/browse_thread/thread/6ea5486d6e89e9
(8) Bhante Henepola Gunaratana "Mindfulness in Plain English, updated and expanded edition". Wisdom Publications, 2002, p. 180.
(9) Itivuttaka, Sutta 27, quoted from "The Practice of Loving-Kindness" by Ñanamoli Thera. Available online from 'Access to Insight': http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nanamoli/wheel007.html
(10) "Opening the Heart", by Sharon Salzberg. From beliefnet.com. The site includes guided meditation in audio form.
http://www.beliefnet.com/story/32/story_3248_1.html

Mudita

A few years ago, a stage play called "Avenue Q" (1) came out and quickly established itself as a hot ticket, winning multiple awards (including the Tony for 'Best Musical'). The play is a satire of…well, everything. One hallmark of this show is its hilariously offensive, politically incorrect observations of the human condition. Take the following song, called 'Schadenfreude', for example:

Selected Lyrics:
GARY COLEMAN: Right now you are down and out and feeling really crappyNICKY: I'll say.GARY COLEMAN: And when I see how sad you are, It sort of makes me...Happy!NICKY: Happy?!GARY

COLEMAN: Sorry, Nicky, human nature-Nothing I can do! It's...Schadenfreude!Making me feel glad that I'm not you.

The song continues:

GARY COLEMAN: People taking pleasure in your pain!NICKY: Oh, Schadenfreude, huh? What's that, some kinda Nazi word?GARY COLEMAN: Yup! It's German for "happiness at the misfortune of others!" (2)

For specific examples of Schadenfreude, we need only look back to the song in question:

NICKY: Ooh, how about...Straight-A students getting Bs?GARY COLEMAN: Exes getting STDs!NICKY: Waking doormen from their naps!GARY COLEMAN: Watching tourists reading maps!NICKY: Football players getting tackled!GARY COLEMAN: CEOs getting shackled!

Pretty mean isn't it? And yet it's something that we're all guilty of. Thinking even deeper, it's actually a tad sadistic. There might be some cases where Schadenfreude gives us a good laugh or guilty pleasure but what if it was possible for us to be happy in a completely different way. What if we could be made happy, truly happy, at the triumphs and successes of others? As lofty as this sounds, it is possible and it's a quality known as as 'mudita'.

'Mudita' (pronounced moo-dee-tuh) is a Pali/Sanskrit word which means "pleased, gladdened heart, pleased in mind" (3) as well as "joy, delight, and rejoicing in gladness" (4). This final sense of rejoicing in happiness, particularly the happiness of others is how the word is most commonly used: it's the complete opposite of 'Schadenfreude'.

Often, when we someone gets upset, or is acting in a way that we're not used to, we say "their true colors come out". If it's a negative situation, we often chalk up a person's indiscretions to "human nature". According to the Buddhadharma however, the opposite is true; it's a person's "inhuman nature" which is showing itself. No matter how misguided a person may be, beneath all of the defilements and negative layers of the mind, there is a fundamentally pure and bright aspect to our being.

Mudita is listed as one of the Four Boundless Qualities or Brahmavihāra (5). Cultivating mudita (or any of the other Brahmavihāras), can lead to a complete opening of the heart (Boundlessness) and to liberation itself. To be able to fully rejoice in the happiness of others is something that would be VERY useful in our everyday lives. Interestingly, despite its status as a Brahmavihāra, teachings relating to mudita itself aren't common. So just how exactly can we practice mudita? Ajahn Suwat, a contemporary Thai teacher, offers some advice to a practioner:

Question:
I've had some practice in developing good will and loving-kindness, but I don't know how to develop sympathetic joy. Do you have any suggestions?
Ajaan Suwat:
Sympathetic joy is a feeling of happiness at the good fortune of others. When other people are happy or gain wealth, we wish them well. We aren't jealous or envious of them. This is a quality we develop to get rid of the defilement of envy. When other people gain good fortune, we practice feeling happy for them. If we suffer from the defilement of envy, we can't stand to see other people doing well in life. We get

jealous because we feel we're better than they are. This is why the Buddha taught us to develop sympathetic joy.
Question:
Is there any technique for developing sympathetic joy?
Ajaan Suwat:
The technique is to spread this thought to people in general: "If anyone is suffering, may they experience happiness. As for people experiencing happiness, may they maintain that happiness. May they not be deprived of the good fortune they've gained, the wealth they've gained, the status they've gained, the praise they've gained, the happiness they've gained. May their happiness increase." We're not jealous of their happiness and we don't try to compete with them in underhanded ways. The Buddha's purpose in teaching sympathetic joy is so that our minds won't be consumed with envy over other people's good fortune. When we feel no envy toward others and can train our hearts to reach stillness using this theme as our preoccupation, then we've completed our training in sympathetic joy. The phrase we repeat when we chant every day — "May all living beings not be deprived of the good fortune they have attained" — *that's* sympathetic joy (6).

Instructions on how to meditate on mudita can also be found in the voluminous Visuddhimagga (Pali: Path of Purification). This text, the most influential work in Pali (outside of the scriptures themselves), was composed by the ancient master Buddhaghosa. He was an Indian monk who traveled to Sri Lanka to study the Theravada teachings in the 5th Century AD. The Visuddhimagga itself is a vast and detailed commentary on the Pali scriptures. The Brahmavihāras are part of his analysis and Buddhaghosa says of mudita:

“When this meditator develops the mind-deliverance of unselfish joy through any of these kinds of absorption he obtains these eleven advantages: he sleeps in comfort, wakes in comfort, and dreams no evil dreams, he is dear to human beings, dear to non-human beings, deities guard him, fire and poison and weapons do not affect him, his mind is easily concentrated, the expression of his face is serene, he dies unconfused, if he penetrates no higher he will be reborn in the Brahma World” (7).

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(1) Avenue Q is still on Broadway and on tour nationally: http://www.avenueq.com/
I saw it with some friends last year it came when it came through San Francisco…it was a total riot! Definitely check it out!
(2) The now legendary soundtrack for this play includes many other classics like, “Everyone’s a Little Bit Racist”, and “The Internet is for Porn”.
(3) Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary Online p. 537. Accessed via the "Digital Dictionaries of South Asia" Project. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries
(4) Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, p. 882 Motilal, 2005 reprint
(5) Brahmavihāra was the introductory thread to this series:
http://groups.google.com/group/Dharmasight/browse_thread/thread/6ea5486d6e89e9
(6) “A Fistful of Sand” by Ajahn Suwat Suvaco. Translated from Thai by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. From Access to Insight:
http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/thai/suwat/fistful.html
(7) Quoted from “Mudita: The Buddha’s Teaching on Unselfish Joy”. From Access to Insight:
http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/various/wheel170.html

Saṃsāra

The great American singer Johnny Cash (1) was known as “the Man in Black” because many of his songs had a distinct melancholic feel. One of his most famous songs, sung as part of the “super band” The Highwaymen (2), is called… ‘The Highwayman’.

“The Highwayman” by The Highwaymen

I was a highwayman. Along the coach roads I did ride
With sword and pistol by my side
Many a young maid lost her baubles to my trade
Many a soldier shed his lifeblood on my blade
The bastards hung me in the spring of twenty-five
But I am still alive.
I was a sailor. I was born upon the tide
And with the sea I did abide.I sailed a schooner round the Horn to Mexico
I went aloft and furled the mainsail in a blow
And when the yards broke off they said that I got killed
But I am living still.
I was a dam builder across the river deep and wide
Where steel and water did collide
A place called Boulder on the wild Colorado
I slipped and fell into the wet concrete below
They buried me in that great tomb that knows no sound
But I am still around.
I'll always be around and around and around and around and around
I fly a starship across the Universe divide
And when I reach the other side
I'll find a place to rest my spirit if I can
Perhaps I may become a highwayman again
Or I may simply be a single drop of rain
But I will remain
And I'll be back again, and again and again and again and again.

The last line of the song points to what the Buddha described as THE fundamental problem of human existence. What is this problem? It’s the problem of birth and death (3). Let’s sketch out a human life: we’re born, we grow up, we age, we start to get ill, and eventually we die. Sure, there may be TONS of things that happen in between these events but let’s face it, there’s no escaping these facts. If this sounds morbid or creepy, then imagine having to go through the process again, and again, and again, like “The Highwayman” says. Because he called it THE problem we have in life, the Buddha had much to say about this process of death and rebirth, known as saṃsāra.

Saṃsāra (pronounced ‘sum-saaruh’) is a Pali/Sanskrit word which means “going or wandering through, undergoing transmigration, course, passing through a succession of states, circuit of mundane existence, the world, secular life, worldly illusion, to walk or roam through, and to diffuse through” (4).

From where did saṃsāra arise, how did we get here, and when will it end? One of the key teachings of the Buddha was that existence has no First Cause (5), that is saṃsāra has no beginning and it has no end. We have died and been reborn an infinite number of times in the past and will continue to be

reborn an infinite number of times in the future. Many people may think that this isn't a bad thing at all, why would you want to "not exist" by leaving saṃsāra?

This is a common question that arises but another characterization of saṃsāra is that it's a hopeless struggle because which we will always have to experience suffering in every single life. Saṃsāra also implies that we're lost, wandering aimlessly from life to life. If you've ever been lost as a child in a mall or lost in an unfamiliar city/place, you know the feeling the fear and anxiety. When we're lost, we become very vulnerable.

In English we have a phrase which describes saṃsāra quite well: a rat race. In the words of actress Lily Tomlin, "the problem with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat".

So how does the Buddha describe saṃsāra? One short text, the Assu Sutta (Tears) gives a poignant simile:

"Which is greater, the tears you have shed while transmigrating & wandering this long, long time — crying & weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing — or the water in the four great oceans?... This is the greater: the tears you have shed...

"Long have you (repeatedly) experienced the death of a mother. The tears you have shed over the death of a mother while transmigrating & wandering this long, long time — crying & weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing — are greater than the water in the four great oceans.

"Long have you (repeatedly) experienced the death of a father... the death of a brother... the death of a sister... the death of a son... the death of a daughter... loss with regard to relatives... loss with regard to wealth... loss with regard to disease. The tears you have shed over loss with regard to disease while transmigrating & wandering this long, long time — crying & weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing — are greater than the water in the four great oceans.

"Why is that? From an inconstruable beginning comes transmigration. A beginning point is not evident, though beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving are transmigrating & wandering on. Long have you thus experienced stress, experienced pain, experienced loss, swelling the cemeteries — enough to become disenchanted with all fabricated things, enough to become dispassionate, enough to be released." (6)

In Buddhist art, a popular motif involves showing saṃsāra as a wheel and in later art, this wheel is usually depicted as being held tightly in the grip of Yama, the ancient Indian deity associated with death. (7)

All of these teachings and descriptions of saṃsāra may seem quite disheartening but there is one thing that we must always keep in mind: it is POSSIBLE to go beyond the cycle of birth and death and to end our suffering. When that happens then we will, "light up this world, like the moon set free from a cloud" (8).

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(1) For a fantastic look at the life of The Man in Black, do check out his biopic “Walk the Line” (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0358273/)
(2) Aside from Johnny Cash, this group included Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Kris Kristofferson
(3) The topic of rebirth has quite often been controversial in the modern age and many practitioners don’t interpret “birth and death” literally but rather metaphorically. For simplicity’s sake however, I’ll stick to the classic definition which DOES take death and rebirth as a literal fact of life.
(4) Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, p. 1119 Motilal Banarasidas Publishers, 2005 reprint, Samsara is also a perfume from Guerlain: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccrQ3oAy5kE
(5) For more on the idea of cosmological beginning see Wikipedia’s discussion: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosmological_argument
(6) Assu Sutta, Samyutta Nikaya 15.3, translated from Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Available from Access to Insight: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn15/sn15.003.than.html
(7) BuddhaNet has an awesome interactive description of the Wheel of Life from the Tibetan tradition: http://www.buddhanet.net/wheel1.htm
(8) Dhammapada Ch. 25, verse 382, from “The Dhammapada”, translated by Gil Fronsal, Shambhala, 2005. p. 98

Sangha

Human beings are social creatures. We love to do activities in groups like watching a basketball game together, eating together (in some cases going to the restroom together), and living together. Group behavior is such a vital part of the human experience that our languages have lots of names for groups of people engaging in similar activities. For example, a group of athletes is called a team, a group of soldiers is called an army, a group of students a class, etc. But is there a name for a group of people whose common interest is spiritual practice? The answer is yes, and name for such a group is called a sangha. To call the concept of a sangha extremely important would be a gross understatement. Before delving into how 'sangha' fits in the Buddha's teachings however, let us first look at the meaning of the word itself.

The word 'sangha' (pronounced sun-ghuh) comes from the Pali*/ Sanskrit** and means "multitude, assemblage, assembly, community, crowd, society, association, congregation, and any number of people living together for a common purpose". In usage, 'sangha' has two distinct but related meanings. In the first sense, 'sangha' refers exclusively to the Buddha's disciples and/or the monastic community of monks and nuns who practice the Buddha's teachings. The second, usage refers to anyone, monastic or layperson, that practices the Buddha's teachings, or more broadly, anyone spiritually inclined. The emphasis in this thread will be on the second usage.

Sangha is such a fundamental and defining characteristic of the Buddha's path to awakening that is considered one of the "Three Jewels". The Three Jewels are 'Buddha', the teacher of the path to enlightenment, 'Dharma', the teachings that lead us to awakening, and finally 'Sangha', the community that practices the Buddha's Dharma.

Many might find it odd that a sense of community is so strongly emphasized, particularly in light of the focus on solitary, monastic practice that is found in many of the early texts. The Venerable Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and attendant, touched on this idea in a famous #Pali Sutta. Here he tells the Buddha, "...This is half of the holy life, lord: admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie." The Buddha replies, "Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk

has admirable people as friends, companions, & comrades, he can be expected to develop & pursue the noble eightfold path".

In our time, we have the expression, "a friend in need is a friend indeed", that is friends who stay with us and never abandon us, no matter how bad the situation may be, are considered the best/truest of friends. This is the purpose and value of a sangha. As a group of like-minded people practicing the Buddha's teachings, we can relate to issues that arise on the path and offer effective help precisely because of our common, spiritual association. A spiritual friend of this sort is known as 'kalyana mitra' in Sanskrit and we can think of a sangha as a group of spiritual friends. Often times these spiritual friends are the Dharma teachers that we learn from. Many times however, they can be our peers or anyone that we happen to learn an insightful lesson from.

One way we can remind ourselves of the preciousness and importance of the Sangha is to recite/chant/read verses of in praise of it. This has been a traditional practice since the time of the Buddha himself. As you read these words of devotion, remember that you too are part of the Sangha:

RECOLLECTION OF THE SANGHA Now let us chant the recollection of the Sangha. They are the Blessed One's disciples, who have practiced well, Who have practiced directly, Who have practiced insightfully, Those who practice with integrity-- That is the four pairs, the eight kinds of noble beings-- These are the Blessed One's disciples. Such ones are worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of respect; They give occasion for incomparable goodness to arise in the world.

SUPREME PRAISE OF THE SANGHA Now let us chant the supreme praise of the Sangha Born of the Dhamma, that Sangha which has practiced well, The field of the Sangha formed of eight kinds of noble beings, Guided in body and mind by excellent morality and virtue. I revere that assembly of noble beings perfected in purity. The Sangha, which is the supreme, secure refuge of all beings-- As the Third Object of Recollection, I venerate it with bowed head. I am indeed the Sangha's servant, the Sangha is my Lord and Guide. The Sangha is sorrow's destroyer and it bestows blessings on me.

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*Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary Online, p. 667 **Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Motilal, 2005 reprint, p.1129 # Uppadha Sutta, Samyutta Nikaya 45.2 http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn45/sn45.002.than.html & Abhayagiri Monastery Chanting Book, Evening Chanting, p. 13

Shraddha

Whether we realize it or not, we place our precious lives in the hands of complete strangers every day. In fact, we do this multiple times per day. Take crossing the street for example. In order to do this we must wait until we have the light (if you're outside of NYC that is) and for traffic to stop before we can walk across. But before any of this takes place, we have to believe that the drivers will indeed stop their cars when they see the red light. We must also believe that the traffic lights and car brakes are all functioning properly. That's a lot of stuff to believe! There is a word that describes the idea of believing something will happen or be true: faith. Faith is an important idea in all major religions but especially so in the Buddha's teachings and therefore a perfect topic for week's thread.

The Sanskrit word for faith is shraddha (pronounced shruh-ddhuuh). Shraddha is defined* as "faith, trust, confidence, trustfulness, faithfulness, belief in, loyality, conviction". The Pali equivalent is saddha

and has the same meaning(s). Before exploring the place of shraddha in the Buddha's teachings, it would be helpful to briefly see how the concept of shraddha differs from 'faith' in other traditions.

The word faith, especially in the religious context, has acquired some negative connotations over the centuries and especially in modern times. To many people, the word 'faith' is charged with a dangerous irrationality that implies blindly believing something without a shred of evidence. Indeed, in many religious and philosophical traditions, it is precisely the belief in something without evidence that is considered virtuous. This kind of "blind faith" however, is exactly what shraddha is not.

One of the most famous Buddhist scriptures, especially in the West, is the Kalama Sutta (Anguttara Nikaya Book 3, Sutta 65). In this sutta, a group of people called the Kalamas were in a philosophical/spiritual dilemma. Many different pundits, ascetics, gurus, yogis, and spiritual teachers would pass through the Kalama's town and promote their own teachings while speaking badly of the teachings of others. Which one of these teachers was correct and which was wrong? The Kalamas were quite clueless but it just so happened that the Buddha was passing through town. The Kalamas decided to ask the Buddha how they could figure out correct spiritual teachings from those that are false. The Buddha's reply was that they should not necessarily accept (or reject!) something merely because it is tradition, logical speculation, or popularly agreed upon. Only when they actually put the various teachings into practice and see what kind of benefits or drawbacks come about, should a decision be made about belief and placing faith. In other words, the proof is in the pudding.

The Buddha was talking to the Kalamas in a general sense however his advice also illustrates what shraddha means in his teachings. We should "take everything with a grain of salt", especially the teachings of the Buddhadharma, but once we've seen how we can benefit by practicing, we should be able to place our faith where it needs to be placed. In this sense, shraddha may seem more like the cautious investigative attitude found in science but there is a catch: doubting things too much and having no faith can be very detrimental to our spiritual development.

Extreme skepticism is such a pitfall that it is classified as one of the Five Hindrances**, i.e. qualities that hinder us on the path to awakening. The Pali word for this is vicikiccha and it is often translated as 'skeptical doubt'. Skeptical doubt is a hindrance because it keeps us from developing the kind of faith that is needed to progress on the spiritual path. Going back to the street crossing story that started this thread, without any faith, we would not be able to cross the street. It is just the same with our spiritual practice.

Some of the most amazing and inspiring verses and expositions in all of the Buddha's teachings have shraddha as the object of devotion and it is with one such praise we will conclude. The following verses are taken from Chapter 12 of the Flower Adornment Scripture (Avatamsaka Sutra#). In this part, a bodhisattva named Chief in Goodness speaks on the good qualities of shraddha:

Faith is the basis of the Path, the mother of virtues, Nourishing and growing all good ways, Cutting away the net of doubt, freeing from the torrent of passion, Revealing the unsurpassed road of the ultimate peace.

When faith is undefiled, the mind is pure; Obliterating pride, it is the root of reverence, And the foremost wealth in the treasury of religion, Being a pure hand to receive the practices.

Faith is generous, the mind not begrudging; Faith can joyfully enter the Buddha's teaching; Faith can increase the knowledge and virtue; Faith can assure arrival at enlightenment.

Faith makes the faculties pure, clear, and sharp; The power of faith is strong and indestructible. Faith can annihilate the root of affliction, Faith can turn one wholly to the virtues of buddhahood.

Faith has no attachment to objects: Transcending difficulties, it reaches freedom from trouble. Faith can go beyond the pathways of demons, And reveal the unsurpassed road of liberation.

Faith is the unspoiled seed of virtue, Faith can grow the seed of enlightenment. Faith can increase supreme knowledge, Faith can reveal all Buddhas.

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*Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary. ** The Five Hindrances are Sensual Desire, Anger, Sloth/Torpor, Restlessness/Worry, and Skeptical Doubt. # "The Flower Adornment Scripture", trans. by Thomas Cleary. Shambhala Books.

Sila

During his lifetime, the Buddha taught many things to many to people. While the ultimate goal of these teachings is the same (to liberate beings from suffering), the sheer vastness and variety of these various Dharma teachings can be quite bewildering. Fortunately, the teachings are organized in numerous ways, most often in lists. The path to liberation, the Noble Eightfold Path, consists of the following:

1. Perfect Understanding: Realization of the real nature of existence. 2. Perfect Thoughts: Properly guided human emotion. 3. Perfect Speech: Harmonized human communication. 4. Perfect Action: Upholding morals and ethics. 5. Perfect Livelihood: Respectable and harmless way of life. 6. Perfect Effort: Dynamic mental processes directed to disciple and cultivation of the mind. 7. Perfect Mindfulness: Awareness of own action, words, and thought. 8. Perfect Concentration: Higher consciousness with purity and wisdom. (taken from Ven. K. Sri. Dhammananda's "Daily Buddhist Devotions")

The Eightfold Path itself is traditionally divided into three categories; samadhi (meditative concentration, no. 6-8), prajña (paññā in Pali, no. 1-2), and sila (virtue/spiritual ethics, no. 3-5). In this thread, we take a closer look at sila.

Sila (pronounced seeluh) comes from the Pali language. The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary defines sila as "virtue, moral practice, good character, code of morality, code of ethics". The Sanskrit equivalent is 'shila' and shares the same meaning(s). In addition to the above mentioned Three-Fold Division, sila also occurs in the list of Paramitas (Transcendent Perfections) Bodhisattvas on the Way of Awakening must cultivate. Sila is a fundamental aspect of the Buddhadharma so it would be useful to examine what it is and how it fits in with the Buddha's other teachings.

The concept of upholding a set of spiritual ethics is the very essence of sila. The spiritual ethics prescribed by the Buddha are laid out in sets of precepts (another definition of sila). The number and kind of precepts one follows depends one's situation. There are separate precepts for monks, nuns, lay people, bodhisattvas, etc., but the most popular (and the basis for all other sets) is what is known as the

Five Precepts (Pancha Sila in Pali). The Five Precepts are read/ recited/chanted daily by all Buddhist of all traditions:

1. I undertake the precept to refrain from taking the life of any living creature. 2. I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given. 3. I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct. 4. I undertake the precept to refrain from false and harmful speech. 5. I undertake the precept to refrain from consuming intoxicating drink and drugs which lead to carelessness. (From the 'Abhayagiri Monastery Chanting Book')

Particularly in the West, we are taught to exercise our free thinking minds and to be wary of following rules and regulations. Mindlessly obeying and going along like a robot is something many people are averse to. From that perspective, Precepts may seem like just another list of do's and don'ts but that's exactly what they are not.

It is extremely important (actually vital!) to note that the Five Precepts are not ultimate, inflexible commandants handed down the Buddha. Instead, they are a set of guidelines for us to follow as we practice the Buddhadharma. In the Pali-English Dictionary's definition of sila, one comment calls the Five Precepts, " a sort of preliminary condition to any higher development after conforming to the teaching of the Buddha and as such often mentioned when a new follower is "officially" installed" (p. 712). Far from being "limitations on freedom", the Precepts are actually the basis for any and all spiritual practice.

Initially, the purpose of sila/precepts is protection. We protect ourselves and our practice by not engaging in unwholesome activity that would lead to negative karmic consequences. We also protect the living beings around us by not harming and exploiting them. At this point we actively strive to follow the Precepts. As we progress in our practice, the deepening insights into wisdom and compassion lead to a change in our relationship with the precepts. We go from constantly reflecting on and monitoring our thoughts/speech/actions to being spontaneously able to live and practice in accordance with precepts. Following them becomes as natural as breathing; we become the precepts and the precepts become us. This is the Perfection of Virtue (Sila Paramita) alluded to earlier.

We often hear people being scolded with phrases like "stop acting like a child" or "be a man about it". In the same way, sila exhorts us to "start behaving like the wise and compassionate beings we are".

Sutra

It has probably happened to you at some point. You get on the subway and you see someone reading a book. At the next stop someone gets on and they begin to read a book, the same you saw before. While walking in the park, or sitting in a coffee shop, you see people reading the same book. Gradually you hear people talk about this book. You begin to wonder, what is this book about? Was it Oprah's book of the month or something? Why are so many people reading it? Now your interest is piqued, the next step is to acquire a copy. Maybe you go to the local library, or even try to borrow it from a friend. You could always go to Amazon.com but let's say that none of these options worked. You'd really like to read this book because you see that it's touched the lives of many people, so what do you do? Would you be willing to travel thousands of miles and spend decades in search of this book? Totally insane you might say, is any book worth that kind of effort? Throughout history there have indeed been such books and ones that contain the teachings of the Buddha are known as sutras.

The word sutra (pronounced 'soo-truh) is derived from the Sanskrit root 'sutr' meaning (1) "to string or put together, to contrive, effect, produce, compose". 'Sutra' itself means, "a thread, cord, string, that which works like a thread which runs through or holds everything together, rule, direction, any work or manual consisting of strings of such rules hanging together like threads". Another (related) definition is, "a carpenter's measuring line". The Pali equivalent is 'sutta' and has the same meanings (2). 'Sutra' is also etymologically related to the English word 'suture', i.e. the thread used to sew a wound closed.

'Sutra' itself is not, by any means, an exclusively Buddhist term. There are Hindu and Jain sutras too. In pop culture, the word is widely known and associated with texts like Patajali's "Yoga Sutras" and more famously the "Kama Sutra" of Vatsyayana (3).

Sutras are absolutely essential because they are THE record of the Buddha's teachings. If you walk into any bookstore and wander into the "Eastern Religions" section, you'll probably find shelves and shelves of books about what the Buddha taught. There is nothing wrong with these books, but all of them ultimately have the sutras as their source material. To read about something is not quite the same as reading something directly. In the same way, being able to read through what the Buddha and his disciples actually taught gives us direct access to the profound teachings that lead to liberation from suffering.

The collection of sutras is known as the 'Sutra Pitaka" and means, "the basket of teachings". How many sutras are there? A lot. The Sutra Pitaka (in any language) consists of dozens of volumes containing thousands of sutras. This large amount of teachings is often compared to a great ocean, not only because its vastness but because of its depth as well. A common expanded version of the "Taking Refuge" verses contains the follow:

I take refuge in the Dharma, and I wish that all sentient beings will delve into the sutras, their wisdom as deep as the ocean. (4)

The sutras cover every topic from basic meditation instructions and verses on virtue to inconceivable descriptions of the highest and most exalted planes of realization. With so many texts out there, which ones should we read? Should we even attempt to read all of them? Do we need to? These are common questions which are ones that can only really be answered by looking within. Many people engage in reading the entire Sutra Pitaka as a form of practice (5). Others stick to one sutra and delve very deeply into it. It really all depends on our practice and affinities. There are certainly some sutras which are more popular than others such as the Heart, Anapanasati, Diamond, Lotus, Shurangama, Avatamsaka, and, Mahasatipatthana to name a few. If you've never read a sutra or would like to take a closer look, these texts aren't a bad place to start.

In studying the sutras, there are a few items that we should keep in mind. First, it is not possible for one sutra to be "better" or "worse" than another. Every (and I mean every!) sutra was spoken to a specific audience in a specific context and has a specific message. Because of this, we might find that different sutras say different things about different topics/concepts. This does not, however, mean that one is right and one is wrong. We can compare this idea to a doctor counseling patients.

If we hear this doctor telling his first patient to eat less and then telling his second patient to eat more, we might think the doctor was being contradictory. But what if patient #1 was overweight and patient #2 was underweight? Would we still think the doctor was a quack?

The goal of every sutra is the same: lead us a step closer to liberation. Because of this, we should read/listen to them with a mind that is as calm, open, and receptive as possible. Sutras are not the sort of thing one would read in a noisy station while waiting for a crowded bus to come. Similarly, we could not fully enjoy or understand a great movie if we watched it half asleep. The right mindset for reading/reciting sutras is important enough to have lead to the tradition of reciting preliminary verses to help settle the mind. You can try it for yourself. Before opening a sutra, slowly and mindfully read its title then recite the following:

Verse for Opening a Sutra: The unsurpassed, deep, profound, subtle, wonderful Dharma, In a hundred thousand million eons, is difficult to encounter; Now that I've come to receive and hold it, within my sight and hearing, I vow to fathom the Thus Come One's true and actual meaning. (6)

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(1) Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Motilal, 2005 reprint, p. 1241 (2) Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary Online p. 718. Accessed via the "Digital Dictionaries of South Asia" Project. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries (3) At a high school Interfaith presentation, I was asked, in all seriousness, if Buddhism was the "religion with the Kama Sutra" in it. (4) From the Bodhi Monastery Liturgy http://www.bodhimonastery.net (5) To the best of my knowledge, there is no complete English translation of the entire Sutra Pitaka although many organizations (like the Buddhist Text Translation Society) are putting much effort into changing that. I believe that a full English translation of the Pali Suttas is available from the Pali Text Society however most of the translations were done in the mid-to-late 1800s. Many of these translations are dated and in many cases inaccurate but scholars are working hard to revise them. Its only a matter of time before all of the Buddha's teachings are available in the language of Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, and Bob Dylan. (6) Translation from the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association.

Upekkhā

In the realm of modern music, there's a phenomenon which simultaneously inspires joy and displeasure: the one hit wonder. We're probably all familiar with these songs even if the names of the artists have long left our memories. The songs produced by one hit wonders (like music in general) can often hold some interesting spiritual insights if looked at from certain angles. Case in point: "Break My Stride (1983)" by Matthew Wilder". The chorus for this song goes like this:

Ain't nothin' gonna break my stride
Nobody's gonna slow me down
Oh no, I've got to keep on movin'
Ain't nothin' gonna break my stride
I'm running and I won't touch ground
Oh no, I've got to keep on movin' (1)

These verses can also be summed up with the following pop adage "keep on truckin' ". The idea of not being upset or disturbed, no matter what one encounters is something very important for our spiritual practice. Within the Buddha's teaching, we find this idea appearing in numerous scriptures where it is known as upekkhā.

Upekkhā (pronounced 'oo-peck-uh') is a Pali word which means "hedonic neutrality or indifference, neutral feeling, disinterestedness" (2). The Sanskrit equivalent is upekṣā ('oo-peck-shuh', Devanagari:

उपेक्षा). Upekkhā is most commonly translated into English as 'equanimity'. We can gain some more insight into the meaning of upekkhā from, interestingly enough, looking its English equivalent.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines equanimity as "1). Fairness of judgement, impartiality, equity and 2) Evenness of mind or temper; the quality or condition of being undisturbed by elation, depression, or agitating emotion; unruffledness". The second definition in particular is the kind of quality upekkhā refers to.

Upekkhā appears in numerous places within the Buddhadharma. In the Theravada tradition, it is listed as the last of the Ten Perfections (Pali: Paramis, Sanskrit: Paramita) that a bodhisatta must cultivate in order to realize Full Awakening (4). Upekkhā is more commonly known as being one of the Four Immeasurable Minds or Brahmavihāras (5).

It can be can easy to misinterpret upekkhā as a kind of hard-hearted indifference, almost as if enlightened beings are cold robots who are not capable of being emotionally perturbed. This however, is an incorrect understanding of term and of the Brahmavihāra themselves. Bhikkhu Bodhi clarifies this point:

"The real meaning of this word is equanimity, not indifference in the sense of unconcern for others. As a spiritual virtue, *upekkha* means equanimity in the face of the fluctuations of worldly fortune. It is evenness of mind, unshakeable freedom of mind, a state of inner equipoise that cannot be upset by gain and loss, honor and dishonor, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. *Upekkha* is freedom from all points of self-reference; it is indifference only to the demands of the ego-self with its craving for pleasure and position, not to the well-being of one's fellow human beings. True equanimity is the pinnacle of the four social attitudes that the Buddhist texts call the "divine abodes": boundless loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity". (6)

Ajahn Candasirī, a bhikkhuni from Amaravati Monastery, also addresses this point:

"…upekkhā implies a willingness to expand the heart and to listen – even when things seem unbearable. As we practise, what seems to happen is that, far from becoming indifferent, we become able to encompass an ever-increasing range of experience – to be touched by life, as by a rich tapestry of infinite colour and texture. So it's not a dumbing down or deadening, but rather an attunement to the totality of this human predicament. At the same time, we find an increasing capacity to hold steady with it: the balance of
upekkhā. Through establishing ourselves in the present, and holding steady – whatever we might be experiencing – we find the resources for dealing with whatever we may encounter in this adventure we call 'life'"(7).

Upekkhā is traditionally listed as the fourth and final of the Four Brahmavihāras. We can see why this is so from Ven. Nyanaponika Thera's eloquent summary:

"Equanimity rooted in insight is the guiding and restraining power for the other three sublime states. It points out to them the direction they have to take, and sees to it that this direction is followed. *Equanimity* guards *love* and *compassion* from being dissipated in vain quests and from going astray in the labyrinths of uncontrolled emotion. *Equanimity,* being a vigilant self-control for the sake of the final

goal, does not allow *sympathetic joy* to rest content with humble results, forgetting the real aims we have to strive for.

Equanimity, which means "even-mindedness," gives to *love* an even, unchanging firmness and loyalty. It endows it with the great virtue of patience. *Equanimity* furnishes *compassion* with an even, unwavering courage and fearlessness, enabling it to face the awesome abyss of misery and despair which confront boundless *compassion* again and again. To the active side of *compassion, equanimity* is the calm and firm hand led by wisdom — indispensable to those who want to practice the difficult art of helping others. And here again *equanimity* means patience, the patient devotion to the work of *compassion."*(8)

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(1) From smartlyrics.com:
http://www.smartlyrics.com/Song97621-Blue-Lagoon-Break-My-Stride-lyrics.aspx
For a live performance of this song in all of its 1980's-synthesizer glory check out:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TY41o-iZStI
(2) Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary Online p. 150. Accessed via the "Digital Dictionaries of South Asia" Project. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries
(3) The Oxford English Dictionary Online: http://www.oed.com
(4) The Ten Perfections in the Theravada tradition are:
1. Dana (generous action)
2. Sila (virtue)
3. Nekkhamma (renunciation)
4. Paññña (wisdom, discernment)
5. Viriya (energy, effort)
6. Khanti (patience)
7. Sacca (truthfulness)
8. Adhitthana (determination, resolution)
9. Metta (loving-kindness, goodwill)
10. Upekkha (equanimity)
For a (really!) detailed study, check out "A Treatise on the Paramis", composed by Acharya Dhammapala and translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi from Pali. Available at Access to Insight:
http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel409.html
(5) 'Brahmavihara' was the first thread in this series:
http://groups.google.com/group/Dharmasight/browse_thread/thread/6ea5486d6e89e9
(6) "Toward a Threshold of Understanding", an essay by Bhikkhu Bodhi addressing incorrect descriptions of key Buddhist concepts by the late Pope John Paul II. Also available from Access to Insight:
http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_30.html
(7) Ajahn Candasirī in "Awakening Presence", Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, 2006, pp. 112-114. Available from online Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery:
http://www.abhayagiri.org/index.php/main/book/awakening_presence/
(8) "The Four Sublime States" by Nyanaponika Thera. Available from Access to Insight:
http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel006.html

Vesak

People have come up with many different ways of measuring time. Some calendars are based on lunar motion, some on solar motion, and some on both but no matter how time has been sliced up, there's a common feature that all calendars share: holidays. From the calendar of Vedic India to that of the

French Republic during the Revolution, there are always “circled days”. These special days or ‘holidays’ (originally from ‘holy day’) as we call them, commemorate more than just religious functions. Revolutions, laws, battles, births, martyrdoms, and seasonal changes are just a few of the things that holidays can mark. Buddhism too has its holidays although most of them are closely related to the cultures in which the Dharma took root. There is however, one holiday (in the truest sense of the term) that is universally celebrated by followers of the Buddha. This day is known as Vesak.

Vesak (1) is a word from the Sinhala language of Sri Lanka and itself a rendering of the Pali word Visakha (Vis-uh-kha). The Sanskrit equivalent is ‘Vaisākha’ (Devanāgari: वैसाख, here, the ‘ai’ is pronounced ‘a’ as in ‘hat’ giving us ‘vai-suh-kha’). Both words are variants of ‘Vaishākha’ (वैशाख), the second month of the Hindu calendar (2). Although originally celebrated during the full moon day of this month, as the Dharma spread, the various cultures it encountered used their own calendars to commemorate this day. The result is that different countries and traditions all have different days for celebrating Vesak. From the perspective of the Western, Gregorian calendar, Vesak usually falls during the month of May.

Vesak is the celebration of the Buddha’s birth although for many traditions, such as the Theravada, his Enlightenment and passing away are also celebrated during this day. So what does one do during Vesak? Generally, we can expect things that we would normally see during any religious function: recitation/chanting of scriptures, offerings of candles, incense, flowers, devotional speeches and songs, processions of sacred images/objects, etc. As just mentioned, the diversity of Vesak celebrations varies so much that even a brief treatment of the individual traditions (Chinese, Thai, Tibetan, etc.) would easily fill up a book. What we’ll instead do is focus on a Vesak celebration that’s a bit closer to home: one from 21st Century America.

On Sunday, May 4th, 2008, I had the great opportunity to attend a multi-denominational Vesak celebration in Berkeley, California. It was sponsored by the Buddhist Council of Northern California and hosted in the newly constructed Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley (3). Jodo Shinshu is a Japanese Pure Land tradition and they’re affiliated with the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA). This was a fitting choice of venue as the BCA is the oldest Buddhist organization to operate in the US. Their first temple opened in San Francisco in 1898 (4). The event featured Sangha members, both monastic and lay, from many different traditions. The traditions present were (in order of appearance): The Jodo Shinshu ministers, Thai Theravada, Vietnamese Mahayana, Soto Zen, Korean Won, Ch’an, Cambodian Theravada, and Sri Lankan Theravada.

The program opened in a universally Buddhist manner: homages to the Buddha followed by recitation of the Three Refuges and Five Precepts (done in Pali and English). After this, a series of chants and songs from the various traditions were performed and before the mid-program break, there was a brief guided meditation by Roshi Blanche Hartman, the retired abbess of the San Francisco Zen Center (5).

The keynote address was delivered by Ven. Heng Sure of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery (6). He began by posing a question to audience: in the history of Buddhism, what place could we call “capital”? A number of places were proposed: India, China, etc. but Heng Sure’s answer was <drum roll> California! He then pointed out that during the golden age of Buddhism in China, the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), one could find about a dozen different traditions in the ancient capital of Xi’an. The Buddhist Council of Northern California however, represents over forty. Although his tone was characteristically humorous, his point was a very intriguing one. We’re living in age that is very unique for the Dharma. Never before has it been possible to have access to so many different traditions from so many different countries.

Because our commonalities as practitioners of the Buddhadharma are far greater and more significant than our differences, it is natural and logical that there be interactions taking place that wouldn't have been possible in the past. An event such as this multi-tradition Vesak ceremony is just the beginning of a very interesting period.

In another sign of our unique time, there was a loving-kindness (Pali: metta) meditation lead by Ven. Tathaaloka, a Theravadan nun from the Dhammadharini Vihara (7), located in the south region of the Bay Area. This vihara is dedicated to supporting the newly revived bhikkhuni (nun) tradition of the Theravada (8).

The program closed with a traditional Vesak ritual performed in many traditions: bathing a statue of the baby Buddha (9) with water. It is said that when Siddhartha Gautama was first born, he took seven steps, pointed towards the sky and proclaimed that he had taken this final birth to attain unsurpassed, supreme, perfect Enlightenment (10) for the benefit of all sentient beings. The monastics were first given the opportunity to do this and when they finished, everyone in attendance was invited to bath the Buddha as well.

It's still hard to say what a Western Dharma will look like but with so many practitioners from so many traditions willing to come together in the true spirit of the Dharma and celebrate the birth of the Awakened One shows the future is very promising.

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(1) Vesak is also spelled 'Wesak' in English. In the Indian languages, there's no distinction between the "w" and "v" sounds as we say them in English. This 'w/v' sound is usually transliterated into English as 'v' although the Indian pronunciation is somewhere between "v" and "w".
(2) Wikipedia's Entry for 'Hindu Calendar' : http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindu_calendar
(3) Jodo Shinshu Center, Berkeley, http://jodoshinshucenter.org/home/
(4) Buddhist Churches of America, http://buddhistchurchesofamerica.org/home/
(5) San Francisco Zen Center, http://www.sfzc.org/
(6) Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, http://www.berkeleymonastery.org/
(7) Dhammadharini Vihara, Fremont, CA http://www.dhammadharini.org/
(8) In the 5th Century AD, bhikkhunis from Sri Lanka traveled to China were they ordained and established the Nuns order. From there it spread out to the rest of East Asia and has continued in an unbroken lineage ever since. The bhikkhuni lineage in like Sri Lanka, for various reasons, died out around the 11th Century AD. To revive the lineage, a number of women took ordination from Chinese and Korean nuns in the 1990's and then went back to their respective Theravada lineages to practice. Some traditionalists, particularly in countries like Thailand and Burma (where the bhikkhuni Sangha never existed) have questioned the legitimacy of such ordinations. Others, especially in Sri Lanka and the West, have enthusiastically supported the reestablishment the bhikkuni Sangha. Theravadabuddhism.org has an interesting discussion on this and LOTS more information.
(9) A typical image can be found here:
http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/pbs2_unit07a.htm
(10) This is a commonly encountered phrase in the sutras and is usually left un-translated. The Sanskrit is anuttara samyaksambodhi (a-new-taraa sum-yuck-sum-bodhi); Devanāgari: अनुत्तरा सम्यक्संबोधि

Work Practice

At various points in our lives, we've all been nagged at to do some work. When we're children, our parents nag us about doings tasks like cleaning our rooms, setting the table, laundry, etc. As adults, we get nagged by our co-workers, friends, spouses, and children. All of this complaining implies that there's a lot of work to be done. This shouldn't come as a surprise, especially since leading a "busy and hectic life" is the standard for our modern society. If we want anything to be done, we have to do some work; 'Sine Labore Nihil' (There's nothing without work), as the old Latin saying goes (1). We do, however, make a distinction between work we like (e.g. planning for a vacation) and work that don't like but have to do anyway, like shoveling snow. The term for the latter is "chore", defined as "A small piece of domestic work, a little job, and a piece of (time-consuming) drudgery" (2). The word 'chore' is almost a dirty word but the tasks we usually consider chores are absolutely vital. Try seeing what happens when trash isn't disposed of (3).

When we hear words like, 'meditation', 'nirvana', and 'bliss' we usually associate them with images of meditating hermits in flowing robes or mystical beings floating in the air with enraptured facial expressions and golden halos. What we don't normally associate the image of a yogi with are words like 'mopping', 'sweeping', or 'polishing'. There is often a disconnection between what we do in our "spiritual lives" (like sitting meditation on a cushion) and the everyday, mundane world that involves activities like washing dishes. In a sutta from the Pali Canon, the Buddha tells us that enlightenment is not to be found out there in the farthest reaches of the cosmos but "it is just within this fathom-long body, with its perception and intellect" (4). If this is true then, ultimately, there is no division between our "worldly" and "spiritual" lives. Think about it: what use is twenty minutes of bliss on the meditation cushion if we go through the rest of the day upset and bothered by what we think are useless chores? It is very easy to set up an artificial separation between the sacred and the mundane but one method to prevent this involves using our "chores" as the object of meditation. Our work becomes our practice.

The idea of work practice is especially emphasized in the Ch'an/Zen tradition of China and Japan. One of the most famous sayings on this subject comes from the famous Tang Dynasty master, Layman Pang (龐居士). When he was asked by his teacher, Shitou (石頭希遷), what he had been doing since they last saw each other Layman Pang said (5):

How miraculous and wondrous,
Hauling water and carrying firewood.

A widely quoted restatement of the above phrase is:

Before enlightenment: chop wood and carry water.
After enlightenment: chop wood and carry water.

In India, the standard monastic model involved wandering for alms but in China, the tradition of manual labor in the monastery gradually became the norm. Work practice became particularly prominent under the influence of the Tang Dynasty Master Baizhang Huaihai (百丈懷海). Master Baizhang (Hyakujo in Japanese) is widely known for his role in the koan, "Baizhang's Fox" (6). Furry critters aside, Master Baizhang was also renowned for his emphasis on physical/manual labor as part of Ch'an practice. One famous story tells of how Master Baizhang continued to work in the fields into his 80's. His students however, felt that an 80-something year old Ch'an master shouldn't be working as strenuously as the young monks so one day they decided to hide his gardening tools. When Baizhang went searching for tools and couldn't find them, he was unable to work and therefore didn't. When it came time for the meal, all of the students were waiting for the elderly master to take his food first but instead of doing

so, Baizhang said to the assembly, “A day without work is a day without food!” and went back to his room to meditate. The next day Baizhang, without having worked, refused to eat again. After a few days, his students finally got to message and left his working tools in their usual place. When asked of this, he said, “I’m unworthy, how can I allow others to work in my behalf?”(7)

Despite the insight that masters like Layman Pang and Baizhang have, many people still have a hard time (not) separating meditation from plain ‘ol work. Why focus on picking up trash when we could be meditating and entering the deepest meditative absorptions (Pali: jhana), known? A classic story between the very Ch’an-like Ajahn Chah and his student (and later Dharma Heir) Ajahn Sumedho touches on this point. This story, which shall conclude our thread, is taken from “Small Boat, Great Mountain: Theravadan Reflections on the Great Natural Perfection”, by Ajahn Amaro (8):

“Ajahn Sumedho was a recently arrived monk. He had been there a year or two by this time and was a very serious meditator. He hadn’t been keen to leave the settled life at the main monastery, Wat Nong Pah Pong, but he joined in and there he was—breaking rocks in the sun, pushing barrows of rubble around, and working hard with the rest of the community. After two or three days, he was getting hot, sweaty, and cranky. At the end of the day, after a 12-hour shift, everyone would sit down to meditate and would be reeling. Ajahn Sumedho thought, “This is useless. I’m wasting my time. My meditation has fallen apart completely. This is not helping the holy life at all.”

He carefully explained his concerns to Ajahn Chah: “I’m finding that all the work we are doing is harmful to my meditation. I really think it would be much better for me if I didn’t take part in it. I need to do more sitting and walking meditation, more formal practice. That would be very helpful for me and it’s what I think would be for the best.” Ajahn Chah said, “Okay, Sumedho. Yes, you can do that. But I’d better inform the Sangha so that everyone knows what’s happening.” He could be really wicked in this way.

At the Sangha meeting he said, “I want to make an announcement to everybody. Now, I know that we have all come up here to make this road. And I know that we are all working hard at breaking rocks and carrying gravel. I know this is important work for us to do, but the work of meditation is also very important. Tan (9) Sumedho has asked me if he can practice meditation while we build the road, and I have told him that this is absolutely all right. I do not want any of you to think any critical thoughts of him. It is absolutely all right with me. He can stay alone and meditate, and we will continue building the road.”

Ajahn Chah was out there from dawn until dusk. When he wasn’t working on the road, he was receiving guests and teaching Dharma. So he was really cranking it out. In the meantime,
Ajahn Sumedho stayed alone and meditated. He felt pretty bad on the first day and even worse on the second. By the third day, he couldn’t stand it any longer. He felt tortured and finally left
his solitude. He rejoined the monks, broke rocks, carried gravel, and really gave himself to the work.
Ajahn Chah looked at the enthusiastic young monk with a foot-wide grin and asked, “You enjoying the work, Sumedho?”
“Yes, Luang Por.”(9)
“Isn’t it strange that your mind is happier now in the heat and the dust than it was when you were meditating alone?”
“Yes, Luang Por.”

The lesson? Ajahn Sumedho had created a false division about what meditation is and isn’t,

when in fact, there is no division at all. When we give our hearts to whatever we do, to whatever we experience, or to what is happening around us, without personal agendas or preferences taking over, the space of rigpa (10), the space of awareness, is exactly the same".

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(1) This phrase also happens to be the motto of my Alma mater, DeWitt Clinton High School :)
(2) Oxford English Dictionary Online, http://www.oed.com
(3) BBC News, "Life Amid the Trash Piles of Naples":
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7174987.stm
(4) Rohitassa Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya Section 4, Sutta 45, from 'Access to Insight',
http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an04/an04.045.than.html
(5) Andrew Ferguson, "Zen's Chinese Heritage", pp. 94-95, Wisdom Publications, 2000
(6) Hyakujo's Fox, from "Sacred Texts":
http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/glg/glg02.htm
(7) Andrew Ferguson, "Zen's Chinese Heritage", pp. 81-82, Wisdom Publications, 2000
(8) Amaro Bhikkhu, "Small Boat, Great Mountain: Theravadan Reflections on the Great Natural Perfection", pp. 39-40 Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, 2003.
The entire book in .pdf form, along with a number of other Abhayagiri Publications, can be found here:
http://www.abhayagiri.org/index.php/main/books/
(9) 'Tan' and 'Luong Por' are Thai terms for 'venerable' and 'venerable father' respective. The latter is used for addressing elder monastics and is roughly equivalent to the Chinese term 'Shi Fu' (師父)
(10) 'Rigpa' is a Tibetan term for awareness beyond dualism. It's a translation of the Sanskrit word 'vidya' (विद्य). The concept of rigpa is prominent the in Dzogchen and Mahamudra methods of the Vajrayana tradition.