

BE LAMPS UNTO YOURSELVES

Today we complete our series on world religions with wisdom from Buddhism, an especially timely theme since contemporary America is fascinated with this ancient faith, what with new movies, celebrity converts, and hundreds of books, including one written by James Ishmael Ford, a Unitarian Universalist minister and serious Buddhist practitioner. Furthermore, there exist growing numbers within our own San Dieguito ranks, who would claim Buddhism as a primary, if not the central shaper, of their Unitarian Universalist identity.

The absence of a supernatural authority figure and the decoupling of the notion of compassion from hell or guilt have proven attractive to countless Westerners. Likewise, Buddhism's idea of universal connectedness rather than individual salvation is appealing. Other converts claim that meditation—paying deep attention to one's immediate breathing as well as life particulars—simply anchors them in the course of daily life.

Yet there remain purists who claim that Euro-American Buddhism doesn't exist nor ever can without vows, celibacy, monks and nuns; while, on the other hand, certain practicing Buddhists, from the outside, are attracted to the strong benefits of our more feminist, anti-racist, gay and lesbian affirming, and child-inclusive religion.

Remember, as Unitarian Universalists, we're never beholden to the pristine version of any faith, be it Taoism or paganism, Judaism or Buddhism, Christianity or Islam. If honorably and reverently done, we can learn from and practice the lessons of any tradition. After all, we're devoted to conversation with, not conversion by, Lao-Tzu or Jesus, Gandhi or Mother Teresa, Moses or Mohammed. They are our teachers, not our

gurus. We would agree with Buddha who said upon his death-bed: “put no head above your own—not even mine!”

What about Buddha? His life-story is known to many of us, so I will share but an abbreviated version today. Gotama was born around 560 B.C. in northern India into a royal family. He left his palatial home to become a monk in a hermit-like order. Realizing the futility of absolute asceticism, Gotama then pursued a combination of rigorous thought and contemplation. After a mystical rapture under the Bodhi tree, that lasted 49 days, enlightenment arrived, and Gotama became the Buddha, the awakened one.

Trekking the dusty paths of India until his hair turned white, Buddha taught kings and warriors, farmers and beggars and criminals, all according to their own special need. He died at the age of 80.

On the one hand, Buddha was a person of deep human sympathy and good will. On the other hand, he was a thinker whose intellect cut through the miseries of life and shaped clear, compelling solutions. As J. B. Pratt put it: “The most striking thing about Gotama was his combination of a cool head and a warm heart, a blend that shielded him from sentimentality on the one hand and indifference on the other.” Buddha always said he was just a human teacher not a savior. By naming no successor save his teachings, Buddha never even set himself up as the head of a religious order.

Nonetheless, a definitive portrait of Buddha is impossible. Part of the problem stems from the fact that like most ancient teachers, Buddha wrote nothing. And there’s a gap of at least a century and a half between his spoken words and the first written records. A second problem arises from the wealth of material in the texts themselves. Unlike Jesus who had three professional years, Buddha taught for 45 years and a

staggering amount of his wisdom has come down to us in one form or another. And then there's a third barrier. By the time the texts began to appear, partisan schools had already arrived, some intent on minimizing Buddha's break with Brahmanic Hinduism, others intent on sharpening it.

What remains clear is that Buddha focused on ethical not ethereal matters. On life problems. Buddha preached a religion devoid of speculation. He wasn't enamored of doctrine but deeds, not discussion but compassion. Questions such as whether life exists after death or not, and whether there is a god or not...simply didn't occupy his soul. Gotama boldly declared that fourteen such questions "tended not to edification". Hence, the Buddha offered no fixed answer to the riddles of creation, deity, or death. Frankly, much of his appeal to millions around the world, for 2500 years, and certainly to practical Unitarian Universalists, has come from his refusal to try to answer unanswerable questions. He simply maintained a noble silence.

Buddha wasn't focused, as so many are today, upon altered states of *consciousness*, but upon altered states of *character*. He considered rituals and theology to be interesting but, ultimately, inconsequential, sideshows. The only thing that really counted was the good life. And what constituted the good life? In his famous first sermon to a few disciples, Buddha taught one thing: suffering and the end of suffering.

Buddha's central message—simply stated yet enduringly profound—consisted of Four Noble Truths:

- (1) Existence is unhappiness. It's our human condition to suffering in one form or another. Anguish, distress, and anxiety are everywhere and inescapable. Yet all suffering isn't depressing, negative or life-denying news. Rather, it's

avoidance of the reality of suffering that's life-denying. What is...is. And what is...includes suffering.

- (2) Our unhappiness is aggravated by selfish desire, the craving, or literally “the unquenchable thirst” of our egos for our own satisfaction at the expense of all other forms of life.
- (3) Release from unhappiness comes through our recognition that as living entities we're all here together for a brief time. Everything, including human beings, is impermanent. Therefore, we must accept reality fully and take care of one another while we can. Everything depends upon everything else—the concept of *interbeing*.
- (4) Such liberation from unhappiness arrives by following the physical, moral, and spiritual training known as the Noble Eightfold path, whose steps are right view, resolve, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration. These are frequently collected together as the three aspects of enlightenment: morality, meditation, and wisdom.

A couple additional notes. First, *right* means staying in alignment with the truth that all existence is *impermanent* and *interdependent*. Second, while Buddha speaks passionately about right understanding and right effort and right action, he never mentions right result. In short, life is finally about our efforts not the results; hence, we must learn to let go of every outcome!

Clearly, Buddha's eightfold path is a course of treatment for our unhappiness. It's not treatment by pills or cult or grace. It's treatment by training, constant attentiveness, and compassionate behavior.

An aside: in Buddhism, as in Unitarian Universalism, no one proselytizes. Buddhism doesn't say you should meditate, or only superior people meditate, or you're going to hell, if you don't meditate. Rather people end up practicing Buddhist disciplines, because they enable us to better face and endure the unhappiness at the core of existence.

Remember, Buddhism isn't a belief system; it's a practice. As with Unitarian Universalism: deeds not creeds. Buddha passed on teachings to be sure, but he always said not to believe them on his say-so. Buddha said to try them out for yourself and see if they prove useful.

Many have called these eight challenges of right relations the Middle Path, because Gotama discovered that extremes bring unhappiness. Over-indulgence has the same effect on a person as has the release of all tension on the strings of a violin. Conversely, extreme self-denial has the effect of tightening the strings on a violin until they're at the breaking point. In neither case is there right attunement. It is this lack of attunement that aggravates our suffering. The Eightfold Path assists us in finding harmony within ourselves and with the universe.

In short, Buddha says that unhappiness or suffering comes from overweening desires and uncontrollable passions. When we're greedy, we come to grief. Therefore, some Westerners have felt that the devoted Buddhist must unequivocally let go of every desire. But that's clearly foolish, because to let go of every desire would be to die, and to die is not to solve the problems of living. That's not what the Buddha meant at all.

There are clearly some desires that he deliberately advocated—for example, the desire for liberation and the desire for the welfare of other beings. His philosophy of the Middle Way simply encourages us to enjoy life and its many pleasures and possibilities,

while not growing overly dependent upon or attached to any of them. When we repeatedly and possessively proclaim: “My house, my job, my religion, my partner, my reputation, my needs, my future...” we get into trouble. Buddha reminds us that most of the suffering we experience in life is the result of our clinging too ferociously to precisely such things, however precious...all of which are transitory and fleeting. Jobs change, children grow up, dear ones die.

Buddha teaches us that possession can become obsession. We yearn for permanence, but we can't get it. Permanence isn't attainable. So, the heart of Buddha's wisdom says: “Desire for what will not be attained ends in frustration, therefore to avoid frustration, avoid desiring what will not be attained.”

You see, life is characterized by constant becoming. Therefore, let things, people, experiences, relationships, life itself...be. Learn the art of both sensitive engagement and healthy detachment. Gentle holding and timely letting go. We're summoned by Buddha to travel through life with a caring yet light touch.

However, it's not so easy, is it; for human desire tends to be insatiable. When we compare human with animal desire, we find an extraordinary difference. Animals tend to eat with their stomach, while we humans eat with our brains. Buddha is promoting moderation, the Middle Path. Keep our passions within reasonable bounds—sensitive to self and respectful of the universe. Passions can quickly become addictions without watchful monitoring. Balance is the key to happy, fulfilled, healthy living.

There's a fundamental paradox here. The less we're attached to life, the more alive we can become. The less we have set preferences and obsessions, the more deeply we can experience the flow of life.

Of all the religions of the world, Buddhism alone makes suffering central and explains the cause of it—neither some supernatural god nor fate nor the devil—but the grasping greed of human beings. Buddhism demands no blind faith from us, pushes no dogmatic creeds, demands no rites or rituals, sacraments, or secrets. The Middle Way remains available and open to every person.

A few words on the development and spread of Buddhism. Just like the message of Jesus got misinterpreted by the early Christian Church, so after Buddha's death, all the paraphernalia of religion that Buddha labored so carefully to exclude came tumbling into his religion with a vengeance—rituals and mysteries galore. As someone plaintively wrote: "The retribution that history seems to visit upon its great figures is to give them followers."

Within 200 years after Buddha's death, historians noted eighteen different varieties of Buddhism. Today there are approximately 200 million practicing Buddhists in the world.

Flourishing abroad, Buddhism languished in its birthplace, as the Indian monks grew rich and corrupt under state patronage. Today, Buddhists constitute less than 1% of the East Indian population, and the faith is kept alive largely by untouchable converts fleeing the caste system. But in Tibet, for example, Buddhism evolved into a theocracy that lasted 400 years until the Chinese drove the current Dalai Lama into exile in 1959.

In a time when the multitudes were passively relying on the Brahmins to tell them what to do, Buddha radically challenged each individual to do his or her own religious seeking. Buddha rejected fatalism and advocated self-reliance. Each person has inherent worth, and needs to be encouraged on a free and responsible search for truth and

meaning. On this score, the kinship between Buddha and Unitarian Universalism is unmistakable.

In his own words: “Do not accept what you hear by report, do not accept tradition, do not accept a statement because it is found in our books, nor because it is the saying of your teacher. Be ye lamps unto yourselves...” No god or goddess could be counted on, not even the Buddha himself. “When I am gone,” he told his followers, “don’t bother to pray to me. For when I am gone, I am gone.”

Related is Buddha’s insistence that wisdom cannot be taught. It’s only arrived at through experience. Never has a religion set out its case with so complete an appeal to individual authority. On every question, direct, personal experience was the final test for truth. A Buddhist disciple must know what’s true and good for him and herself.

In his later years, when India had become electric with his message, people came to Buddha even as they were to come to Jesus asking what he was. When people carried their puzzlement to Buddha, the answer he gave provided a handle for his entire message.

“Are you a god?” they asked. “No.” “An angel?” “No.” “A saint?” “No.” “Then what are you?” Gotama answered. “I am awake.”

That’s what the name Buddha means—an awakened one. So, Buddhism begins with a person who shook off the daze of ordinary convention and status quoism. It tells the story of a person who dared to wake up, then wake others up in return. Indeed, the radical reality is that we can each become buddhas; so the quest is not to become a Buddhist, but a buddha in your own fashion. Wow, that’s some religious invitation.

And folks, that’s the challenge of our Unitarian Universalist faith as well: to be awake, stay awake—awake to sorrow and to joy, awake to new truth and ancient wisdom,

awake to self-fulfillment and universal compassion...simply to be awake, awake, awake
during our entire earthly journey.

Tom Owen-Towle
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