The Experience of Loving Kindness: The Ultimate Concern in Thai Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism

by

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Introduction

"Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of a meaning of our life."\(^1\)

As a religion student, this quote well states how I approach my studies and way of understanding the world that is directed by ultimate concerns. When I look at different religions, I hope to come to a broad understanding of each tradition’s ultimate concern in order to make distinctions as well as comparisons between them. As an American, I perceive, no matter what anyone says, that if the main culture of America is said to have an ultimate concern, than it would be happiness through materialism. I have come to feel increasingly uncomfortable with this idea. My lack of ease directed me towards the study of religion, Buddhism specifically and my choice to study abroad in Thailand, a comparatively less modernized country, which is predominantly Buddhist. I hoped to gain insight into the ultimate differences between the American and Thai cultures through my religious perspective as well as shed light on how an ultimate concern can be taught as a means of cross-cultural understanding and spiritual enrichment for all people.

Over the course of being abroad in Thailand for a year, when I had originally planned for six months, I learned a great deal about flexibility, being in the moment and stepping out of myself so that I could genuinely experience the newness that surrounded me. While most people who have spent significant time in another culture could identify with these lessons, I came to recognize them as ways to understand Buddhist wisdom in practice. Even though I had studied Buddhism for several years, I had never experienced the broad application of its teachings. The more I learned and analyzed my understanding of Buddhism, the more I was aware that I had flown right into an
experiential learning site, which continually tested my wisdom. Before I started any practical research on Buddhism, it was the letters and emails I wrote home, which highlighted my acceptance of the Buddhist Noble Truths or lack there of. I learned how my suffering was only conditioned by my previous experience, and now that I was unable to rely on the comfort of my American lifestyle, I had to deconstruct my values and desires, constructing new ones to fit the cultural context. I became increasingly aware of my Americanism in contrast to what is meant to be Thai and the elements of the Thai culture, which often felt more natural as expressions of my humanity. I went through nine months of structured classes before I began my focused study on Thai Theravada Buddhism, but all along, I remained immersed in its truths, even if there were often no obvious Buddhist ties. The Thai ultimate concern apart from Western influenced modernization was beautifully apparent throughout my personal interactions. Although Thailand is inextricably affected by the process of globalization, and therefore American ideals, I found varying shades of a unique worldview that has provided me with an understanding of how Buddhism can be practically applied to life and explained as the Thai ultimate concern. This ultimate concern can be explained through the concept of loving-kindness. I hoped to share this Thai value and its significance with other Americans, specifically my religious tradition, Unitarian Universalism (U.U.ism), as means of refining our concept of what it is to be religious and actively spiritual.

This interest motivated me to stay in Thailand to do research for my senior independent project on how Thai Buddhism can be taught to U.U.s through a comparison of their greatest concerns. Earlier in the year, I was placed in an internship at a non-governmental organization, which happened to be on temple grounds. Most of my days
were spent learning from the monastic residents who either had great patience with my elementary Thai skills or were the best English speakers around, like my closest mentor, Venerable Ajahn Chaoavan. After a month, I knew that I wanted to personally experience the life of a monastic and the reasons behind its facade. I was on a concerted mission to know and be able to explain to others what Buddhism was really about since most of the people in Thailand seemed so apathetic toward the philosophical truths that the Buddha had taught. Over 90% of the population is Buddhist, yet people act in a hypocritical manner as they are increasingly focused on consumption and materialism that innately distracts people from spiritual development and the Buddhist teachings. I thought that Americans had the world beat, and we do in amount, but not in the seemingly uniform interest in economic success that is a blatant ideal in modern Thai culture. While America is built on the same economic concept of development, there is also an emphasis on individual success, while in Thailand nationalism deliberately orientates citizens to help their entire country over themselves, conforming them to national ideology. I hoped to find the essential Thai Buddhist teachings and escape from the stifling conformity of "pop culture," which I thought I had left behind in America so that I could separate myself from the American version more readily upon my return home and retain the life lessons I had gained. Later on, I was told that,

We live in a context of spirituality and religion, which is deep and broad. This context, our American culture, encompasses all of the categories of questions that religions ask and answer. American culture answers these questions. For example, there is an American spirituality, which involves getting what you think is ahead and being what you think is secure and that money and or fame can do that for you. That is a form of religion. Paul Tillich says that whatever you posit as the ultimate, you will always aim towards that.²
Upon hearing this insight from my minister, teacher, interviewee and mentor, all of whom are the same person, I realized that I wanted to teach others and myself how to be spiritual in ways that are not dictated by an organized religion, but by each person’s rationally conscious ultimate concern. I had found that Thais are also struggling with the same problem of rationality versus traditional beliefs, which confuses their lives just like Americans. My question was now, how does the Thai Buddhist religion help Thais to break from conformity to express and practice their ultimate concern, and how can U.U.s learn to do the same through an understanding of Thai Buddhism.

My Unitarian Universalist religious path had prepared me to respect the world’s major religions’ customs and beliefs. Unitarian Universalism is a liberal, originally Christian, tradition that now accepts a full spectrum of religious beliefs from all major religions, in search of promoting increased right relations among all people. It emphasizes each person’s individual journey to an understanding of ultimate values and the path toward those values. The problem with such an individualistic religion is that there are few if any readily available experienced guides that can help people with their practical spiritual development. Therefore, some congregations that I have experienced are highly steeped in a secular, no-room-for-imagination Humanism that strangled faith and the possibility for mental freedom with over intellectualization. With my increasing career interest in becoming a U.U. minister, I felt compelled to figure out if there is any way in which I can further promote U.U. spiritual development with reflection upon the centering experience I had gone through thus far in Thailand.

Throughout my two-month search, I had many inspirational teachers who’s wisdom all coalesced with the insight that all religions teach the same ideals, they just go
around the mountain of spiritual development by different paths that all end up at the same place. I realized that to study religion is a good way to learn about one's personal religion, one really learns more about his or her own religion while studying another.

"Your faith deepens and forms in a better way that allows you to discover new ideas and beliefs." ³ I learned in what way I am going up the mountain of spiritual development and at the same time, I was able to re-evaluate my methods and re-route myself to take a path that is clearer, requiring less bushwhacking. The wisdom of each person that I encountered on my journey taught me how to realize my path towards freedom. Overall, the Buddhist teachings reverberated throughout each of the individual lessons. My last day of research in Thailand was punctuated by an elderly Buddhist professor telling me that, "to know your self or that there is one in you, and to understand natural phenomenon you must know the three truths. They are in any old philosophy." ⁴ At this period in point, I knew that I had learned what I had hoped I would learn and more. Now I just needed to make sense of it all for the benefit of others.

The truths that I learned led me to experience the marvel of Buddhism in application and the bountiful lessons present in the traditional stories and myths that can be offered to people of all religious traditions. Faith in the teachings of the Buddha, will lead one towards greater understanding and action in developing right relations with oneself, other and the world. This tradition began 2500 years ago with a teacher referred to as the Buddha, the "enlightened one." For Buddhists, "the faith is in the Buddha, which is the ideal of being fully human and the way to realize this vision of being a Buddha is the faith in action." ⁵ The three truths of Buddhism which are that suffering is the result of desire for perfection, all things are impermanent and that there is no permanent entity to
one self, are applicable to everyone's life. Progression towards freedom or the Buddhist goal of nirvana comes from the very specific Buddhist practice and eventual realization of these truths. If one follows a proven prescribed spiritual method, whether it is Buddhist or not, then he or she will come to experience insights of these truths, which will be clearly visible in all of life. Theravada Buddhism lays out very succinct, simple forms of spiritual discipline, which allows them to be applied to most other religious traditions if they are accepting enough.

In my experience of Buddhism as a Unitarian Universalist, I gained a better grasp on what it is to be a sincerely religious person actively developing my spirituality and I hope to convey how this is possible for U.U.s and others who are searching for a form of salvation in this lifetime. This freedom comes from the willingness to be selflessness, flexible and detach from ones desires leading him or her to be mainly concerned with the state of others rather than his or herself through. Compassion then arises from understanding that one's dissatisfaction ultimately affects everyone else and so you are responsible for the happiness of humanity and vice versa. Therefore, the hope for all people to experience the same freedom is essential because of the compassion and identification that one has with everyone else. It is through pure compassion that someone acts out his or her loving-kindness. Loving-kindness is the non-conditioned display of genuine understanding, acceptance and care towards all beings who are suffering the conditions of life and its mystery. Buddhists are aware of the concept of loving-kindness in the scriptures as metta and Christians are taught to "love one's neighbor as oneself," which is the basis of the continuing liberal Christian and subsequently the secular morality of American culture. Whether one looks at Buddhism
or Unitarian Universalism, the wisdom of loving-kindness is present as one of the products of great spiritual attainment. This paper will explore the ideas of metta (loving-kindness) to see if knowledge of the Buddhist tradition can enrich the American UU approach to spirituality.

**Thai Buddhist History and Culture**

Buddhism first came to Thailand over two thousand years ago when the first Buddhist missionaries came over from India. This form of Buddhism is called Theravada, or “the way of the elders,” which is the most conservative Buddhist sect. Buddhism became integral in the Thai life when it was adopted by the ruler of Thailand, then called Sukhothai, in around 1277 C.E. King Rama V solidified the present form of Theravada Buddhism and the Thai alphabet, which is based on Sanskrit and Pali, two sacred languages from India used in the time of the Buddha. From then on, Buddhism and the government of Thailand have been blended together as the leaders took on the “responsibility for the protection of Buddhism” and enacted laws allowing the Sangha, or the community of monastics, to govern itself. Currently, 93.4% of Thais are Buddhist and show full support for their king who promotes Buddhism as “the glory of the country.” This unity of politics and religion has helped to formulate the culture of the Thai people with Buddhism as its base.

The Thai culture and life is intrinsically mixed with Theravada Buddhism in every aspect creating a sense of cultural cohesion throughout the country. The traditional way of life in Thailand focused on the temple as the center of the village, culture, education, one’s social life and even healthcare. Everyone venerated the monks as the town teachers, artists, healers and leaders. Thai art developed from the Buddhist images and
temple decorations, which were imported along with the religion.\textsuperscript{11} Since modernization, over the last several decades in Thailand, the temple has lost the large role it once had in the Thai daily life, but it remains a center for religious studies, practice and the national celebrations.\textsuperscript{12} For the older generations, there is still a strong tradition of visiting the temple once a lunar week, or every eight days, to make merit by offering food and services to the monks and observing the basic moral code consisting of either five or eight precepts for the whole day. Through such observances, monks remain symbols of righteousness and virtue for the Thai community through veneration and customary respect.

**Thai Buddhist Beliefs and Practice**

The reverence and obedience for Buddhism often omits an emphasis on independence, which detracts from spiritual development. With the belief in the doctrine of *karma*, the law of cause and effect, one determines his or her own future by the acts he or she commits. If one does good then good will be returned in this life or the following lives.\textsuperscript{13} The same applied to doing bad. Therefore, the bad luck that one is experiencing in the present could be as recompense for bad deeds performed in one's past lifetime. Everyone's experience and state in life is accepted as justly deserved for his or her actions. If someone is at the top of the social hierarchy then he or she is reaping the benefits of previous good deeds and therefore everyone respects his or her status. While monks are believed to be very virtuous, those who have lives of wealth, fame and ease are also thought to be extremely moral, or, at least, were in their past life.

The respect that the monastics receive is only outdone by that which is shown to the Thai royalty. With enduring commitment, the overwhelming majority of the Thai
population especially admire and idolize the king as an incarnation of a Bodhisattva, or a future Buddha, tying the national religion and the political figurehead neatly together. A good Thai person is one who follows and adores his or her leaders, which include elders, parents, teachers, monastics, political figures and royalty because of their virtue. Those at the top of the hierarchy are to be followed and trusted because, from the Thai perspective, they know best and display their good karma through their status. As a reflection of the larger hierarchy in society, parents and the elderly are respected as the most experienced and knowledgeable in one's family, the basic unit of community. They are viewed as the most virtuous because of their demonstration of the Buddhist laws and precepts, which must be an outcome of experientially gained wisdom. In upholding the rules, they help to keep and promote order and peace, therefore providing increased security for everyone else. One's responsibility and capacity to protect those socially below oneself, is dependent upon his or her wisdom gained through experience, whether with Buddhism or just the toil of life.

This emphasis in virtue and morality is further supported by indigenous animist beliefs that deal with the possession of power from virtue. These ideals are what provide people with respect but also physical power and metaphysical protection from harm. If someone is following the five main precepts then he or she has the ability to control him or herself and take care of people who are not able to be as virtuous. Therefore, the more precepts one follows, the more protective power he or she possesses. While this is a primitive idea of protection, it has been translated into the current monastic system and continues to validate the power one receives as a result of Buddhist spiritual development.
Monks, who follow the Vinaya prescription of 227 precepts, are recognized as having the most power since they restrain themselves to the highest degree, which provides them with abilities that the less controlled and therefore less virtuous lack. These precepts are "the preliminary condition to higher development after conforming to the Buddha's teachings." One must be able to overcome his or her desires through mental training, which will lead to increased focus and purity in thought and action. Monastics are able to detach themselves from their desires following the regime of the Buddha, "the awakened one," with the intention of "awakening" with the insights that arise out of pure lucidity. Through detachment from his or her own wants and perceived needs, he or she is able to experience the world apart from the usual conceptions of what is good or bad for oneself. The precepts seek to restrict sensual experiences derived from food, comforts and entertainment, as well as minimize the ordinary distractions from experiencing the arising out of each moment, in order to produce a state of mind called mindfulness with is required for meditation. Through consistent mindfulness and refusal to give in to one's desires, insights into the nature of reality and oneself arise out of this pure mind and move one toward enlightenment or nirvana, the state of complete separation from the cycle of rebirth.

Lay people do not have the ability to attain nirvana, but still have clearly defined virtues with related levels of power in the Theravada tradition. This is particularly evident in the case of women, where access to power is limited. Since women are seen as being more attached to daily activities such as taking care of the children, managing the household and preparing food, they are not as free to follow the precepts and therefore have less power to protect themselves and others. In addition, most Thai people believe
that the female body causes a woman to be less powerful because of the instability of monthly menstruation and childbirth. At the same time, it is expected that women are to provide frequent offerings for the monks through food donations and are expected to be the compassionate parent, which should give them a great deal of good *karma*. The father's protective power is believed to offer her enough security so that she can take care of the family and be a good mother in her role as a Buddhist woman. In fact, if a woman is not able to be a caregiver then she is lacking a role in Thai society. Many of these women go to stay at temples where they can make merit by taking care of the monks. Nevertheless are rarely respected as much as an active, devoted mother no matter how virtuous they may be. Often times, women come to the temple because they truly want to practice Buddhism in an active way even though they receive little to no recognition for their devotion and are rarely allowed to teach others.

The distinction between socially defined virtue and monastic life has implications for monks too. While the monks are still teachers and religious leaders, they usually teach with their strict discipline rather than strictly practice all of the rules themselves. There is a great emphasis on studying Pali and following the tradition although the monks do not teach or observe a devotional form of Buddhism except on an individually motivated basis. This is because only a small percentage of monks actually study and analyze Buddhist scriptures intellectually. Rather they learn through memorization and repetition. Instead, morality is the central focus and the message that the monks teach the community. While the monastics most often speak about the main five precepts of no killing, no sexual misconduct, no false speech, no stealing and not taking intoxicants, the basis of Buddhist virtue comes from the combination of wisdom, purity and compassion.
which the majority of Thai Buddhists are not taught. The philosophical theory of Buddhism and practice of meditation is generally reserved for monastics and scholars while the lay people are told to focus on the application of virtue in daily life.\textsuperscript{21}

There is also a disconnect between the moral ideals for different levels of monasticism. The monastics, who by principle vow to follow at least ten precepts if they are ordained women (\textit{mae chi}) or novices and 227 precepts if they are full monks, often do not actually practice these for various reasons. Many times, they are only planning to be a monastic for a short while, maybe for a cheap college education, to make merit for their parents or in an attempt to balance out their bad \textit{karma} with some of the good. With these and many other less than noble motivations, there is little impetus to follow all of the 227 precepts. In addition, there are different interpretations on what is important to follow in the scripture since they were written so many centuries ago, in a different time and culture, and do not always blend well with modernity. Some Buddhist leaders believe that all of the precepts should be obeyed exactly as they are written since the Buddha supposedly said that if one does not follow the path exactly, then he or she would not be able to reach enlightenment. At the same time, others proclaim that modern life contrasts with the Buddha’s experience so much that to follow every rule is much too inconvenient and no longer relevant. Therefore, they feel that minor adjustments should be made from the scriptures for the moral guidance of monastics in different areas of the world.\textsuperscript{22}

Even though the monastics themselves often do not follow the prescribed precepts, they will still teach lay people very literal readings of the basic set of precepts laid out in the scriptures. At the same time, the monks do not expect that the laity will
necessarily follow the five precepts either. In fact it is very rare to find a Thai person who is so religiously devoted but not living the monastic lifestyle. Most modern Thai people will observe the five precepts on Buddhist holidays and their birthdays, while sometimes practicing one of the precepts for a burst of protective power if they foresee a dangerous situation for themselves. Morality for the great majority of Thai Buddhists is focused on how to protect themselves now and in the future rather than for spiritual advancement. It is, of course, the rare lay Buddhist who has come to understand the reason behind the rules and that the precepts are merely vehicles by which one can purify oneself away from distraction. There is no requirement to believe the law of karma in order to find the practices of Buddhism relevant to real life. Yet the monks rarely mention these secular purposes since the public is interested in gaining merit from Buddhist ritual and practice above all else which can be dedicated to loved ones or can bring him or her good luck and a better rebirth in the next life.

Although the Thais are generally not rationally aware of why they should act in accordance with Thai Buddhism’s highest moral ideals if not for good karma, most of them naturally manifest aspects of these ideals in their customary behavior without even thinking about it. In Buddhist cultures like Thailand’s, there is no requirement for people to be constantly analyzing how and why, which contrasts with the Western ideal of rationality. The populous may not generally meditate or philosophize but they live the dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, in their lives unconsciously since the teachings are embedded in the culture. Thais display their moral ideals among strong family bonds generally living with multiple generations in one household, and kindness to others is shown by hospitality toward, acceptance of, and interest in those who are different from
themselves. In addition, there is a cultural emphasis on giving what you have to offer or being namjai ("like water") in one’s generosity and sabai sabai or "peacefully content" in one’s state in life. These Thai characteristics are apparent in the Buddhist teachings of the highest moral ideals, yet most Thai people would not consider these customary standards as proliferated by their Buddhist beliefs.

**Thai Buddhist Ideals**

While Thai laity may not be able to attribute their virtuous activities to Buddhist ideals, they are aware of the five essential Buddhist precepts as their religious and even national moral code. The Thais rarely go to the temple to hear any sort of preaching or lecture given by the monks. They mostly only study Buddhism from the Thai perspective while in the educational equivalent of an elementary school. While talking with interviewees about how they identify these Buddhist values, I received the common answer that people were not sure whether the ideals came from a Buddhist lifestyle or were inherent to their traditional Thai culture. The terms I frequently heard were “katanyou katee chon,” which is someone who knows the virtue and good offered them and returns the favor, while a “poo pakee chon” is someone who performs all of the perfections. This person is striving towards becoming a “manoot seeya tham” or one who possesses all the ideals of a human being, which is very rare. In these designations, there is a theme of striving for genuine moral transparency.

Most people I asked told me that simplicity and family obedience were highly valued in society, but in the monastic community there seemed to be an emphasis on purity above all else. Without purity, one was not able to make a sincere effort towards spiritual attainment; the Buddhist practitioner must be virtuous before making an honest
The three virtues of wisdom, purity and compassion all relate to each other and none of them are able to be possessed without the others. For example, one must have wisdom before knowing how to be compassionate in a wholesome way. In fact, all the values and precepts intrinsically rely on each other, unable to be fully possessed without the rest. At the same time, the highest ideal or goal for Buddhists is the attainment of enlightenment, which is said to be met by those of the greatest loving-kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), equanimity (ubekka) and sympathetic joy (mudita). This kind of love is universally encompassing allowing for the connection with all living beings in existence. Loving-kindness or metta is most often emphasized when teaching Westerners about the ultimate goal for Theravada Buddhists.

**The Definition of Metta**

Historically the Pali term *metta* comes from the Sanskrit root of *mitra* in the masculine form and *maitri* in the feminine form, which means “to unite” in friendship, benevolence and good will as one would with a companion or associate. The word Maitreya, which includes the same root, is used to describe the benevolent and compassionate bodhisattva who is the Buddha to come in the future. A bodhisattvas is an ideal human who acts through perfect kindness in his or her entire life and attains the status of a buddha, the ultimate spiritual achievement for Buddhists.

The word *metta* is rarely used in normal speech since it is not a Thai word, but most Thai people recognize the word from monastic instruction as loving-kindness in action. Those who study Pali learn the term *metta*, but apart from religious discourse and studies, it is seldom spoken. Instead, the term *jaidee* (“good hearted”) or *kwam-ga-ru-naa* (“kindness”) is typically used. The majority of the laity do not feel compelled to
fulfill any supreme moral model since they are working to make the best of their particular state and role in life which does not necessitate the perfection of any ideal, not to mention the fact that they perceive genuine intention as unattainable through merely the application of moral ideals. In addition, most men who go into the monkhood dedicate themselves only after a short period, up to several years, with the intention of disrobing and living the rest of their lives as family members. Therefore, there is little impetus to attempt the highest morality, especially since the law of karma excuses having to strive for improvement in any area of one’s life.

On the other hand, those monastics who take their role seriously as a life-long commitment, will most likely say that they are aiming towards the ideals of loving-kindness (metta) as well as compassion (karuna), sympathetic joy (mudita) and equanimity (ubekka) if one specifically asks about their moral ideals. Nevertheless, most monastics would not see fulfilling the morals as their main duty. Rather, they are to be obedient, learn Pali chants, take care of the laity who come to the temple, teach the younger monks or novices and gather food for their community. The monks who seem to be most concerned with working towards truly virtuous lives are the meditation monks. These monastics make up a small minority of the sangha in Thailand. Those monks and women who live as monastics and place great importance on meditation generally say that the reason they meditate is because it provides them with peace and calm (sati), which is the initial requirement for the attainment of genuine morality. Those monks who have studied under meditation masters also know that once they are strong in concentration, they will be able to focus on offering others a sense of loving-kindness
(metta) that will draw people to them but can also protect them. This ideal of metta is taught by monastic example and through allegory.

**Metta in Application**

*Metta* is used as a moral teaching tool throughout two separate applications in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Initially, Thai people will learn about *metta* in the context of how to ideally act within the world. These lessons come from the monastics, teachers and family in the form of parables, advice and moral codes. Understanding *metta* takes one a long way towards grasping the Thai concept of perfected morality in every context. Many of the folktales emphasize peaceful human interaction with animals, which calls on the virtue of loving-kindness for all life. In the second application, in order for *metta* to be genuine and truly “heart felt” from which the Thai language suggests all of emotion originates, then one must have a spiritual discipline of developing loving-kindness before offering it to others. This practice, whether in meditation or ritual offering, will lead the Buddhist practitioner closer towards true altruism while realizing the insight of selflessness that characterizes Buddhist spiritual wisdom. With the internal acknowledgement of identification with all creatures, one is called to love all of the life that is a part of existence, sustains it and provides endless variety of manifestations from which human life is possible. At the same time that one effectively transcends humanity, he or she must remain ultimately tied to the elements of life on all levels, teaching others how to love beyond themselves as well.

Thais have traditionally learned about the practical effect of *metta*’s experiences from monks. *Metta* is the moral focus of stories teaching children why kindness is important and how they should act it out in their lives. For example, Ajaan Chuen said
that when he sees anyone who is about to step on a bug he asks him or her how he or she would feel if an elephant stepped on his or her head. He is trying to demonstrate that one should be conscious of the experience of other living beings and therefore be compassionate towards their existence. “One would see a little bug in a very special way through the eyes of the Buddha.”38 For a true Buddhist, all of life is worthy of notice and respect for its individuality and commonality, whether one encounters a bug, a child or a snake.

The idea of loving-kindness is also used as protection from the harm of others, whether animals or humans. Since there is a forest-wandering tradition among the Thai monastics, monks have frequent encounters with predators while in the forest. They believe there is no danger of being harmed if they are able to focus their concentration on sending loving-kindness to the animal. The monks rely on their faith in karma, leading them to not harm other creatures.39 While in the jungle during his wandering period, Ajaan Luang Ta, the abbot of the temple that I stayed at, heard the roar of a tiger while sitting in meditation. Frightened, he didn’t move. He sat very still and focused his mind. Finally, the tiger came out of the forest slowly until it was right in front of him. He just kept thinking on loving compassion; that he loved the tiger and he would like him to go away. In the end, the tiger jumped clear over his head and took off into the woods. Ajaan Luang Ta said he thought he might die but he did not really care. He would have been ready with detachment from fear and desire. Another story he told, was of a time when he was meditating near a cave and a big snake came, slithered over his lap and then wrapped around his body. He did not move at all and kept thinking, “met-ta, met-ta,” that he loved the snake but wanted him to leave just like the tiger. The snake with its
head in front of Luang Ta moved back and forth and then he unwrapped himself and left. Just as one can read in any work illustrating the monastic stories of the time, Ajahn Luang Ta gave the traditional description of the moments when mindfulness is tested in the forest.

These stories are teaching tools rather than harrowing tales of courage and strength to impress. They offer lay people an understanding of why the mindfulness that comes from meditation is important for them. The average lay person has no interest in striving for enlightenment, especially since it seems so far out of one’s reach, but the steady concentration that results from simple breathing or chanting meditation (samateet in Thai) is able to provide increased ease of life for those living with the uncertainties and dangers of the Thai jungle. If one is able to center his or her mind on and exude metta, then such a person will receive loving-kindness in return in accordance with the law of karma (cause and effect). Even without an understanding of karma, there is an obvious reciprocation of kindness when it is given, whether to a tiger or a human being.

Whether Ajahn Luang Ta actually came face to face with a tiger and a big black snake is not relevant. The importance lies in conveying the truth that to receive acceptance and love one must initially offer such sentiment. The peaceful presence of metta radiates, is felt and returned in countless stories throughout the Buddhist folklore.

The Jataka stories, which are the retelling of the Buddha’s previous lifetimes in preparation and progression towards buddha-hood, offer elaborate and picturesque descriptions of how one should act according to the Buddhist ideals. In one of his previous lives, the Buddha was the king of the monkeys who helped a dying man in the forest while risking his own life. After the king monkey and his monkey followers
helped the man and gave him food to eat, the man tried to capture them for more food. The king monkey nearly lost his patience, but then remembered that he should always show love and kindness and allowed the man to leave unharmed.41 One cannot harm another living thing under the influence of metta. Buddhists, especially children, learn this and many other lessons from the Jataka stories on how to live moral lives and work towards the ideals of virtue for “right living.”

**How to Attain Metta**

This “right living” is really just a small piece of the larger Buddhist path to spiritual enlightenment, whereby one’s outer life of practical morality contributes to and reflects one’s inner journey towards perfection of wisdom. If someone is intent on studying Buddhism in Thailand, they focus on purifying the body and then the mind in order to live rightly. The term *metta* is one state of mind that is a part of the four “divine abodes” or *brahma-vihara.*42 The state of *metta parami* is that of “perfect loving kindness.”43 Here purity of the heart is the essential element, which sustains and reinforces the mindful focus on *metta.*44 There must be as little conscious and subconscious distraction as possible for sincerity to show through. The active effort of being a caring, considerate person is not enough since the goal may be selfish. The problem with selfishness is that ultimately one’s good deeds are not for others, only oneself, which in Buddhist philosophy should be broken down until one realizes that there is no such thing as an essential self. Therefore, one must strive to innately arrive at his or her actions of kindness naturally without effort apart from the conscious striving of the mind, which we confuse for a self. We are unable to act out all of our intentions without the practice of improvement through constant effort and action.
While most lay people are not aware of the different levels of mental attainment and their Pali names, they do understand the term *metta* as how one is to practice loving kindness, and giving (*dana* in Pali) is the most commonly mentioned application of this ideal. Traditionally, devout Thai Buddhists offer food to the monks in the morning as they go on their barefoot alms rounds in the town and there are several ceremonies each year that call for money, food and/or donations of other essentials such as robes and toothpaste. This is one way in which a Buddhist makes merit, which adds to the accumulation of good *karma* as one works towards ensuring a better birth in his or her next incarnation. One can also devote this merit to someone else through a mental recitation after the act of *dana* is made to help this individual with his or her good *karma*. To give displays *metta* in its simplest and most obvious way, but the actual experience of genuine “loving-kindness” is that which comes from meditation.

Although meditation is not the focus of the Thai Buddhist tradition, the monastic community promotes the practice to facilitate purity, which enables genuine “loving-kindness” to emerge. For the meditation-based monks and Buddhist scholars, the goal of the mindful focus in silence is this *metta*. There is a circular connection from the instigation of kindness in one’s actions inspired by the wisdom of observant mindfulness back to the experience of pure loving kindness that emerges in this silence. *Metta* is the ground for insight from mindfulness that ultimately returns to intuitive love. In other words, as a culturally Thai Buddhist, one begins his or her religious devotion with offering their kindness to others, especially those who have made one’s life possible. Then one moves onwards from there to learning about the knowledge that is held in the scriptures and the community of monastic teachers. The next step is to routinely act out
the lessons through one's life with the centered attention of mindfulness, which leads him or her to the wisdom of how to be a humane being. Ultimately one will come into a creative consideration and love for everything that makes up the human experience. There is an understanding of what it is to be a person, just like every other person. One connects with everyone else in response to this comprehension and therefore, realizes that one's own existence shares in the common experience of nature.

Most young monks with whom I came into contact said that to know oneself is the best benefit that they and anyone else initially receives from being a serious monastic and or doing meditation. Since we are with ourselves all of the time, focusing on the mind, that which interprets and provides our experience, is the easiest and fastest way to know the link through all of humanity. Mindfulness brings one to the present moment of an experience with his or her self in relation to his or her experience. One is able to stop allowing the experience to happen to him or her and is able to know the experience as it happens with him or her self. Observation of one's reactions to the stimuli that continuously bombard the mind every instant provides an understanding of how one's mind facilitates one's life. With the acceptance of ourselves, we are less and less inclined to control our experience and the stimulus that we meet. In fact, there is a letting go of the moment, allowing each to come and pass in its time, no clinging, no desires, just being. There is no need to know anymore because one is beyond knowing to intuiting, receiving and accepting but not falling into and being consumed by that which is being experienced. For instance, when someone watches a television show, he or she is in the show him or herself, he or she is lost to the self, unaware of the process of attachment to the flashing pictures and noises that are entering his or her body system. The show is
mistaken for reality because the watcher allows his or her mind to run amongst the action in the transmitted field shown on the screen. In the same way, in meditation there is no need to consciously remind oneself to watch what is going on in the mind or otherwise because through regular practice, meditation strengthens one’s concentration so that the focus is the rising and falling in each moment within consciousness and nothing more. One can experience his or herself in this way.

To know oneself fully is to know all selves. Delving into oneself is looking at the detail in life in order to understand the universality apparent throughout all of life. Everyone picks a point at which to look in a picture, providing a focus for comprehension of the entire scene. Even though one is not able to look at the whole picture at the same time, the viewer is still able to make out an intelligible image. It only takes one spot to understand the whole. We are all points of being in nature and are governed by the same laws of nature, therefore we take part in the entirety of the world on a smaller individual level. If one is to know the self fully then he or she must be connected to a sense of being a miniature natural cosmos created and sustained by the larger macrocosm of nature, which includes all the other microcosms surrounding him or her.

Through this ever-expanding worldview, the universal love ideal is approachable. In order to love unconditionally, one must be able to identify his or her self in another being finding personal integrity through the connection to this person. Apart from familial, romantic or friendly love, if a person can genuinely feel the essential longing of each being for greater integrity, then unconditional love towards each being is possible. Likewise, translated into a larger scale, one must identify with the whole of existence in order to love it all and be drawn towards its salvation. While this is the motivation
behind the devotional life of the bodhisattva, which generally places an emphasis on the ideal of compassion, the Theravada tradition answers the call for selflessness with the ideal of metta. The bodhisattva, as the ideal person, concentrates on having the utmost compassion for all living beings so that he or she is motivated to strive for the salvation of all beings. As a Theravada Buddhist monk or nun, one is centered on his or her own personal enlightenment, but the end goal is that of loving-kindness (metta) for all life and its expression through compassion. Genuinely dedicating one’s life to lessening the suffering of others is the practical goal of modern Buddhism and can be understood through the cultivation of metta.

This ideal of loving-kindness is a core concept in Theravada Buddhism, which leads to protection, acceptance and communion with Life. Practically, metta is one of the highest ideals, which can be acted out daily through giving to others, but is not fully experienced until one’s intention is pure. This purity is attained with a clear mind, which has the strength to concentrate on spiritual development. The practice of meditation is that which hones the mind towards clarity, while the moral precepts help to eliminate physical and mental distractions from mindfulness. When loving-kindness is the subject of this mental focus, especially as a mental discipline, eventually there will be a natural integration of its virtue in one’s character, which is apparent to all others. Ideally, through the insights gained in meditation and experiential wisdom, one will spiritually progress towards the loving acknowledgement and care for each living creature, leading a life of service for the betterment of all beings. While this is loving-kindness to the extreme, it is the ability to center on another life instead of one’s own that offers the most insight into the experience of metta and the ability to see all beings as part of a whole.
which requires all of the parts. The increasing emphasis in Theravada Buddhism on
教学 the idea of metta is thought to be instigated by the growing Western interest in
Buddhism and our demonstration of love through philanthropy, which, in turn, can be
seen in Buddhism's compassion and loving-kindness.

Application of Metta in American Theravada Buddhism

With rising international diplomacy, trade, travel and education, there has been
increasing interaction among the different Buddhist sects and traditions in Asia and with
every other tradition around the world. Western intellectuals, missionaries, workers and
tourists go abroad to experience, study, live in and help the religions of other cultures and
often unknowingly impart their biases and beliefs in forceful and even unconscious ways.
At the same time, Easterners come to America and Europe to get an education in the
world's best educational institutions and learn how to develop their third world countries
like the first world has already demonstrated. In addition, information is ever-
increasingly accessible and larger in scope so that more people than ever are able to self-
educate and learn all about the unique world that interests them.

Many monks learn about world religions in monastic universities and go on to
study them more deeply in their free time. Ajahn Luang Ta, the abbot of the temple that I
stayed at, has dozens of books on the world's religions and frequently spoke of wanting
to understand them better so that he would be able to teach his Theravada Buddhist
message to anyone. Although he has no intent to proselytize, he does hope to impart the
benefits of meditation to interested Westerners who come to his forest monastery and to
those he meets when he visits abroad. He latches onto an idea in another religious
tradition, such as the universal love that Jesus spoke of which closely corresponds to the
Theravada Buddhist concept of *metta*, and then teaches the ideals of Thai Buddhism through this central pivot point. This is a common method of comparative religious study and teaching. Through this process, both religious traditions broaden their view of these concepts and slightly change in response to new spiritual understanding. This is how the ideal of *metta* came to the forefront in the American interpretation of Theravada Buddhism.

With the concept of *metta* as central, Theravada Buddhism in America transformed into an increasingly secularist form of spiritual therapy. Since the majority of teachers have not been from a Buddhist culture, the traditional rituals and customs have fallen away from this Western Buddhist form. The first teachers, however, were Asian immigrants who came to set up Theravada Buddhist temples for diplomats in Washington D.C. and growing Asian populations in the Western States. They soon found that there was an increasing interest in the form of meditation from the surrounding non-Asian population. These Buddhist "parallel-congregations’ in which one location supports two communities—one ethnic, and the other consisting of non-Asian converts,” often found difficulty in trying to provide the cultural requirements of one group and the educational, practical interest for the other. Therefore the American Theravada movement did not gain much momentum until the early 1970s when a number of non-Asian college graduates returned home from their practical education in Southeast Asia, which included meditation training. Most of these meditation practitioners learned Mahasi Sayadaw’s *vipassana* tradition. He was a Burmese monk who took away the initial *samatha*, or “calming,” practice in Theravada meditation and went right into the “insight” or *vipassana* phase. This allowed for faster progression towards an
experience of freedom, commonly emphasized as the goal in the American vipassana tradition instead of nirvana. Without the focus on the cultural, doctrinal framework that instigates much of the Buddhist practice in Asia, American vipassana students often have individual spiritual and therapeutic aspirations for meditation.

While freedom is a central theme in the American Theravada Buddhist movement, there are traditional guides of practice to teach the wisdom of the Buddha. Joseph Goldstein, one of the main American Vipassana masters says, “we practice the Dharma in order to be free. That is the heart of all the effort we make because from freedom comes connectedness, compassion, loving kindness and peace.” Dharma, the Buddha’s teachings, inspires the practice, which is based on very simple, universal ideals to which all people can relate when the Buddhist tradition is disassociated from culturally distracting elements. Essentially, the “four spiritual practices central in American vipassana as taken from the Theravada tradition are mindfulness (sati), loving-kindness (metta), ethics (sila), and generosity (dana).” While mindfulness is often focused on initially, “loving kindness meditation is practiced as a complement to mindfulness meditation, both to stabilize the mind and to infuse mindfulness practice with a spirit of friendliness.” The element of generosity or dana is key because “it both supports and expresses the openheartedness and happiness that are said to come from mindfulness practice,” providing a practical outlet for metta. The essential teachings that are applied practically at a Thai Buddhist monastery are also a large part of the mission of the American Vipassana movement, but there is a greater emphasis on the actions of love and kindness.
The American *Vipassana* meditation teachers tend to increase the focus on *metta* when compared to most Asian teachers, likely due to the greatest spiritual issues troubling Americans, which are increasingly becoming Asian problems as well. There also is more emphasis by American teachers on forgiveness as mixed with *metta*, which is rather unknown in Asia. Because of the American Christian culture, there have been adaptations to the Theravada tradition allowing it to tie in better with the American psyche such as the greater prominence of love and forgiveness. The common technique of concentrative *metta* meditation “focuses the energies of the mind to cultivate a feeling of loving-kindness towards the world . . . The first object of the meditator’s loving-kindness is themselves, which often turns out to be a surprisingly difficult task for people in our highly judgmental society,” and finally after a process of broadening, *metta* “is offered boundlessly to all beings everywhere.”

The current American culture of an unrestricted materialistic lifestyle is transforming values here and overseas. “America is still like a teenager, a juvenile, just trying to grow, and that spiritually immature state has been taken as a standard for the whole world to follow.” The immature American value of materialism is becoming that of the Asians through the global influence of economic development. Conversely, American *Vipassana* and other Buddhist movements are attempting to incorporate Asian wisdom in the American melting pot, which goes against the grain of individualistic consumption and emphasizes simplistic communion.

While Theravada Buddhism is able to help America gain a deeper grounding in meaning, the historic American values can also help Theravada Buddhism gain further integrity as well. Ajahn Chuen, the founder of the Midwest Buddhist Meditation Center
in Warren, MI, who is originally from Northwest Thailand, related to me that "here [in America] it is hard to find truly virtuous people. People are not generally kind to their parents; they only visit them once or twice a year but sleep with their dogs and cats every night. I tell people to meditate on why this is since it was your parents not your pets who gave you your life."65 In Thailand, and most Asian cultures, the familial bond is of the utmost importance for the majority of people. For example, children will commonly live with their parents up until and even after marriage regardless of financial security. This tight bond teaches the younger generations to be grateful for the support and love of their elders while having the confidence to go out and share this love and kindness with others. At the same time, Thais generally do not understand the need for greater diversity and equality among all people because of their doctrinal Buddhist belief in the law of karma and the fear of losing their rich cultural heritage.66 Therefore in Asia, but more notably in America, "Theravada Buddhism is being deeply affected by the spirit of democracy, by feminization, by shared practice, and by the integration of lay life."67 In effect, "a North American vehicle is being created. Already this vehicle draws on the best of the roots, the trunks, the branches, the leaves, the blossoms, and the fruit—all the parts of Buddhism -- and it is beginning to draw them together in a wise and supportive whole."68

As a result of the diverse interpretations of Buddhism and religion in America, the Vipassana meditation movement is able to keep its essential Buddhist core and add from the best of the other wisdom traditions that are available to create a universal vehicle for practical spiritual growth.

The American Vipassana tradition is an example of acceptance and plurality of expression that characterizes some of the most progressive spirituality that America has
to offer. There is another American tradition that promotes the same message of individual spiritual practice among a fellowship of support. In this religious institution, there are no doctrines or dogmas to ingest, or judgmental assumptions to agree with allowing for each participant to spiritually search, experiment, practice and believe in any way that promotes the seven basic principles. These universal principles direct what is the Unitarian Universalist Association.

**The History of Unitarian Universalism**

There is a historic movement of liberal Christians who are open to and learn from the world’s religious traditions, in part to gain a greater scope of the universal experience of love. The Unitarian Universalist (U.U.) movement especially emphasizes this practice of studying other religions as a way of understanding the common good for all people. The theological notion of Universalism dates all the way back to the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century with Origin, who stated that, “God is all-loving, and all of creation will ultimately be drawn back into the eternal divine goodness.”\textsuperscript{69} This promotes the liberal Christian idea that all people will eventually enter heaven and God’s acceptance whether they must earn their entrance through a redemptive experience of punishment after death or not.\textsuperscript{70} The Unitarian theology was initially founded in the period of radical reformation when anti-Trinitarian thinking was formulated in Eastern Europe around the mid-1500s.\textsuperscript{71} Francis David, the Transylvanian leader of the first Unitarian faith to be literally called Unitarian, convinced the local king to proclaim religious freedom and tolerance throughout his realm, the first declaration of the sort known in history.\textsuperscript{72} Liberal Christianity was opening the doors to religious tolerance and acceptance in the West taking on the
egalitarian understanding of religion as an objective experience of love, much like Buddhism in the East.

Unitarianism and Universalism both developed and grew within the freedom of a new diverse nation and the increasing emphasis on rationality. In 1825, the American Unitarian Association was officially formed, and by 1833 Unitarianism was the dominant religion in the state of Massachusetts, focusing on the human possibility to create a society from the ideal of God’s love. The Unitarian tradition helped to fuel the Enlightenment and brought science into the foreground of the American understanding of history and the human experience, casting a shadow of disapproval on religious intolerance, which is often instigated through doctrine and dogma. Its anti-Trinitarian theology spoke to the increasing need to observe scientific rationality instead of archaic doctrine of the fourth century.

William Ellery Channing was a congregational minister in Boston when American Unitarianism was founded at the beginning of the 19th Century. Later he would become possibly the preeminent Unitarian voice throughout the American tradition. His words still ring true when he said: "In the first place, we believe in the doctrine of God's unity, or that there is one God, and one only." Deists such as Thomas Jefferson pointed our country towards the growing optimism of the collective human potential for love. His strong Christian morals along with his dedication to rationality and freedom, led him towards the acknowledgement that the radical acceptance of love can provide an environment for the greatest of human achievements. Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau promoted scientific rationality while drawing from other world traditions to explain the religious
experience focusing on the “Great Mystery” found in nature. The mystical stint in Unitarian history was short lived as society increasingly looked to scholarship for explanations. Against the threat of Calvinism’s pre-destination, which preached that only a certain already chosen number of people would go to heaven, Universalism argued that everyone had the right and ability to be eternally saved. It was John Murray who founded a church and called it Universalist, saying “give people something of your new vision . . . preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.” He promoted a God of love as opposed to a God of judgment.

Unitarianism took a turn towards Humanism after WWI, further emphasizing intellectualism. Unitarians eliminated the archaic terms used for religion and focused on ethical living as the only way to show goodness. The Unitarians held onto their optimism for the “perfectibility of humankind.” Throughout the next few decades of worldwide turmoil, a greater shift towards grounding the Unitarian faith in science and education took place. The Unitarians and Universalists increasingly used Humanism as a religious framework through which to understand and evaluate the rest of the world’s religious traditions. The “theistic-humanist controversy” emerged with the denial of a “supernatural creator deity” on one side and the remains of the Christian God on the other. While this debate still remains, sometimes robustly, Unitarian congregations have come to peacefully accept both sides by understanding that they have common goal of actualizing our highest human potential together. In 1961, the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged to form the Unitarian Universalism Association (U.U.A.), which continues to gladly struggle with the expression of religion through reason and intuitive expression.
The U.U. tradition continued to look to the world's religions for inspiration and wisdom, but generally separated the mystical away from the practical moral lessons. It is understood that all the major religious traditions "teach a spirituality of empathy, by means of which you relate your own suffering to that of others. The one and only test of a valid religious idea, doctrinal statement, spiritual experience, or devotional practice is that it must lead directly to practical compassion." U.U.ism evaluated and dissected the myths from Christianity through a screen that picked out these ethical lessons leading to compassion and the rest was set aside as one does the horror and gaiety of a fairytale. The cosmology and beliefs from various traditions such as Hinduism were tossed away as outdated, irrational ways of seeing the world that we certainly had risen above with our modern scientific understanding. In addition, Jesus’ parables were now the message of the Christian teachings that the U.U.s took their theology from rather than the whole of the Bible or the accumulation of the Christian tradition. The core of Jesus’ teaching that was now taught in U.U.ism, which is itself a Christian tradition, was to love one’s neighbor. The universal love of all human kind has become the U.U. focus while allowing for the subjective interpretation of this love for religious freedom. As an association they "simply refuse to diminish the lofty goals of our organization by "pinning ourselves down" to a certain unchanging set of rules, thereby creating a dogma in a faith dedicated to freedom from such restrictions." U.U.ism has continued to flourish with a progressive religious definition that has only recently been fully laid out.

**Unitarian Universalist Theology**

Although many U.U.s struggle with the idea of pinning down a uniquely U.U. theology, there has been a movement to do just that started by Rebecca Parker, the
president of the Star King U.U. School of Divinity in Berkeley, California. She took the initiative to unite all U.U. congregations using the history of the tradition and her views on what a religious congregation should offer to a community and the world. She developed the theology of Unitarian Universalism into the notion that as humans we are innately good and come from a higher source of which we are made and should live up to (i.e. God).\(^85\) While not every U.U. may believe in God or a Creator, there is a Judeo-Christian historical basis from which U.U-ism comes. It has been said, “U.U.s believe in one god at the most.”\(^86\) The tradition has widened and now a U.U. can believe in any concept of the divine or none at all, since all U.U.s are encouraged to find what they believe independent from any religious doctrine or dogma. People should feel as though they can devise their own religion as a way to explain individual worldviews. While this creates immense diversity, through such multiplicity, accepting union is found when one person is able to love another unconditionally or the whole community is joined in fellowship. If nothing else, the majority of U.U.s will agree that our human ability to love on a number of different levels connects us all to a force that is beyond all of us. The source of love, that which creates all things including us in each instant, continues to sustain love as life. One can call this source by many names: God, Truth, energy, Brahman, the Ground of All Being, Love or Nature since all of them point to the same experience of being beloved.\(^87\) From the experience of unconditional love, one cannot help but feel responsibly compassionate for others as a result of the human ability to love.

**The Definition of Love**

In the Western Christian tradition, the concept of love and being beloved has its history in the Greek love trinity of *eros*, *agape* and *philia*, which all shed light on
different aspects of our longing to be in communion. Our intense desire to connect with God or a sense of transcendence is called eros. Plato said that, “eros is the drive which impels us not only toward union with another person in sexual or other forms of life, but incites in us the yearning for knowledge and drives us to passionately seek union with the truth.”88 This is the U.U.’s undying need to question and not give in to the path that is most visible, but to continue to search for the truth everywhere. Jesus is often taught as the ultimate example of someone who took every risk to share his message of love. “If Jesus was nothing else, he was a person who had developed his spiritual awareness to an astonishing degree. He knew God’s love, not because somebody told him about it, but because he was open to experiencing it in all aspects of his life. His experience of God’s love was palpable to his friends and neighbors.”89 This idea of God as love around us unconditionally just because we exist, like the love of a parent, is called agape in Greek. This love is “God reaching out to all humans.”90 The love of God, however you understand that term, still flows over and around U.U.s through their sense of connectedness to the world. There are moments, which force one to stop and recognize that there is meaning to being right there right now. “To those with the patience and discipline for spiritual discernment, that love is palpable. And that love still calls out to us. It calls us to break out of our insularity and really share our faith.”91 There is then the call to offer this love to all people. This love is philia, the love for all humanity as equals. Being one with all humans in our experience, we should come to love all. “It is about exploring together the various facets of human relationships, and the various and splendid ways that we have been given to express love, to achieve intimacy, to live out our destiny as creatures created for relationships.”92 This love gives us earthly comfort
and support as we share our lives together and recognize everyone as having our same desires for home in the beloved. In the statement of Principles and Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association, all three forms of love come from the “Jewish and Christian teachings, which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

Love in Application

Working towards this ideal of love is a constant process that takes place throughout our modern time as the act of promoting justice. The U.U. principles call all members of the congregation to strive for “justice, equity and compassion in human relations” as well as aim for “the goal of a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.” Rev. Star King said that, “we can always love more, act more out of love.” The church is, or should be, the place that challenges us to radical love acted out in the larger community. Over time, U.U.s hope to use this essential love as a tool to make progress towards a more harmonious world community through the fulfillment of basic rights and peace. While there is a need for all persons to find their own inner tranquility, there must be a balance including action towards “making the world a more human, loving, compassionate, right and just place to live. A sign of our justice is the way we treat others. So according to this view justice is a way of doing.” The famous theologian Paul Tillich saw love and justice as one side of the other. He wrote: “justice is that side of love which affirms the independent right of persons with the love relation . . . Only love can transform calculating justice into creative justice. Love makes justice just. Justice without love is always injustice.” The same notion is apparent in Buddhist scriptures of the 5th century B.C. that combine a belief in justice and love, peace and
commitment to the law. "The Dhammapada says: A person is not just if he or she carries a matter by violence; no, they who distinguish both right and wrong and guide others, not by violence but by the same law, being guardians of the law, are called just."98 To guard and support the law, whether it is the law of nature (the dhamma) or a just national law, will generally increase peace and freedom from fear for all people under the law.

The U.U. mission is then to help to make this justice through love a reality by treating all people as a part of our neighborhood in which we learn from everyone out of love.99 This love converts everyone to full humanity through their willingness to participate together in healing. To be fully human, one feels a sense of unconditioned compassion for all other beings since all of life is suffering just like him or her. Love is the choice to experience life as a member of the human family.100 The U.U. calling picks up on this note to accept and encourage everyone towards spiritual growth as a part of the world community.101 Since all people are connected in our human experience, there is the requirement for everyone to recognize each other’s similarities and learn about the differences to bring greater empathy and understanding. This includes mutuality in giving life rather than taking life in order to allow people to be their best in our relationship with them. Our job is to be a part of the world, not to be the best or strongest, but to learn from and love all.102 Although it seems as if this love ideal leaves no acceptance for suffering, the famous American Buddhist teacher, Ram Dass, explains that "the powerful awakening of our own compassion can tune us not just to the nurturing and sustaining forces of the world, but to the oppressive and destructive ones as well. When we open to these directly and become familiar with them...we are more likely to hear ways to respond with life and support to relieve the suffering."103 With the
acknowledgement of everyone's pain as well as his or her will to live of which all are born to, one promotes and acts out of universal justice.

As a result of feeling called to work towards a better life for all, one identifies with and takes on responsibility for the state of the living world in all forms. The way in which one is able to associate with the world body is in the acknowledgement that all beings have the same "life force," which also runs through the Earth as our entire surroundings. 104 There is a comprehension of God's love as all of nature. 105 In fact one of the U.U. principles is "the respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." 106 Through the observation and study of nature, one comes to the realization that humans are made of the same elements as plants and even rocks. Elementally, all things are incredibly similar with the same properties of creation and destruction. From this insight develops the love of all as equals (philia) and the yearning to learn the love in each moment for all things as an observation of reverence as eros. Gautama Buddha was called the awakened one because he was fully conscious to the divine in the present. He was able to look into the heart of reality itself, embracing the darkness along with the light. Our purpose as human beings from the U.U. perspective is also to be awake to the miracles of life all around us. This is the call to experience the transcendence in all things as a mystic. This very real experience of mysticism as participating in some indefinable and mysterious power that embraces all of life as one living being. 107 With this holistic ability to commune with all life, there comes salvation.

In order to provide a sanctuary for the individual, one must have an ideal relationship with all beings expressed as loving-kindness through creative altruism. 108 U.U.ism believes and practices salvation in the here and now. There is no need to worry
about the future after death since one can have peace in each moment if he or she is open
to the possibility. It is the job of every person in the U.U. perspective to cultivate his or
her ideals in order for there to be positive relations that are constantly moving towards
universal salvation. Creativity is required to save and protect us through the healing
power of relationships against our brokenness and incompleteness. While the
Universalists traditionally believe that God is too good to damn them and the Unitarians
used to believe that they were too good to be damned there is now a combination of the
two negating the necessity to believe in an external saving grace. The work of a U.U.
is to repair his or her self and each other towards integrity as salvation. Instead of asking
for forgiveness and deliverance from God, U.U.s delve into themselves in order to
understand the mind so that self-acceptance can emerge, providing the foundation to
sincerely help others. "Atonement has to do with how we repair the harm done to one
another in the here and now, how we make it right. Theravada Buddhism calls for a
similar act of liberation through the practice of meditation allowing one to recognize the
conditioned self, which is caught up in the world and then let it go. After one is free from
habituated attachments then the practitioner is able to devote him or herself genuinely to
the liberation of others.

In the recognition of and support for this mission, U.U.s come together through a
covenant, which says that they are all equals through democracy in striving for the
betterment of each other and the world. The U.U. commitment is to the whole body of
the church as an egalitarian community in "affirmation and promotion of the right of
conscience and the use of the democratic process within the congregation and the society
at large." This pledge is a process of engaging in the church community through an
appreciation of the fact that freedom is impossible if attempted alone. Just like this religious covenant, if love is a decision, it is not a decision we can make once. It is a decision you make over and over again. The spiritual discipline of love, then, requires that one move through life while intentionally holding his or herself open and available to the church community and the world. The U.U. covenant can be broadly understood as the promise to intentionally look deeply at oneself and every person in the practice of being present to all of humanity. This promise requires a certain sacrifice. It calls for one to give up all those many ways in which he or she secretly withdraws from his or her self and others. This rings true with the Theravada teaching of mindfulness. Devotion to the practice of meditation as constant awareness bonds a person to his or her environment in a relationship of presence. In this moment of presence, one is open to accepting all that enters into his or her consciousness with understanding and compassion as the ideal relationship known in Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism.

Application of Ideals in a U.U. Church

At People's U.U. Church in Kalamazoo, MI, there is a conscious emphasis on the practice of working towards right relations in the lives of everyone who make up the congregation. While each U.U. individual is encouraged to have his or her own personal spiritual practices, the community of People's Church also provides for communal application of its ideals. In application, U.U. congregations demonstrate their highest ideals in a similar manner to devout Buddhists. While communal practice is not as formulaic or traditional, there are outlets for the development and expression of U.U. morality. Virtue in the U.U. context emphasizes the expression of loving-kindness through social action within the congregation, the community, the nation and the world.
for the overall wellbeing of all people and elements of life. In addition, the environment of the church is such that the members of the congregation feel encouraged to be active advocates for social good. This environment is developed through the democratic process and sensitive integration of different perspectives on religion, spirituality and the common good. Through the process of forming cohesion among individual philosophies and traditions, greater love and kindness can emerge from the genuine attempt for understanding and acceptance. Spiritually, alongside social engagement, the U.U. worship service provides a creative outlet for expression and the challenge to grow as a religious being within a pluralistic community. As a home of loving-kindness, the entire congregation promotes individual spiritually growth, by means of social action and communal worship.

The U.U. church environment takes all participants into consideration, as essential, interconnected elements of the congregational organism that must be nurtured and encouraged to grow towards spiritual health. This includes mutuality in giving life rather than taking life in order to allow people to be their best in their congregational relationship with each other. The church is there to provide a comfort zone of acceptance that will allow people to learn, take risks and sometimes crack open their hard shells of isolation knowing that they will receive the care of fellowship. Without a community of acceptance, people are much less likely to open up and then stay open, but in a congregation, this unfastening of the heart is encouraged for the healing of one self and all those that he or she encounters. Rebecca Parker would agree saying, “the holy is with us when we gather to improve life for all.” This sentiment is reflected in the founder of Parker’s U.U. seminary who declared “the church must be a live institution
drawing all of us to something better and higher than we now know or realize." While most people would agree that this is an idyllic notion of the religious mission, there must be an actively cognizant practice that all of the congregation members participate in for true spiritual development to occur on all levels of involvement. As participants in the U.U. community, there is an attempt to judge if one practices his or her ideal principles actively in U.U. meetings, groups and classes as rehearsal test grounds before taking them into the bigger, less accepting world.

Rev. Jill McAllister has taken strides to incorporate these ideals in very real, conscious ways at People's Church that touch all areas of membership, especially within religious education. The teachers of the religious education department are encouraged to be ideal examples for the children and adolescents in their Sunday school classes since it is how one acts that children follow rather than what one says. Teachers are role models and helpers; they influence us without "teaching" anything as they embody his or her greatest ideals and values in how they meet and relate with the world. Starting at junior high school and then periodically into adulthood, the "Our Whole Lives" (OWL) program for sexual education, teaches one how to holistically integrate one's sexuality into his or her conception of the self and how he or she should relate to others healthfully as a sexual being. More than just a sex-ed class, OWL provides a comfort zone within which to explore issues of discomfort and fear that most educational systems stay away from. On the high school level, adolescents join a youth group that encourages their leadership and initiative. There are opportunities provided for social action, free-form spiritual worship, self-motivated education, artistic sharing and leadership development. Among the U.U. congregation, children and adolescents are encouraged to learn
experientially through exploring the difficulties of growing up that allow for free
expression and holistic spiritual development.

In allowing for such dramatic diversity and acceptance, on another level the U.U.
church has also publicly announced its congregations as open and accepting of people of
all races, sexual orientations and areas of society. The U.U. Association promotes all
congregations being welcoming and inclusive places for all people. There is a
committee at most churches focused on the welcoming of all who have alternative sexual
orientation while providing forums for the education of its members on the pertinent
issues involved and what it means to be fully accepting. Since 1970 the U.U.A. has been
supporting those of bisexual, gay and lesbian sexual orientation. An initiative called
"The Journey Toward Wholeness" educates members on how to create truly conscious
antiracist, anti-oppressive communities inside and outside of the U.U. church. In 1997,
the project was conceived and the curriculum is now available for every congregation as
a means to promote equality for all. This initiative includes empowering activities that
encourage open views, mutuality and inclusivity for all people. "To become an anti-
racist multicultural institution requires commitment, analysis, strategy, resources, and a
willingness to risk, grow, and change. The benefits of embarking on this journey are to
experience a spiritual change of heart and to enter into what many anti-racist theologians
and organizers are describing as "a politics of conversion" to create the beloved
community." The members of People's Church are moving forward in this journey of
transformation towards the action of love in all occasions for all people. This sentiment
is reflected in the way that the Buddha broke from the social conceptions of his day to
radically acknowledge the humanity of those who were most socially repressed and the greatest repressors.

U.U.s recognize the need to integrate all people into the movement towards egalitarianism with radical love. The social justice effort does not ignore those in power who are the repressors. While these individuals may be "the hawks, the merchants of death, the blasphemers, [they] are all targets, but they are not our enemies, they are our beloved. It is not just a matter of wooing them. The keystone of the strategy to win this war is community, and the weapons can only be those of love." There has to be a practice of agape, love for all of humanity. One can learn to see all others as friends in suffering, which leads him or her to feel compassion for all and therefore will refrain from adding to the world's mass of suffering. The synergistic society of agape considers every person entitled to protection of his or her full dignity as a human being beloved to God and not of less importance than any other human being. In practice, an open mind and heart can be offered to every person one meets in any circumstance.

These ideals apply to social interaction on every Sunday morning with an emphasis on practicing genuine hospitality at church to all visitors as well as those congregation members that one may not know as well as others. This is done through an awareness of not using disparaging language that society has often conditioned one to think are acceptable. It is in breaking away from these conditioning through habitual awareness that keeps one working towards right relation with all. In addition, one must learn to incorporate acceptance at every layer of his or her being. This is commonly over looked in our society as we have less and less physical contact with each other with the increasing hyper-development in communications technology.
In traditional cultures, like those of Thailand, there is an unconscious teaching of social wisdom through loving acceptance. While very few Thais could articulate these ideals, they just apply them, usually as a bright smile with every encounter. In our culture, there is usually a void between the mind and actions that we display to everyone else. Therefore, there must be a greater integration of this mind-body duality through more ritualized action of expression. Fortunately, the U.U. denomination is quickly catching on to this great need for personal integrity in our relationships and daily spirituality. It seems like a natural starting place would be emphasizing to a congregation the great importance of constantly nurturing and expressing one’s loving-kindness towards oneself and then others as an exchange of ideal humanity in all personal exchanges, which could be as simple as a smile.

For Unitarian Universalists, religion is practiced as a principled way of life that hopefully leads to a better world for all, but there is often the lack of spiritual discipline, which characterizes most religions. The ideal of loving-kindness, is present in the secular and emphasized religious teachings of the world at most U.U. congregations, and is now taking hold as a practical vehicle for personal and social change. Without placing an emphasis on identifiable beliefs, U.U.s allow for individual spiritual expression, while joining the congregation with acceptance and love for each individual. Communally, U.U.s do share, or will at least agree with the same principles and ideals. The unique U.U. theology is loosely based on the experience of traditions from all around the world, but Buddhism in particular is easily compared and blended appropriately into the broadly outstretched U.U. worldview. It is the goal then of each unique U.U. congregation to appropriate the U.U. theology into meaningful action for daily observance like People’s
Church has begun to demonstrate and like Theravada Buddhism has practiced since its inception. It is the concept of *metta*’s universal love and kindness for all beings, which is easily accessible for most people. Whatever one’s personal beliefs may be, *metta* can be a conceptual reminder for widespread change through one loving action at a time.

**Conclusion**

The ultimate concern of love is significant to human cultures all around the world, although it is often not explicitly taught. In order for relevant and consist cross-cultural human progress towards integrity, one’s motivation must be rooted deeply in his or her ultimate concern and love is easily applied. In many religions, the concept of loving-kindness has been clouded by infinite cultural details, but looking through the distractions, elements of this truth emerge. I personally learned to move my focus from the details of the Buddhist scriptures out towards the overriding ideals and how they were being displayed. I stopped grasping to understand all the rules and minutiae. Later I realized these are often for the development of patience and concentration in memorization and are present in many traditions for a reason. It is obvious that many of the Thai Buddhist practitioners are distracted by the supposed necessity of following the precepts, while the greater Buddhist message of *metta* is drowned out of his or her consciousness. Similarly, I think that most Christians are aware of the teaching of kindness and love in their religion, but it is how Christianity teaches the practice of loving-kindness that allows it to get lost in the particulars. For example, Jesus got to the end goal of compassion and love for all, but Christianity generally does not explain how to discover these ideals for our selves very well. Lay Christianity does not have a systematic process of spiritual development like Buddhism’s Eight Fold Path, which
leads the religious practitioner through a distinct process while allowing for personal adaptation with the proper guidance. The Christian practitioner is supposed to act with love, but it is mysterious how is he or she is expected to genuinely experience this love from the beginning. “Christians have the right intention down but not the right practice.” Parts of the Buddha’s path seem to be highlighted in the Christian teachings yet others seem lost or confused while people are increasingly alienated from themselves and others as devout Christians. It is the study of one’s self through meditation that develops insight of how he or she is the same as every other living creature and how one’s suffering can be reduced so that purity of heart overrides the confusion of the mind. The result is tremendous love in action.

Unitarian Universalism as a whole is in great need for a consistent practice like that of meditation, which will eventually teach people the three essential truths that are prominently taught in Buddhism: dukkha (suffering), anitya (imperfection) and anatta (no-self). As concentration develops through meditation, one’s thoughts fall away leaving the meditator with less and less of a self on which to grasp. In fact, the self is deconstructed through the realization of how one’s life experience has conditioned him or her into who one believes he or she is. People learn from experiences, and build conceptions of themselves around those incidents as judgments of the stimulus. Gradually they hold onto these conceptions tighter and tighter in order to create an understanding of the world, which becomes increasingly dull, as they believe they know all about life. They are unable to fully appreciate the newness in each moment. If one is able to break away from his or her conditioned existence through the slow process of mental deconstruction, he or she will eventually wonder at the mystery of each now and
forget to desire for anything more than full presence in the moment. In these instants of appreciation, one feels the “duty to do something, to give back to the universe and be grateful” which entails “being kind to all life, people, animals and plants too. We can talk to them and love them all. We will see that everything needs to be loved.” An American monk with whom I spoke pointed out that the most important thing for Americans to learn from Buddhism is the notion of *anatta* or “no-self” because of our culture’s extreme emphasis on individual success that leads to greed, vanity, selfishness and disconnection, which are so harmful to ourselves and others. Americans should come to realize how their selfishness is encouraged by our culture which tells one how to be and live while worshiping commercialism and materialism. Traditional religions, help one to look passed these superficial concerns to ultimate concerns that American U.U.s need as a means of moving away from the disconnect that is the current state in America and coming together in mutual attempts to understand each individual.

Buddhism is very flexible and applicable religion for most any culture since its core teachings revolve around observing nature as one’s ideal teacher. Also, most monastic Buddhists are more than willing to share their knowledge with anyone who is sincerely interested to experience and know for oneself. No one can memorize all of the Buddhist wisdom; the initiative to learn must come from the student’s sincere interest and effort to experience the truth. While teaching foreigners about meditation, one senior monk with whom I spoke said that he teaches them about “*metta*, compassion and peaceful calmness, which is what they need to learn from example.” He went on to say that, “most foreigners learn mediation very easily because they are able to experience their feelings and desires more readily and take the practice more seriously than Thais.
They do not keep the feelings inside and heat up like Thai people but can let them out and be happy." Americans tend to express themselves since individuality is nurtured and viewed as a natural tendency for diversity.

The Buddha recognized this variety when he said that spiritual interest manifests itself in four different types of people. They are like the different stages of a lotus flower (dok bua). There are those who are in the mud, those in the water, those at the level right at the top of the water and those who are hovering above the water in the air. The people in the mud will never be able to conceive of air and those in the water will never understand air, but those who are right at the surface of the water are only a jump away from knowing air. At the same time, there is nothing wrong with those who are fixed in the mud or surrounded by water. There is a necessary progression to understanding, there must be learners and teachers, but evolution is inevitable on all levels.

After one has come to the realization and incorporation of noble truth, whether he or she is Buddhist, U.U. or of any religious tradition, one is then motivated to actively engage in the water of life to encourage the awakening of others. It is in returning to the world that one’s wisdom is fully realized through the compassion of societal application. Whether one participates in U.U. social justice programs or acts as a religious leader, there must be relevance for his or her spiritual knowledge. At the same time, there must be actual wisdom behind the action for the result to be one of consistent general good. U.U.s can often become overly politicized so that they move away from being open minded and are only activated for a cause that shuts out other perspectives and narrowly closes out the wisdom of how to create justice. On the other hand, Buddhists could use the Christian wisdom to do more active good in the world rather than meditating alone in
the forest forevermore. There must be a return to society because only through social interaction will the teachings eternally live on. Because of modern communication technology, the expanse between the East and the West has shrunken significantly and there is the recognition and incorporation of the similarities between the many teachings. Throughout my contacts and experiences, I sensed that soon there will be another worldwide shift in spiritual development like that of over two millennia ago with the influence of teachers like Jesus and the Buddha. This time, religious isolation cannot continue. Spiritual truths will merge with the acceptance of all existence as participants in the same teachings of nature (dhammachat). This is the ultimate goal of U.U.ism as well as the universal truth of Buddhism. The challenging part is that the responsibility is placed on each individual to find his or her own path since no one can be led all the way to freedom.

The greatest tip I received while in Thailand was to focus on the individual point of each moment. I learned that while looking into myself at one point in my core, I am still able to sense my whole body and expand from there, while always staying grounded at my heart. I practice this teaching through a meditation routine, which increases my concentration. As a result, I am more likely to awaken my intention of loving-kindness towards each person whom I meet. Hopefully, through practice the application will become a tendency and then ultimately engrained into my character for the consistent betterment of all people whom I encounter. Thailand taught me to learn from the heart with greater sincerity. Even the Thai language reflects this idea since the phrase for “I understand” in Thai (chan cow jai) directly translates as “I enter your heart.” All thought and mental activity is colloquially said to happen from the heart. Thinking and feeling
are from the same place in Thai culture as opposed to the English split between the mind and the heart. It is displayed in the seemingly genuine, yet not always happy smiles that adorn each Thai face in most every circumstance. Their smile seems to acknowledge the connection between themselves and others even though discomfort or a lack of words may be the instigation. Although their bright smiles may not always be a sign of positive feedback, for me they were constant reminders to be actively conscious of showing my loving-kindness. Now, more consistently than ever, I find myself smiling with a sense of peace as a sign that loving-kindness is slowly becoming a stronger aspect of my personality. While, in the end no one is perfect, compassion through loving-kindness goes a long way in moving humanity towards the infinite goal of self-proclaimed improvement, of which spirituality must be incorporated for any individual or community to have the freedom of integrity. But then again, I cannot explain it all to you; you’ll just have to experience it for yourself.\textsuperscript{134}
End Notes


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