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## **“Making Heaven On Earth”**

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Several hundred years ago when Korea was a collection of tribal fiefdoms a warlord started on a mission to conquer. He conquered a great deal of territory leaving behind death and destruction in his wake. Finally, he got to a monastery where there was a Zen Master who was known to be very wise. So, he batters down the down the gates of the monastery and he confronts this Zen Master who is sitting on a cushion meditating and he says, “You’re said to be the wisest man in the land. Tell me about heaven and hell.” The Zen Master looks up at him and says, “You are a man full of violence and hate. You could live this way only if you were a complete ignoramus. Why would I waste a single breath talking to an idiot like you.” The general grew purple with rage and immediately drew his sword and was about to chop off the Zen Master’s head, when at the last possible split second, he said, “That’s hell!” The warlord realized what had happened. The look of compassion in this master’s eyes when he said this, the total courage and equanimity with which he said it, he was in awe of this man’s wisdom, courage, and compassion. He was overcome and fell to his knees and wept in gratitude. Softly the Zen Master said, “That’s heaven.”

We have two major streams of American religious thought that have come together to create Unitarian Universalism. Sometimes the Universalist part of our heritage has been neglected, but I think now in a world full of factionalism and hate, it’s more important to us than ever. It’s a movement that started in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the idea that no one was going to hell when everybody else thought everyone but them was going to hell. Universalists preached that no one is going to hell. There is even a deeper message there about the nature of the divine, the nature of ultimate reality, the nature of the universe and that was for the Universalist: God never gives up on anybody. God never gives up on anybody.

This is very similar to the Buddhist teachings. Even though our ideas have changed about God and heaven and hell and an afterlife, the Buddhist teachings say that whatever may be on the other side of the mystery of life and death, here in this life we can have heaven or hell. They are all states of mind and we have power over those states of mind. We all know that we can be in hell because we’ve all been there. I don’t need to spend a lot of time talking about how you get there. Get angry, get fearful, have those emotions be strong enough and there you are. The good news is that there are states that we all have the power to cultivate, new habits for the good that we all have the chance to practice that will create heaven for us. The Buddha identified four of those, what he called “heavenly abodes” or “heavenly abidings”, *Brahma vahara* in Nepali. The first is loving kindness, or maybe another translation, friendliness, basic friendliness to all beings. Compassion is the second. Sympathetic joy was the third. And equanimity, being able to have happiness beyond all sorrow as the bodasatva vow, with which we opened the service, states.

The most important of these and the basis of all four is loving kindness, basic friendliness toward oneself and toward all other beings, an open-heartedness and acceptance of all beings. It's based on a knowledge of oneness. This sermon is the first in an occasional series of sermons about what is really the most important thing for all of us; it's happiness. So, why not have a series on happiness? We all want to be happy. That's why we do what we do whether it's skillful or not. It's all in the service of trying to be happy. Every other being we meet wants to be happy. Loving kindness is based on this truth that we all want to be happy. That we are one that way and that our happiness is intertwined. It's a lack of judgment. It's an opening of our hearts to another person and even non-human beings. The story about the particular meditation, called the meta meditation, for developing loving kindness, how that was invented is a legend of the early days of the Buddha. The Buddha had sent a bunch of monks out to meditate in a wilderness and the previous inhabitants of this forest were tree demons and they were used to having the place by themselves and they were a little afraid and threatened by these monks, harmless as they were. So, the tree demons made all sorts of racket and horrible noises and played all sorts of tricks on the monks and just terrified them. The monks went to the Buddha and said, we can't work on our enlightenment with all of these tree beings around here scaring us all the time. We can't get any quiet and we are afraid. We are very afraid. The Buddha taught them this meditation and it is known as the perfect antidote to fear. This world right now is so full of fear and one of the best things we can do is to cultivate this loving kindness. The Buddha lists all kinds of fun benefits from practicing loving kindness. You'll fall asleep easily. You'll wake up easily. (I need to do a little more of this stuff.) You'll have pleasant dreams. People will love you. Angels and animals will love you. Angels will protect you. You'll be free of external dangers like poison, weapons, and fire. Your face will be radiant. (Think about it as kind of a spiritual facelift. What a great idea.) Your mind will be serene. You will die unconfused and be reborn in a happy realm. If even half of those are true, I'm willing to give it a shot. Aren't you? Let's try it. Let's try this meditation. We're just going to take some time to meditate. I'm inviting you to join my guidance on this. You may want to close your eyes.

Pay attention to your breath as it manifests in the very center of your chest. Wish yourselves those things which you most deeply long for. May I be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May I be happy and peaceful. May I be well, free of illness and physical pain. May I live with ease of physical being. May I go through my daily affairs without stress or struggle or conflict. These deep yearnings or whatever others you think of for yourself, wish them for you now. Pay attention to how it feels in the center of your chest. Perhaps there's some warmth there. If not, that's fine because what's most important is your intention. Now, think of someone who has been generous to you with kindness, who has lavished themselves, taken your good into account, gone out of their way for you. Just as I wish to be safe, so may you, my benefactor, be safe. Just as I wish to be happy, so may you be happy. Just as I wish to be well, so may you be well. Just as I wish to live with ease of well being, so may you live with ease of well being. Now you might want to think of other people you love and send them those feelings and thoughts. Maybe just people you run into can be included. And how about those people who seem to be standing in the way of your cherished

agendas, can you send them some loving kindness now? Traditionally, this meditation ends by loving kindness to all living beings, to everyone in this room, in this campus, in this city, on this earth, to Shias and Jews in the Middle East, to animals and humans. May all beings be happy. May all beings be safe. May all beings live with ease. May they know the joy of their true nature.

Each of this heavenly abidings has a far enemy. The far enemy is the obvious opposite. Of course, the far enemy of loving kindness is anger or fear. It's very hard to have your heart open to other people if you are angry or afraid. There is also a near enemy, that may look like the heavenly state but if you look at it more closely it is actually the opposite. The near enemy of loving kindness is attached love. Loving kindness doesn't have any conditions. It's a state of well being and friendliness for everybody and everything. It's an understanding of how we are all connected. Attached love is a transaction. It's "if you meet my needs, I'll meet your needs", "I'll feel good about you as long as I like what you do" "Here are the conditions for my affection." It looks, in its positive phase, like love, but it's not. Loving kindness is the basis of all of the other three heavenly abidings. The next is compassion. Compassion is being able to feel the suffering of other people with them. The near enemy of compassion is pity. The far enemy of compassion is cruelty, that's obvious, you dehumanize someone and you hurt them. But pity looks like compassion. What's the difference? Compassion is feeling that other's pain and your pain and feeling it as *the* pain. Not your pain and not my pain, but *the* pain that we share as human beings on this earth, in this plane. The Buddha says that there are four inevitable causes of suffering. No human being, no matter how enlightened, how good, how noble, can escape them. This is who we are. This is part of our life on this planet. Those four sufferings are: physical illness, none of us escape physical illness and we all suffer. The second is for many people, most fortunate, old age. The alternative is not having old age, which most people think is worse. But old age is suffering; it is letting go of one thing after another, one person after another, and if we live long enough, none of us escape the suffering of old age. The Buddha wasn't into denying that old age exists. The third is death. We all die and knowing this causes us to suffer. The final one: it hurts when we don't get what we want or we lose what we want. It doesn't matter who we are, we all suffer from these four conditions. So, compassion is seeing the suffering in others and knowing that that suffering is echoed in our own experience, whereas pity is "Oh, that poor hurricane victim. I'm glad I've got a home that's safe." or "Oh, those poor war victims. I'm glad we're safe." "I'll help them. I'll give them a few of bucks." not understanding that we share the same human condition and the same vulnerability with every other person on this planet. The Buddha assures us that all four of these are heaven. So, that seems to imply that compassion feels good, sharing the suffering of other people feels good. Let's see.

Again, you might want to close your eyes and pay attention to your breath. Think of someone who is going through great physical or emotional pain, or both, right now. Bring them into your heart, your heart that has been opened by your intention for loving kindness. Send that loving kindness and that compassion to them. May you be free of your pain and sorrow. May you be free of your pain and sorrow. You may want to think

of some other people who are suffering, physically, emotionally. It may be you. May you be free of pain and sorrow. You may want to be sending compassion and loving kindness to Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley. May you be free of your pain and sorrow. Other members of our community, bereaved, sick, suffering.

Here's a surprise. The Buddha said that it is easier to share other people's suffering than to share their joy. Here is where we see how greed gets hold of us. Sympathetic joy, the third heavenly abiding, is difficult, to be happy at another person's happiness, triumph, achievement, joy. The far enemy of sympathetic joy is envy. In the Christian tradition envy is the only one of the seven deadly sins that is no fun. All the others have an element of pleasure. But envy is no fun; it just hurts. It comes from a craving and a wanting and a believing that the world doesn't have enough. It's believing that if your good friend has found the love of your life, you never will because she got the last one. Crazy, huh? Or if your brother's had a financial success, and somehow your reaction is that he got the last money in the world and none of it is left for you. Even when we do feel happiness at the joy of others, there is all this comparison going on which is the near enemy of sympathetic joy. "Oh that's great. I'm so glad Joe got that job that he loves. I love my job too, but maybe he got a better deal. I wonder what he's getting paid." So, this is the hardest ones of these states to cultivate, to actually reach out and share the joy of someone else because while suffering is an inevitable part of every human life, so is joy. We get to have that too and if we cultivate these states we can have more and there is plenty to go around. So let's see what we can do about practicing this cultivation of sympathetic joy. Again, you may want to close your eyes. Pay attention to your breathing, taking a deep breath and a second one.

Now bring to mind that someone you really care about, for whom you have little problem fully sharing their joy with them, a child, a relative, a close friend. May your happiness continue. May you always be as happy as you are today. Sending them that joy, sharing in their pleasure. May your happiness continue. Who else is having joy and triumph in their life now? May their happiness continue.

Equanimity is the final of the heavenly abodes. Equanimity is being able, knowing that there will be joy and sorrow at different times of our lives, to be calm and happy with all of those states. I think the best description of equanimity does not come from the Buddhist tradition, although there are a lot of descriptions there. The best definition of equanimity that I've seen comes from the Christian tradition. It's from Reinhold Nieberg's "Serenity Prayer, the version that is said at twelve step programs is the one that I'm quoting now as an good example of what equanimity means. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Of course, the far enemies of equanimity are attachment, caring so much to get your way, making sure you get your way, doing whatever you can to get your way, and aversion, "I don't want this. I can't stand this. This can't happen." But there is a near enemy that looks like it and that's indifference. Equanimity is not indifference, because it is full of sympathetic joy, but it's not allowing one's mind to be clouded by desire and aversion, changing what you can, understanding that everything that is created right now is the result of conditions,

endless conditions that have come together in this moment, and doing what you can to change the conditions that are within your power to change. I think this is true for spiritual progressives in our time, that we need to be cultivating equanimity. As we work for peace and justice, we need to learn how to do it without hatred and anger, how to keep the humanity of our opponents in mind. Why? If we copy the tactics and attitudes of our opponents, we become them. We become them and we sow seeds that we would not like to reap. Again, a deep breath, a second deep breath.

Bring to mind a person that you don't know well. Send them these thoughts. May you and I be undisturbed by the coming and going of events. May we be undisturbed by the coming and going of events. Bring some other people to mind if you wish now. I will care for you but I cannot keep you from suffering. I wish you happiness but I cannot make your choices for you. Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Last Sunday was the bad news sermon. This Sunday is the good news sermon because we may have spent an unconscious lifetime cultivating states of mind that cause us suffering that sometimes actually literally land us in a hell realm. The good news is that by our intention and by our diligence we can gradually replace those states with these heavenly abidings. We get to do that. We can choose that. It doesn't change everything right away but it has power, greater power than our bad habits do. Now what if you're just not into meditation? You can still practice these states. One of the best ways to do it is through generosity, unselfishness, giving of yourself to others, giving of your heart, opening your heart, giving of your talents, of your compassion, and, yes, of your material well being. It's a beautiful way to loosen the fetters of greed and anger and cultivate these states of being. This is going to surprise you, but one of the most ancient Buddhist practices of all is something that's nowadays and even a century earlier embroidered on little things. It's counting your blessings, counting all the ways in which you have been made fortunate in your life, ancient, powerful Buddhist practice. How about that? When your grandmother was embroidering that on little things, she didn't know that that went back so far. These are things that you can do. I've just started a practice suggested by Bo Lozoff. The first thing I say to myself when I wake up in the morning when I'm conscious enough is "May I be a little less selfish today than I was yesterday." Everybody has time for that practice. The good news is that we have the power to change the world and we can start in this square six inches in the center of our chest.

So be it.