

# “Peace of the Ultimate”

Sunday Sermon, Skinner Chapel, Carleton College  
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By Ajahn Chandako

Thank you. You know, I really don't go to church all that often...so it is a real honor to have been invited to give this sermon, and give it to a community for which I have so much respect. This morning I would like to talk about peace.

There are many forms of peace and many levels of its depth and stability. I believe that peace is what human beings most deeply wish for. As the Buddha said,

‘Natthi santi param sukham’, ‘There is no happiness that transcends that of peace.’\*

And yet we seem to intentionally do so many things to destroy the peace we seek.

On a global level our generation faces tremendous challenges, challenges to peace unique in their far reaching consequences, challenges that prove that when human greed and self-centeredness are amplified on a grand scale, suffering and conflict are the inevitable results.

On a personal level, it is also easy to lose touch with a sense of serenity: the serenity of a canoe on a lake, of mountains, of silence, of free time, or simply the serenity of being still. This is one level of peace, the peace of simplicity. In the modern world we have become simplicity-challenged.

And when it comes to peace, our religions have the power to perfect it...or to destroy it. All over the planet we see how societies can break down along religious lines of division, fueled by conflicting world views that too often result in violence. When we have different religious traditions, each with millions of followers, each with holy books with different opinions about ultimate salvation, and many of these books claiming the same author, there is no getting around it: we have to expand beyond our narrow confines if we are going to learn how to live in harmony.

It takes an unusual open-mindedness and integrity to not just delve fully into and explore one's own belief system, but also to make an honest attempt to understand the teachings and perspectives of others.

A year ago I was on my way to a family reunion in Saskatchewan and was on a small plane to Calgary. The plane was just big enough to be three seats wide, and I found that my seat was in the very last row in the back. After a couple of minutes a middle-aged Canadian man sat down next to me and after we spoke for a minute he asked about the significance of what I was wearing. I told him I was a Buddhist monk, etc.

After listening politely, he said that he was a Christian and that God said that the only way to Him is through His Son the Lord Jesus Christ...and that all other paths led to eternal damnation.

So at this point I could have smiled and nodded and said, "Thank you for sharing that with me," and spent the rest of the flight looking at the clouds out the window. However his words didn't bother me much, so instead I decided to find out more about what he actually did believe and how he lived his life. As it turned out, yes, certainly he was of a fundamentalist stripe, but it seemed that he was sincere in trying live a peaceful, kind life modeled after Christ; and was as put off by the self-righteous and hypocritical fundamentalist Christians as anyone else.

He tried his best to convert me, for which I give him much credit, but to no avail. As we spoke he kept coming back to this same memorized phrase that there is only one way to God and that is through his Son the Lord Jesus Christ, and well, sorry to say, all other paths are leading to eternal hell-- including all other Christian denominations that were different from his.

At this point the woman sitting in front of me couldn't take it any more, turned around, put her head between the seats, and it turned out that she was originally from India.

"No, no...God is not like that. God is love and embraces all good people everywhere. You are so fortunate to have swami sitting next to you. That is your good karma. Swami is blessing you with his presence. You cannot limit the scope of God. Listen to swami's wisdom. The Buddha included all people in his compassion."

I had to smile. The fundamentalist Christian wasn't quite sure what to make of it. Our Indian passenger then fully joined our conversation, and the three of us developed various religious themes further. We then turned to the man sitting next to her and asked him what he was. He said he was a Roman Catholic. As our four-way discussion became more animated, it could be heard by most of the back half of the small plane.

The man sitting next to me, in all his certainty, kept speaking in terms of 'God thinks this...' and 'God is like that.' I suggested, for the purpose of our discussion, "How about if you phrase your statements, not as 'God is like this' but 'I *believe* God is like this' or 'I *believe* that there is only one way to heaven.' Because this opens the door for other people to express their, possibly different, beliefs and doesn't automatically put others on the defensive. And we'll all do the same." He reluctantly agreed, although we had to regularly remind him when he got excited. In Buddhism, you see, it's not belief, per se, that is of primary importance. It is direct experience, insight and understanding that are considered to be the key qualities that lead to 'salvation' or enlightenment.

Anyway, when our flight attendant reached the back of the plane we heartily invited her to join our interfaith gathering. She curtly said she was a "Catholic... and an angry Catholic," and then quickly pushed her cart to the front of the plane. It wasn't too long however, before she was back again, joining our conversation and seemingly forgetting

all about her flight attendant duties. She told us the whole, long story of why she was so angry at her priest, and by the end she seemed much lighter and happier.

We were really enjoying ourselves by this time, and our discussion lasted to the end of the flight and on into the baggage claim. The point of the story is this: by the time we reached our destination, none of us had significantly changed our beliefs or positions, but in the process we all had a great time. We laughed and joked and discussed meaningful things and learned from each other. And most importantly, we all parted as friends.

Because attachment and clinging to any view—even a good view—leads to stress. Even our religions are merely social conventions designed to lead us to a reality beyond them.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition we talk of developing an awareness of the presence of God. In Buddhism we talk of developing an awareness of the present.

Whether we speak about prayer or meditation, rather than getting sidetracked by the words and concepts, we can take a look at what effects our spiritual practice is having in our lives. Is it leading to peace? To being at peace with ourselves? Is it leading to clarity, to greater understanding? To living harmoniously with people who we perceive as different from us? Is it leading to a heart of kindness that includes *all* beings? Does our spiritual practice prepare us for death?

Because there is no escape from the limitations of the body. Life melts away like the last dripping icicles of March (...or April...or May), and as we get older, there is no escape from physical pain: back aches, leg aches, tooth aches and head aches. Fortunately there is some temporary respite, but in the end we either make peace with physical pain or we suffer more.

With emotional pain, however, there is an escape. Anger, depression, loneliness or fear: these are optional. These disappear with proper understanding, and this is where religion or a path of spiritual development, has a vital role to play. Learning to harmonize with the way things are and actively contemplating life, gradually gives rise to wisdom, and wisdom brings peace.

One element of realizing peace is to be living in a way that is consistent with our deepest values. This is the peace of integrity, of self respect born of living our values. *This* peace is not inactive. In fact, it is one of the most powerful forces for positive change that we can bring into the world, and when the peace loving people of the world stand up with courage and be strong, then we see that meek is not weak...and our strength is in being true to ourselves.

There are many practical things we can do in daily life to experience peace more readily. For example, there is the peace that comes from contentment. We may think of contentment as the culmination and reward of a spiritual path, but it is also a quality we can develop every day: cultivating the habit of stopping and appreciating how much we *already* have, appreciating the people around us and what has already been accomplished. Because, the truth is, we have everything we need to be happy right here and right now.

And then, there is the peace of forgiveness. Carrying around a negative perception or memory of another person is just too heavy a burden for a human heart. In some cases, not forgiving is easier, and easy to justify, but is it worth sacrificing peace of mind, sacrificing our ability to feel joy? So we practice forgiving others for the faults we perceive in them, for not always living up to who we think they should be, because every person in our life is a teacher of forgiveness. And sometimes we have to forgive life for not giving us what we want, and, maybe most importantly, it's good to practice forgiving ourselves: forgiving ourselves for having areas where we are not yet strong, for occasionally making mistakes or for being too self-critical. We forgive ourselves for not being perfect.

Knowing ourselves brings peace: mindfully being aware of what motivates us, being aware of our emotions. When we are up, we know. When we are down, we know. And we know how these states of mind always pass. With simple and non-judgmental awareness of what is happening both inside and out, we can replace an emotional roller-coaster with an inner mountain of unshakeable peace.

There is the peace of compassion, because tuning into the pain of another being and responding with understanding and love is one of the greatest of human abilities.

And there is the peace of understanding our world with insight, because our world is composed of what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and cognize, and making peace with every sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and thought is to make peace with the world.

And then there is the peace beyond the world. It doesn't matter what you call it, because the concepts have a knack of obscuring the issue. I'll read you a poem from the Japanese tradition:

“There is a reality prior to heaven and earth.  
Indeed, it has no form, much less a name.  
Eyes fail to see it. It has no voice for ears to detect.  
Even to call it ‘Buddha’ or ‘mind’ violates its nature.  
For then it becomes a visionary flower in the air.

Absolutely quiet, and yet illuminating in a mysterious way,  
It allows itself to be perceived only by the clear-sighted.  
It is the truth of nature, beyond form and sound.  
It is the truth of nature, having nothing to do with words.

O my good and worthy friends gathered here,  
If you wish to listen to the thunderous voice of Truth,  
Exhaust your words and empty your thoughts,  
For then you may come to recognize  
This one essence.” \*\*

As individuals, and as a collective species, we humans have tremendous potential. Clearly we have the potential to be intelligent and creative, to be kind and beneficial members of society, to be loving parents and loving towards our parents, and to be courageously patient in the face of hardship. We have the potential to recognize that we are essentially no different from each other, the potential to see how clinging to things and people and opinions leads to the pain of a divided heart and a divided society. We have the potential to be unified and whole...and to be unified *with* the whole.

But even more than that, We have the potential to free our conscious awareness from the limitations of who and what we think we are, from the web of identifications that create an illusionary world of what we perceive ourselves to be. This is real freedom, and this is true peace.

Please never think that you, as one small individual, have no power to change the world. Because you do. When there is generosity in your heart, it manifests in the world. When your mind is filled with thoughts of loving-kindness, it is unavoidable that love and kindness fill your life. When your heart is filled with understanding, it touches every person you know.

If we want to live in a world of mutual understanding and love, then we can create it by cultivating those qualities in our own heart...and as the world changes, it brightens. It softens. It wakes up. And it is friendly back. When we experience the peace of a pure heart, the ripples go out, expand, are felt by everyone in our lives and eventually touch distant and unimagined shores. It's possible.

And when you do discover some peace, please share it with others, because the world needs more peace, and when we have experienced peace and offered it to others, we will know that we have lived a life of true benefit.

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\* Dhammapada, XV.202

\*\* taken from a poem by Dai O Kokushi

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