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## Cultivating Grace: Fierce Acceptance

The Australian monk Ajahn Brahm tells about a garden in a Japanese Temple. People came from afar to admire its beauty and simplicity.

*One day an old monk sought to discover the secret of the garden's elegance. Before dawn he hid in bushes where he could observe.*

*A young monk slipped into the garden carrying two wicker baskets. He picked up leaves, twigs and fallen pieces of bark, patiently examining each. He smiled gently at some and placed them in the first baskets. He frowned at others and tossed them in the second basket. It took him three hours to sort everything that had fallen.*

*Next he dumped the basket of rejects on the compost behind the temple.*

*Then for the next three hours, he examined each remaining leaf and twig a second time. He placed it carefully in the garden, and stood back to see the effect. He adjusted and readjusted it until it was just right. His attention to color, shape, beauty and detail was extraordinary. When he was done, the garden was immaculate.*

*The old monk stepped from hiding, "Well done! Well done indeed." He smiled a toothy grin. "I've been watching you all morning. Your diligence and artistry are remarkable."*

*The young monk smiled with pride as the old monk gazed around nodding approval, "Yes, this is truly lovely. Your garden is almost perfect."*

*The young monk stiffened; his smile faded; his eyes grew wide. "What do you mean almost perfect?" He dropped to the feet of the elder. "Master," he pleaded. "Please show me kindness. Please teach me how I can bring my garden to true perfection. Show me the way!"*

*The old monk's eyes grew wide in surprise. His face grew calm as he surveyed the garden. Then he drifted to the great plum tree in the center, placed his strong hand upon it, and began to shake the tree. Leaves, twigs, and pieces of bark rained down. He shook and laughed and shook the tree until nothing more came loose.*

*The young monk was horrified. Six hours of work was ruined. A whole morning of labor was wasted. His face turned red as he imagined placing his hands around the old monk's neck and shaking him.*

*But the old monk peacefully surveyed the garden with an anger-melting smile. "There," he said, "Now your garden is perfect."*

### Grace and Acceptance

This morning is the first sermon in a series on cultivating grace. Grace is anything we enjoy which we don't have to earn. Indeed, there are many wonderful things we cannot earn: bodies that move, eyes that see, hearts that feel, minds filled with curiosity, air we breathe, sunlight that warms us on a cool day, stars at night.

We don't find grace by cleaning up the garden to fit our idea of beauty. We find it by cultivating attitudes and practices that make us more sensitive to the beauty around us and inside us.

One such attitude is fierce acceptance. It's a way of relinquishing ideas about how the world should be or how we think our lives ought to be so we can see and accept what is without resistance or need to control. The old monk encouraged his younger brother to let go of his ideas of perfection so he might better accept the grace of a natural garden.

I use the term “fierce acceptance” to distinguish it from “stupid acceptance” or “lazy acceptance.” If we’ve developed a habit of spending too much time on the TV or the computer, we could say, “Ah, it’s a habit. I accept it. Nothing I can do.” This is stupid or lazy acceptance. Fierce acceptance goes deeper than electronic distractions to quell the discomfort that urges a more enriched way to live. It encourages us to be open to comfort and discomfort alike.

This morning I’d like to investigate three aspects of fierce acceptance: (1) exploring our deeper nature, (2) committing ourselves to truth more than to comfort, and (3) finding support from fellow seekers.

### *True Nature*

The first aspect of fierce acceptance is listening sensitively to our own depths.

Spirituality is not about self-improvement. Unitarian Universalism is not a seven-principle self-help program. The problem is never who we are. The problem is who we think we are, hope we are, or fear we are. True spirituality is exploration, discovery and realization. It’s about finding the essence beneath our confusion, egotism, hurry, or fatigue. Spirituality is about finding the core of what we are already.

In Unitarian Universalism we call this essence inherent worth and dignity. It’s also been called Buddha nature, Christ nature, inner light, and God within. Here we often call it the goodness in everyone.

As concepts, these sound lovely and wonderful. But in our daily lives they aren’t always so present in our awareness. They manifest differently in each of us. So they aren’t so easy to feel.

A story illustrates the problem:

*An old farmer happened upon an eagle’s nest that had gotten dislodged from its high*

*perch and fallen to the grass below. There were three eggs in the nest. Two were broken. One miraculously survived intact.*

*He took this egg back to his farm and put it in a nest in the chicken coop for the hens to incubate.*

*In time, the egg hatched and the young bird grew up in the chicken yard learning to peck seeds and scratch the ground for bugs.*

*One day while scrounging in the yard he caught a glimpse of an eagle flying high and free. “Oh, I wish I could fly like that,” he yearned. The other chickens didn’t even see the eagle’s flight. So the young bird brushed it out of his mind and returned to pecking the ground.*

Obviously the young eagle can’t find his true nature by self-improving his chicken-ness. And, even if someone tells him he’s an eagle, he will not learn to soar by trying to fly like he thinks an eagle flies: how eagle flight *looks* is not the same as how it *feels* from the inside.

The young bird can begin to discover his true nature by feeling it from the inside – fierce acceptance of faint yearnings that may be different from all those around him.

But by itself, even this is not enough. No yearnings he feels, insights he has, books he reads, meditations he engages in will move him instantly from a mock chicken to a realized eagle. His wings are weak. They’ll need to be exercised over and over to grow into their full power.

Furthermore, few of us are lucky enough to see someone whose true nature resembles ours. Rather than seeing a soaring eagle, it’s much more likely that the youngling might glimpse a gliding goose or crane. This might move him to explore who or what he is. But it won’t be a perfect role model.

How each of us soars is a little different because each of us is a different kind of bird.

So the first aspect of fierce acceptance is learning to trust our essence knowing that our Buddha nature doesn't look like Siddhartha Gautama, our Christ nature doesn't look like Jesus of Nazareth, our light within doesn't look like the flame of our chalice, and our divinity does not resemble sunbeam in the clouds on a Hallmark card. Still we can learn to look within and trust the essence to guide us along a winding path that slowly reveals itself.

### *The Truth of How Things Are*

When we look deep inside sometimes we sense lightness of spirit. And sometimes not. Sometimes we uncover old hurts, pains, and fears. We see little urges for revenge or spite. We see greed, anger, and discouragement. Spiritual awakening can be one insult after another.

We humans are wired to run from fear, pull away from pain, and ignore discouragement. They are fiery angels or dark demons guarding the road to our own Buddha nature, inner light, or divine spring of wellbeing. So the second aspect of fierce acceptance is the capacity to not run, pull away or ignore. It's the capacity to just stay with what's uncomfortable or scary.

To say this differently, it's the capacity that arises when our urge to know truth is stronger than our urge to be comfortable.

This doesn't mean that we don't treat a toothache or that we suffer silently in a difficult relationship. It does mean that before we try to fix anything we first make sure we can see it clearly. It's fierce acceptance of our experience even when it's difficult. This can soften the heart and open compassion.

Many of life's difficulties heal with good attention. Many of life's dilemmas will show their own resolution if we have fierce patience – if we can open and relax rather than close and run.

*Last summer I went on a fifteen-day meditation. Toward the end of the retreat I had a breakthrough that left me quietly blissful and with more energy than I knew what to do with.*

*A few hours later, my mood suddenly dropped. My spirits sank. I felt low and depressed. My inner landscape turned dark.*

*I tried to sit with it. I tried to meditate with it. But it was so disturbing and discouraging I couldn't sit still.*

*So I gave up on sitting meditation and went out to do walking meditation on the side of a steep hill. I hoped that getting my blood moving and getting more oxygen into me might lift the mood. But it clung to me like a storm cloud following Charlie Brown.*

*Then, as I was walking up the hill for the fourth or fifth time I had an insight: a painful feeling is just a painful feeling. It's not who I am. It's just an emotion. What's the big deal?*

*As many of you know I was chronically depressed for the first forty years of my life. It took fifteen years of work to break out. Even though I hadn't been clinically depressed for many years, it seemed reasonable that those old neural circuits were still in my brain. As my mind and heart became more tranquil, it was inevitable that some of those old patterns would surface. But they were just neural wiring, not the core of who I was.*

*Seeing the mood this way, I felt no need to fight it or push it away. Beating myself up for feeling bad was not a route to feeling good.*

*This was radical acceptance of how things were at the moment. In a deep and organic way I accepted them as part of the family, part of the inner landscape, if you will.*

*And guess what: I still felt bad. But I was smiling at the same time. The gloomy cloud was still there. But since I wasn't wrestling with it, I could see it more clearly. I had stepped back and gotten a broader view. It was just a dark cloud. The rest of the sky was filled with morning sunlight.*

*I kept walking up and down that hill in the woods feeling sad and smiling. The sadness wasn't a bogymen any more—just a touch of poignancy. A few tears slipped down my cheeks as I laughed softly.*

*"This is crazy," I thought. "How can I feel sad and light spirited at the same time?" But that touch of worry was just another feeling. I smiled more deeply until my face hurt from grinning. It was a good hurt.*

Fierce acceptance does not mean indulging our thought, diving into our worst fears, fanning our anger, nursing our bruised feelings. It means relaxing our thoughts and opening ourselves up to experience afresh what is actually going on with little preconception. Above all else it means *less* commitment to our ideas, fears, or even hopes and *more* commitment to directly experiencing the truth of how things are in this ever-changing moment. Truth is never a real problem.

### ***Supportive Community***

The third aspect of fierce acceptance is openness to the support of others who understand this path. In Buddhism it's called "taking refuge in the saṅgha" or "taking refuge in the community of fellow seekers." Last month I called it "spiritual home" – a place where we don't shut our nightmares in the closet but take them out and tuck them into bed to give them comfort.

The support of a wise community is a huge help in getting us through tough spots. While we do have to face difficulties with an open heart, we don't have to do it alone. We gain great strength from others.

Since I spoke about this a few weeks ago, I'll leave it at that except to say that, as we get supported and nurtured, the human heart naturally wants to help others. And as we grow wiser, the circle of our caring grows wider. Caring for others

or caring for the world becomes intrinsically rewarding. It's not something we do for an external reward. It's something we do because it's what we are. Our actions become a manifestation of grace – something that enriches us in and of itself.

### ***Sharing***

So these are three aspects of fierce acceptance: (1) recognizing the light within that manifests uniquely in each of us, (2) the capacity to stay present in the face of fear and discomfort, and (3) the support of others to help us be with things that are difficult to face alone.

Let's see if we can make a list of the variety of situations where fierce acceptance could be helpful. To be clear, I'm not saying fierce acceptance by itself is a magic elixir. I'm saying it's a powerful and underutilized too. *What are some areas of your life (or the life of someone dear to you) where more acceptance might lead to greater genuine wellbeing in the long run?*

<...sharing...>

### ***Zadok the Tailor***

I'd like to close with the story of Zadok the Tailor.

*Zadok was one of the greatest tailors to ever pick up a piece of cloth or thread a needle. People came from distant cities to have him make suits for them.*

*There was a man who had wanted a Zadok the Tailor suit for years. He kept stashing away a few coins until at last he could afford the best. He went to Zadok who carefully measured him and told him to come back in a week.*

*When he returned, Zadok said, "You'll love this suit. Try it on."*

*But as the man studied his suited reflection in the mirror, he looked puzzled. "Zadok," he said hesitantly. "Be assured of my great faith*

*in you. But doesn't this right sleeve look a little long?"*

*Zadok studied the reflection. "No, it's perfect. You just need to stretch your arm a little."*

*So the man stretched his arm until the cuff touched his wrist in just the right place. Suddenly, the suit looked exquisite.*

*Then the man said timidly, "Zadok, the cuff of my pant leg ... it looks a little short now. I don't understand."*

*Zadok smiled patiently and said, "My good man, you need only adjust your leg a bit."*

*And sure enough, when he did the suit looked exquisite.*

*The man thanked Zadok and limped proudly into the street with one arm lengthened slightly and one leg held back. Standing at the crosswalk a woman said, "My that is handsome. Can I ask you were you got such a marvelous suit?"*

*He smiled proudly, "Zadok that Tailor made it for me."*

*The woman nodded in admiration. "I should have known it was the work of a true master. Zadok is probably the only person who could make a suit to fit a cripple like you."*

*Let's not try to fit into one of Zadok's suit, no matter how attractive. None of us – not a single one of us – is a perfect expression of any ideal. Ideals are too simple. We are too complex. We are*

perfect expressions of what we are. The path to freedom is not the path of self-improvement. It is the path of discovering what we are already and allowing that divine essence to flow forth in its own unique way.

### ***Closing meditation***

Let's close with a short contemplation:

*Let your eyes close or come to rest. Relax.*

*Don't try to do anything. Don't worry about focusing your mind, having elevated thoughts or spiritual feelings.*

*Just be with yourself with an accepting mind and heart.*

*Observe what comes into your mind. Push nothing away. Hang on to nothing. Just see all as passing phenomena.*

*And if there is anything that comes up that is less than completely okay with you – wandering thoughts or moods or memories – let them float in that huge space called the heart.*

*Accept them as they are.*

*Your job is not to control. Your job is just to know whatever arises on its own terms.*

### ***Song: Seems Like Such a Long Time***

*Seems like such a long, long time.  
Endless spirit waiting,  
Since my breath has drawn you in  
Silent all pervading.*