

Love in Action Inspired by Dr Martin Luther King Jr

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January 16, 2022

Keywords: mettā, anukampā, Dhammapada, nonviolence, loving kindness, Martin Luther King, Mahātmā Gandhi, civil rights, anti-poverty, hate

Warm greetings on this Sunday. This is the weekend that here in the United States we celebrate Martin Luther King. And I love this holiday because it's the holiday that I associate most closely with love. Martin Luther King based his life on a love that was inclusive, that was not compromised for the conflicts he was in, but sought to stay present with love in these conflicts, to search for cooperation, to search for mutual kind regard. And this dedication to love, which was at the foundation of his life, can be celebrated on this day. I like to celebrate more than his great accomplishments, like with civil rights and voting rights, that were really the outcome of his dedication to love.

Then, I suppose, the other holidays that the United States celebrates, we could infuse them with love. Labor Day and our love and care and good will and gratitude for the people who work and all the different ways which sustain our lives. Memorial Day and Veterans Day maybe it can be a very certain kind of love, that maybe even love for our enemies in conflict, and the dedication of people's lives to protect what they love, and so forth. Maybe it's possible to infuse everything with love. That ought to be the foundation. And of course, it's very common for us to say, But what about what if not that? How can I do it for it? How can I love that?

And Martin Luther King's message, I believe, is that if you don't love, you harm yourself. Certainly he said that hate harms the hater, and so he was dedicated to not hate. And perhaps against tremendous challenges, he dedicated himself to love. And that's inspiring what's possible. Martin Luther King was inspired in turn by Mahātmā Gandhi. And he said that one of Gandhi's great contributions was to show how love can be evoked for social action.

Love can be evoked for civil rights, for freedom, for overcoming oppression, government oppression, national oppression of all kinds. And so Martin Luther King kind of took that

message from Gandhi and dedicated his life to love, the force of love, the power of love. He said that he was first inspired to nonviolence by Henry Thoreau, who had an essay on disobedience and civil disobedience, and from that he became inspired that you could stand up against a government, against the state, with nonviolent ways. And so he spent a lot of time studying this and thinking about nonviolence. And in college and graduate school and seminary, he was primarily a big reader of the philosophy of nonviolence, and social change got him more and more centered in this idea of nonviolence. But when he was introduced to Mahātmā Gandhi, that's where he understood that this dedication to nonviolent change could be centered on love.

And he was dedicated to an all-inclusive love that, though no one was left out. And as he wrote, he said, for he dedicated himself for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation, and all-embracing, an unconditional love for everyone. And so is it possible? Is it interesting? Is it valuable? Is it valuable enough that we can dedicate ourselves to it, perhaps on this holiday, at least for this one, to emphasize love?

This weekend I read a short story that came out of Thailand, published in a new journal, the new site there in Bangkok. They have the neighborhood small corner stores that are money exchangers, money places to transfer money and send money to, and Thais will use it to send money to their relatives in the countryside from Bangkok. And for a long time there was a woman who came once a month, end of the month, and would send twenty thousand baht, the currency of Thailand, to her relatives in the countryside. There was no real discussion about it, just a matter of fact transaction. But one day she came and she wanted to transfer fifteen thousand instead of twenty. And so the owner of the shop asked her to know what's happening, and she said, Well, times are difficult and this is all I can do.

And she said, he asked her, Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. And somehow in the conversation he learned that even when she spent twenty thousand baht, her son couldn't go to school in the countryside, and her sister had to take care of their elderly parents, and that she had very little money for herself. And it seemed like she worked a little bit as a mother, and a little bit overlapped with the sex industry there, and something that she really detested doing, but felt that she had to. And so the next time she came back next month, she came with twenty thousand baht and wanted to have it sent to her, sent to the countryside. And so he took the money and did a money transfer. And she returned a while later and said, There's been a mistake. You didn't transfer twenty thousand baht, you transferred two hundred thousand baht.

And he said to her, It was no mistake. I thought I wanted to support you and help you in your life that's so challenging for you. She cried and thanked him, and then some months later she didn't come back any more to transfer money. But then he got a Facebook message from her that she had opened a noodle shop back in her home village or hometown and that it was already thriving. People loved her noodles and food and she had taken that money and started a business, and gotten out of the massage trade, and was now running a business that maybe was sustaining her more than her massage trade could do. And now she thanked him deeply.

The title of this article that I read was "Love without Action is a Four Letter Word." So that was kind of a powerful title and thought. That's why I read the article. And what are they going to say here? Love without action is a four letter word. There's a bunch of Buddhist teachers, a few who started a non-profit that's called *mettā* in action. *Mettā* is a word for love, or loving kindness.

So loving kindness in action, they raise money to support mostly link schools and medical facilities in Burma. They've built school houses and supported teachers to teach in the schools, and that's kind of been their mission for many years now. So love in action is without action. Is love love? What is love without action? And what is it to act on love and live with love?

And certainly we find in Buddhism a lot of emphasis on the value of love and kindness and good will. And with the kind of or the opening kind of, you know, if Buddhism has, you know, a sacred body of texts, technically it has no official opening passages, but because of the fame of the *Dhammapada*, this book of verses, sometimes that's seen as the opening kind of teachings of Buddhism, of early Buddhism. The text begins in the first chapter with not the very first two verses, but a third verse quoting someone who is exclaiming, He abused me, attacked me, defeated me, robbed me. And then for those carrying ill will such as this, hatred does not end. For those who say, She abused me, attacked me, defeated me, robbed me. For those carrying ill will such as this, for those not carrying ill will such as this, hatred ends.

So when hatred takes the form of attacking and criticizing other people and being angry with them and in a mean spirited way, hatred doesn't end. Hatred never ends through hatred. By love alone does it end. This is the eternal truth. The literal meaning is by non-hatred alone does it end. This is eternal truth. But it's often understood that the word non-hatred means love in this context.

And then there's a very interesting next verse, and maybe this is kind of punctuates this. Many do not realize we here must die. For those who realize this, quarrels end. So there's some-

thing about realizing that our life is limited on this planet, that maybe we don't want to waste time wasting it with hatred, wasting it with greed, wasting it with closing in on ourselves or closing in tight on one particular clan, one particular tribe or race. But rather to have some love that's all embracing. So Martin Luther King was this way, and I think he's most famous for the work he did for civil rights, and the need for it was so great in his time.

When he grew up as a young man in the South, he saw a tremendous injustice happening: injustice voting, injustice in the courts, injustice by the police, injustice by the society around him that his African American neighbors and friends struggled under. And so he wanted to change that and work for that. And so he's famous for his civil rights work, and it was phenomenal what happened among the civil rights people that he was part of, one of the leaders for, in terms of changing a whole country where they did not give up their nonviolent education under the onslaught of violence. And most of you have maybe seen in some of the videos of the tremendous violence that was done in Montgomery and against children and teenagers and high school students, and the violence on the bridge in Selma, where a lot of the civil rights leaders and others were brutally attacked by the police. People who were killed and shot and lynched coming to the South trying to make a difference, and even under the harshest conditions, Martin Luther King refused to give up love. It's hard to believe that anyone could do this, but this is a message that he said all religions taught.

And for him, he was just trying to live out the message of love that he received or he found in the teachings of Jesus and Christianity. And he made, I think, a very powerful statement about love. And from a Christian point of view, he said at one point, Let us love one another. Love is God. Love is God. So do not worship love, do not destroy love, you know, for him, this kind of destruction of God.

Then he also wrote: When I speak of love, I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. All great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. So is love at the heart of Buddhism? Love and action in Buddhism is described by the word *anukampā*, a quivering of the heart, a vibrant vibrancy of the heart that was translated to action and care and kindness in support of others.

The Buddha dedicated his life to this *anukampā*. I think it was the organizing principle for his life. He was dedicated to *mettā*, to loving kindness. And when people came to him with *mettā*, to attack him both verbally with anger and hostility, and in one story where someone came with hostility to actually try to kill him, his response was to radiate the power of his love. His

power was *mettā* towards the people and to, in one case, an animal that was coming to kill him, an elephant. And the stories say that his power of love was enough to stop the attacks that he was receiving.

Is it realistic to do that? And in a threat of violence, the Buddha made a tremendously powerful statement about this that it's easy to dismiss because it's so maybe it's hyperbole. Maybe it is so unrealistic that how could we ever make this true? But it's, you know, Martin Luther King says that love is the unifying principle of life, and this dedication to love. And so the Buddha said that even if bandits come and capture you and start cutting off your arms, do not succumb to hate, but radiate your kindness to them. And I think we have to understand this story. This is instruction from the Buddha partly as hyperbole in all cases, but I think also literally because the Buddha saw succumbing to hate was such a bad thing to do for oneself.

It's one of the worst things we can do in terms of harming ourselves to succumb to hate. Someone who really understands and sees the self-harm from hate, who understands, never give up love, always, but always work hard not to succumb to hate and it's not a message. Do not defend yourself. I think the conditions for this powerful statement is if you have no other choice and you can't escape them. Because the Buddha said that he did condone not actually acts of violence maybe not, but acts of self-defense to escape from the harm others are doing to us. And he said that a monastic can strike out to defend themselves for the purpose of escaping, provided they do it without any hate, provided they can do it with good will towards the people they're escaping from.

So I think what striking back then, you know, what striking out meant may be to lift up your hand and block a blow, or push someone away. There's an example of someone who protected their own life by pushing someone off a cliff from the time of the Buddha. And the Buddha kind of understood that matter of factly that was somehow not an act of hatred or act of self-defense. So how far this idea of self-defense goes, and how far we can go in our lives to do that kind of act. The Buddha was not just saying, Stay, you know, passive, and allow yourself to be, you know, taken advantage of. And there's nowhere in the Buddha that he says it, you know, somehow just accept violence being done to you, if any.

In my interpretation of the Buddha is that you should always look hostility in the eye. Be strong and forceful and look it in the eye. Don't, you know, sense. Hold your ground even if you have to step away and walk away. But there is no idea that you're supposed to cower or be less than or be somehow meek. In Buddhism, the example the Buddha is one kind of the way he's talked about in the language of the texts is a language of power, strength.

Sometimes the modern people, when they read some of this language of power and strength in Buddhism, interpret it as being a kind of a certain kind of machoism or a certain kind of an overemphasis on strength. But I think when I read the text, I interpret at least to be the nice combination of love with strength, love with love, and this dedication. And so that's what Martin Luther King says in this quote. I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I'm speaking of that force, the force of unifying love. I see the shadow you miss speaking about love and hate, like what I said. I think I got a little bit jumbled in my love and hate. Well, I don't remember well enough to go back and correct it. So if you listened, hopefully you understood my jumble then.

So here is a quote from what I was saying from Gandhi, from Martin Luther King of what I was saying about Gandhi. Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. Love for God was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I have been asking. One of my first Zen teachers said that the Buddha's contribution to humanity was importance of meditating. Gandhi's contribution to humanity was important to decide where you're going to meditate. I think what he had in mind was these nonviolent protests that where you marched, where you stood, where you sat, you can sit in such a way that you are there to offer a counter, to offer an alternative to oppression, to violence that exists in this world.

So they had this in the South in the nineteen-sixties, these sites. And you know, us Buddhists will often call meditation sitting, going to sit. And so where do we sit? And now, the possibility of sitting, nonviolent protests. We've seen this over and over again. And you know, it's easy to say they don't work? But I think the genius of a Gandhi, and perhaps of Martin Luther King, was to not do this naïve, but to really choose very carefully where we show up to sit, to walk, to march, to the actions of nonviolence, to have to really change the other people and to search for cooperation. Do not live a life of competition, but one of cooperation to see, seek to change the heart of the other, not by force.

One of the important parts of Martin Luther King's life was that he realized at some point that the civil rights movement, as important as it was, and voting rights important as it was, was not enough to liberate the African American population in this country because of the tremendous poverty that existed. And so he became a champion, anti-poverty champion. He saw that the two, the civil rights for African Americans and for all people, were intimately connected to an economic change and to an improved economic position of African Americans

in this country. And he worked with a conversation with Martin Luther King with President Lyndon Johnson around this. And Lyndon Johnson began this great movement to eradicate poverty in this country. But then Martin Luther King saw what happened when President Johnson escalated the war in Vietnam, that the money for working, doing poverty programs in the country was taken away from those programmes and used to fuel, to pay for the American war in Vietnam.

And so Martin Luther King started to see all these three as being unified, as necessary to be addressed: civil rights, poverty, and militarism, war. And he became anti-Vietnam. He started actively fighting against the Vietnam war, actually supporting anti-poverty programmes and fighting for, working for that, and civil rights. And he lost a lot of his popularity because of this. He was seen as some, even by many people who supported him earlier, as somehow becoming an enemy of the state in a way he hadn't before, of the country. But he saw these as being unified, as being connected.

And he talked about the importance of a rehabilitation for African Americans. He said, I'm not talking about getting them paid, got back all the money that they deserved from all their work they did in slavery, but there has to be enough focused, substantial support, to bring them out of poverty, as to repair the damages of slavery. But the interesting thing he said about this because his love was so all-inclusive. He said that, so he proposed he did not seek full restitution of wages lost to slavery, which he believed impossible, but proposed a government compensatory program of fifty billion dollars over ten years to all disadvantaged groups. So fifty billion dollars now seems like a drop in the bucket compared to what these last year the spending programs the federal government is doing now. There's sixty-five billion dollars just available for broadband across the country. Martin Luther King posited, the money spent would be more than amply justified by the benefits that would accrue to the nation through a spectacular decline in school dropouts, family breakups, crime rates, illegitimacy, swollen relief rolls, rioting, and other social evils.

He said he didn't want it to be only for poor Americans. He wanted the money spent for all people who were poor. He said that this effort should benefit the disadvantaged of all races. So seeing the evils or the problems of suffering of poverty in the times when the Buddha gave social teachings, for the kind of teachings that addressed the governments and how they should care for everyone. He saw one of the most important back in the time of his time twenty-five hundred years ago. One of the most important roles for governments back then, it was the king, was anti-poverty programmes, was to provide the means for people to be able to pull themselves out of poverty and provide them with land and other means.

And you know, this idea that poverty and well-being and lack of well-being and overcoming poverty is essential for people to work for, you know, to help them out of poverty. Without that, how can people thrive and develop? And so this dedication to love in action would take the form of not allowing people to live in poverty, to support anti-poverty programmes, to support those who are poor in our country, to support people who are disadvantaged. And that's why I was so touched by this one man in Thailand who used his own savings to provide enough money to this woman, a gift to this woman, so she could break out of her cycles of poverty and in the sex trade, and then open up a shop in her home country, hometown, to make a difference. So love.

So I would like to suggest that much that we think of Martin Luther King's holiday as a holiday of love, and the argument or the rationale for that is that love was what Martin Luther King based his life on. And all the good work he did for our society that we celebrate and that did so much good was, you know, was really based on his foundation for love. And when this country went astray and went into war with Vietnam, he knew that war in Vietnam was going to damage this country. He thought it, called it a poison for the United States. And one analysis for the consequence of the Vietnam war is that we're still suffering from the divisions in this country that that war opened up. And if it's true what Martin Luther King said, that the focus on overcoming poverty that started me just before there is that this escalation of the American war in Vietnam that was, that came to an end, or was somehow impoverished, the war, and poverty was impoverished, that this has a lasting effect on this country that we've never really come back to. I really address poverty in the same all-encompassing way.

And when we've ended up in a country, that's the poison of hate that exists in our society in such a huge way. And so let's be careful. Remember, hate does not end with hate. Let's be phenomenally careful to use our practice, to use our care, love, to not succumb to hate ourselves. And if that's all we do, fantastic. But maybe when we don't succumb to hate, maybe we, too, can celebrate love, and can open up to love, and let love, kindness, good will, generosity, respect, compassion be the operating principles for how we live this life, because if we do that, then that is the world that we're contributing to make with every action that we do that's influenced by love. We are contributing to a world where love has a place. May we love on this weekend and perhaps on every day. Thank you.