

Justice and the Five Laws of the Universe

(Based on a talk given at an interfaith service with the theme of
"Justice: Our Sacred Calling," on September 11, 2004)

Homage to the Buddha,
Homage to the Dharma, the Buddha's Teaching,
Homage to the Sangha, those who practice the Buddha's Way.

When these services first began, following the events of September 11 (2001), the word remembrance was included in the title. I do not see its absence from tonight's program of any great consequence; however, this being the third anniversary of that day, I would like to ask you all to pause for just a moment to offer merit, goodwill, and love to all those who lost their lives in that and subsequent events. We commonly think that death is an ending, but often as we take up a spiritual practice, we may get glimmers that death is not an ending, but more of a transition. And so for those who have died, may we wish them well, wherever they may be.

In offering you some Buddhist teaching tonight on justice, I would like you to keep in mind what Great Master Dogen, the Japanese monk who brought the meditation tradition from China to Japan, taught. One important teaching he emphasized was the "kaleidoscopic mind". A kaleidoscope, for those of you who did not enjoy this toy as a child, is a cardboard cylinder through which one looks as one turns a sleeve at the other end. Inside is revealed a constantly changing array of colored crystals, forming elegant and dazzling patterns with each shift of the wheel. It's like looking at multi-colored snowflakes falling in a snowstorm. In religious practice we wish our minds to be like this, reflecting the true reality around us: things are continually changing, there are different arrangements, there are different perspectives, there are different views. What I want to offer here is not intended to be in opposition to what anyone else has said, but rather to be another perspective.

To the best of my knowledge, the Buddha never addressed the issue of justice directly; however, he was constantly and continually addressing the subject as he helped people uncover the cause of sorrow, the cause of suffering. Suffering is a translation of the word *dukkha*, which also includes meanings of dissatisfaction, dis-ease, uncertainty, and stress. We may think we don't know about suffering, but we all do know about stress. (Laughter) And this is what the Buddha was addressing. This experience of *dukkha* is that aspect of our human makeup and life that draws us to religion or spiritual practice, because it is only there that we can find the lasting answer to that lack of inner peace and contentment.

The Buddha wanted to know why the world is the way it is. Why is there suffering, why is there old age, why is there disease, death, war, and injustice? He was motivated by a deep compassion for all sentient beings. And in a re-markedly almost empirical scientific way, he investigated this question thoroughly and deeply. His strenuous and all-

consuming effort sprang from a compassionate determination to help relieve sentient beings of sorrow and suffering. The answer the Buddha discovered was that it is ignorance, manifesting as what we Buddhists call the three poisons or the three fires, that causes suffering. The first of these poisons is craving, attachment, desire; the second is aversion, hatred, violence; and the third is delusion, which is compounded ignorance and often includes the other two, craving and aversion.

Exploring the topic of justice comes into play when we look at our world and try to understand it from the point of view of the law of karma – cause and effect. There is a schema of teaching in Buddhism called the five laws of the universe. The law of karma is one of these laws. I cannot go into all five of these now in detail, but I will quickly give you an overview.

The first law is that of inorganic things. This principle includes the laws of gravity and physics and is studied by the sciences of physics, geology, inorganic chemistry, etc. In spiritual terms this law is expressed as “The physical world is not answerable to my personal will.” There are some things we cannot do anything about. This is what we have to work with. These are the physical “givens” or building blocks of all existence.

The second law is that of organic matter – living things. We study this principle in biology, botany, genetics, ecology, etc. Looking at this law from a religious angle reveals its essence: “Everything is subject to constant change.”

The third law, the law of karma, is that everything that happens in the moral and ethical realm has a cause; likewise, everything we do, our intentional actions, has an effect. From this perspective our present moment is just. Wherever we are, however we are, this is the present unfolding of our life’s path, and it is just. This law is “inevitable and inexorable.” Even a Buddha cannot forestall this law.

However, we do not stop there, because we are also shaping our future in every moment. We are responsible for whatever we do and the choices we make in each moment. This is an incredible responsibility and opportunity and shows the true worth and positive potential of human beings. We are each responsible for ourselves, for our effects on others and the universe, for shaping and influencing our future. There is no passivity, no fatalism, no determinism, no judgment or punishment in the activity of this law. It is universal and natural, just like gravity. Do good, and good rebounds to you. Cause suffering, and you bring suffering upon yourself. Act unjustly, and you will find yourself suffering injustice.

This law plays out over a huge canvas or tapestry of time and space, so we cannot always quickly and easily discern the causes of present suffering or immediately foresee the long-term consequences of harmful acts. But for those who meditate and study themselves intently – and this is where a tradition and a teacher is invaluable – we can learn the why’s of our world, of ourselves, of injustice and prosperity, of peace and war.

So the real question for a Buddhist, as we consider the topic of justice, is how much peace is in my heart? Meditation is the foundation and fabric of a peaceful heart. In addition, and arising from meditation, we keep to ethical principles in daily life in order to prevent the accumulation of more sorrow. For example, in the meditation tradition we cultivate three principal precepts: cease from evil (or, do as little harm as possible), do only good, do good for others. We use the precepts first to restrain the poisons of greed, hate, and delusion within ourselves. We then go on to purify or transform these poisons into compassion, love, and wisdom. With qualities such as these, one stands a much better chance of approaching situations with a kaleidoscopic mind and an open heart. This state of being lessens our selfish investment in decisions and events, and brings forth trust and cooperation in others. It helps us immeasurably in working with others who have a different perspective. And if we can learn to understand and appreciate others, to see their good, to empathize with their suffering and its causes, this world is relieved of one more ounce of sorrow, ill will, and delusion which weigh it down and propels suffering inevitably into the future.

For people following the Buddha's way, justice is not something we have to take into our own hands to ensure its fulfillment. We do not and cannot play God, we have no need to seek vengeance. Justice arises naturally as the universe unfolds. Our sacred calling is to live in harmony with these natural laws, purifying our own hearts and helping others as we are able. Justice will take care of itself, and we are responsible for everything we do. It is also true that as human beings living in societies and communities, we have a responsibility to create just and fair systems of government and courts of law that reflect these universal principles. However, justice needs to be tempered with mercy, as there are two additional laws that come into play in the unfolding of our universe. These last two laws express the great potential of the human mind for good, and the inherent worth of every being.

The fourth law covers the laws of mind, of human intelligence – the various activities of humanity as we gradually advance. Included in this law would be the knowledge gained from disciplines that help us understand ourselves, our relationships, and human life – psychology, sociology, medicine, literature, the arts. In religious terms we express this law as “Without fail evil is vanquished and good prevails.” It is often hard to see and trust that this law is operating, and there are setbacks from time to time, just like in our individual lives. But if one studies oneself and human history carefully, one can see an improvement over the long course of time. As we learn better, we do better. It is also important to remember that these five laws of the universe operate conjointly – they don't exist as separate principles. They move and interact and affect each other. They are more like currents in an ocean than separate rivers on land.

The last of these laws is that all beings have the Buddha Nature, all beings have the spark of the divine. Through meditation, prayer, or other spiritual practice, we can actualize this nature, which is our true nature. To borrow words from St. John of the Cross, we can each become “the living flame of love”. Every being is included in this law. As such, every being is worthy of our love and respect, our compassion and concern.

“This intuitive knowledge...occurs to all.” From a spiritual and universal perspective, it is actually our responsibility to awaken this nature and help others do the same. We are not separate from others. We are all a part of one and what we do affects all beings. Others’ happiness and success is our happiness and success. Since the awakening of anyone is the awakening of others, how can we not assist each other generously and patiently as we walk on the path to awakening, to truth, to compassion and wisdom, to an end to sorrow?

Spiritual practice of any sort can be hard. All the great teachers have taught this. It is not always comfortable, easy, convenient, or popular. And our teachers have also shown us that it is worth the effort. So, I wish you all well in your endeavors, whatever they may be.

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The five laws are quoted from Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett’s article “The Five Laws of the Universe,” found in *An Introduction to the Tradition of Serene Reflection Meditation* (Mount Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, latest edition, 1997).