

## 12/6/09 Sermon

"The Bodhi Tree"

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Who is the Buddha and why is he important to Unitarian Universalists, especially to the Humanists among us?

The beginning of an answer lies in the following:

One day a disciple questioned Buddha, "Are you a Deva?" (God)

And Buddha said, "No!"

"Are you a Gandharva?" (Vedic cloud spirit)

And Buddha said, "No!"

"Are you a Yaksha?" (Vedic tree spirit)

And Buddha said, "No!"

"Are you a man?"

And Buddha said, "No!"

And Buddha said:

"Know, disciple, that I have completely annihilated individualism.

"Know, disciple, that I am Buddha! I am the Perfect One! I have obtained Nirvana!"

A Buddhist understanding of life seems to fit our understanding of religion.

Unitarians have been drawn to this practice for over 150 years. As early as 1844, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody published a translation of a Buddhist Sutra in the *Transcendentalist Journal*, the *Dial*, and the first Buddhist text published in the English language.

Initially, there was great confusion between Buddhists in contrast to Hinduism. The lack of a God in Buddhism was bewildering to people who assumed God must be central to any religion.

As a result, a number of early Unitarians sided with orthodox Christians in seeing Buddhism as a defective faith. They wrongly understood Buddha as a "heavenly spirit and attributed *God*, *soul*, and *creation* as Buddhist concepts" – terms most Buddhists would reject.

Emerson had similar problems, having once described the Hindu classic, the *Bhagavad Gita* as “a Buddhist text.” Of all the Transcendentalists, perhaps Henry David Thoreau was the most Buddhist-like, but he had discovered many of the Buddhist precepts out of his own scholarship.

Buddhism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was continually misunderstood. James Freeman Clarke wrongly found arguments in Buddhism for immortality of the soul and for the existence of God. In spite of such confusion, an increasingly authentic Buddhism became an influential force among Unitarians and Humanists in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Buddhism appeared to be an intriguingly ancient faith that, like Humanism, was not directly concerned with questions of God that many religion theorists declared to be fundamental to any “authentic religion.”

George Marshall, a UU minister said this of the Buddha in 1978, “After tasting the bitterness and futility of life, the Buddha came to discover a religious principle through the anguished mind and social discontent of his sensitive personality. Never again could Gautama return to the conforming society of his royal upbringing. Through meditation, he became the hope for human salvation” – from all suffering connected to attachments and longing.

Marshall led the way for UUs to approach Buddhism with accurate information. For most UUs, Buddhism was mainly an intellectual exercise, but a few, mainly Humanists, began to practice Zen meditation as a spiritual practice.

They learned that many Buddhist teachings and proverbs hold rich meaning for us today. We came to understand that Buddhists believed life’s highest goal was to break the cycle of rebirth, end one’s existence, and enter nirvana, the ultimate stage of enlightenment. All that we are is founded on our own internal thoughts and not on an external God.

Edward Ericson commented on this startling Buddhist proverb, “If you meet the Buddha on the highway, kill him.” This harsh maxim drives home a great truth: No holy prophet, messiah, Christ, avatar, or a God in heaven can substitute for a sacred, personal spiritual practice. “Free yourself. Be a lamp unto your own salvation,” wrote the Buddha.

Buddhism offers more than confirmation of a radical self-reliant, non-theistic or atheistic spiritual perspective. Along with Humanism, they offer a unique approach to the great religious questions of life and death. They share a deeply held belief in the value of the human condition and understanding of

consciousness, which speaks to the possibility of joy and peace innately found within humans.

Through exposure to the process of Karma, UUs have come to know that we are the inheritor of our own actions. We are both free and responsible for all that we do.

For Buddhists, the source of all our feeling of dread and anguish, pain and suffering is attachments. Out of our continued existence, growth, sickness, old age and death causes all lamentations, sorrows, pain, grief, and despair. This understanding, ultimately lead to the enlightenment of the four noble truths:

1. Suffering is universal.
2. The cause of suffering is desire.
3. By ending desire, suffering comes to an end.
4. And finally, to end desire and thus to end suffering, calls one to follow the Eightfold Noble Path.

The noble path, in a much abbreviated form, calls us to a life of patience and humble acceptance as a way to understand existence. Anything that hinders us along the path of enlightenment must be given up. It calls us to forego pure enlightenment, to sacrifice nirvana, until all can pass through its gates. One is enlightened through the practice of "right speech" that links thought to action. This speech must embody wisdom and kindness through moderation and restraint.

This path requires "right behavior" similar to the Golden rule of the Greeks and the Ten Commandments of the Hebrews. It calls us to be sincere in thought, word and deed in order to attain the highest degree of wisdom, peace and enlightenment – the ultimate goal of existence.

We must live with "right effort" – to follow spiritual ideals in the same way our seven principles call us to charity and good will to all as part of the web of existence. The seventh path is "right mindfulness." The goal is to meditate, focus the mind on the connection of the intellectual and intuitive, to find ultimate experiential truth.

Finally, when one does all the above, one reaches the last step of the Eightfold Path. This is the stage of a "Concentration of the Mind" – to enter a state of rapture that is not about stopping the mind or thoughts. It's about allowing thoughts to be present, but not letting them run us. Only then can real truth can be realized.

That truth leads to ultimate detachment. This is the meditative path out of loneliness and a release from suffering that UUs seek, especially when we are dealing with depression, anxiety, and other life negating challenges. In this process, we come to know that "pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional."

Following a Buddhist path does not rid us of pain or death. It serves to alleviate the suffering we experience through practical mysticism embodied in meditation. As UU Rick Heller writes, "Buddhists see suffering as coming from the inner dialogue that runs through our minds and how we deal with it. We ruminate over the past. We live in dread of future developments that may never occur. The only instant we can really affect is the present, and a Buddhist practice focused on helping human beings concentrates on the present."

We Unitarian Universalists have been open to practices and insights from multiple religions and theological perspectives for a long time now. That openness to new revelation has allowed Buddhism to challenge our pre-conceived notions of the world and embodies the potential to reshape Unitarian Universalism for this new century.

It offers both a greater attachment to our inner selves, while an engaged Buddhism with a desire to alleviate suffering in the world at large, edges Buddhists toward traditional UU concern, but with a twist. Sam Truborn put it this way, "If you are finding inner peace, and you want to share that inner peace with others, that's a different approach to social action" – and that is true Unitarian Universalism.

The insights and revelations under the sacred Bodhi tree have blossomed anew in Unitarian Universalism. This flowering has made us a better faith.