

UU's and Buddhism

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delivered February 20, 2011

The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

What do Americans know about Buddhism? Not much, really. We may have heard snatches of Zen koans, such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” Or we’ve heard jokes, like the one about the Buddhist student who asked a hot dog vendor, “Make me one with everything.” He then gave the vendor a twenty for the hot dog, waited a moment and then asked, “Where’s my change?” To which, the hot dog vendor said, “Change is within.”

Then there’s the reason that Buddhist vacuum cleaners don’t sell well: they have no attachments.

And if we know a little bit it’s usually from book written by well-meaning scholars who have never actually practiced Buddhism. It’s from them that we get ideas like “Life is suffering.” Pretty bleak, but Buddhism seems to advertise the possibility that life doesn’t need to be hard, and that if we only follow the 8-fold path, all suffering will disappear.

And so we get the idea that Buddhism offers us a path to a life without pain or disappointment, where one can transcend all the boundaries of selfhood in a blissful nirvana so complete that your identity fades away like the morning mist on the meadow in the sunshine, slowly vanishing like the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*, with an enigmatic half-smile of Buddha contentment being the last thing to disappear.

Is any of this accurate? Yes and no. Over the course of its history, Buddhism has gone through many historical and cultural transformations on the way to becoming the incredibly diverse tradition it is today. In some ways, almost anything you can say about it is probably true from someone’s point of view.

Buddhism is a broad umbrella term for a wide variety of traditions which trace their origins in one way or another to the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived and taught in India over 2600 years ago. Just as Christianity denotes everything from the Ugandan Roman Catholics to the Quakers to the Mormons and Branch Davidians, so too, Buddhism covers a lot of ground.

There are three main branches on the tree of Buddhism: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.

Theravada, the Way of the Elders, is the oldest and most cohesive of these, consisting of really one unified sect. Theravada employs an essentially medical model, asserting that a) There is a deep spiritual problem in our ordinary way of being; b) This problem has a cure; and c) The cure requires adopting the lifestyle and meditative discipline of a monk. Theravada is predominantly found in southern Asia – Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia.

In the U.S. there is an emerging nonsectarian movement known as Vispassana or “Insight Meditation,” which focuses on the meditations and philosophy of the Theravada tradition, without concern for its organizational structure or rituals or folklore.

By far the largest branch of Buddhism in terms of adherents is the Mahayana, or “Great Vehicle,” so called because it originated in a rejection of the strict monastic emphasis of Theravada and pioneered approaches to Buddhism more geared toward lay persons in the midst of daily life.

Mahayana Buddhism has mutated into a great many varied denominations, ranging from the Pure Land sects, which emphasize chanting to enlist the aid of benevolent deities, to the austere discipline, irreverence, and paradox of the various Zen schools.

Mahayana is predominant in Northern Asia – China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

The third branch of Buddhism is the Vajrayana or “Diamond” Tradition. It emanates from Tibet, and so is popularly known as Tibetan Buddhism. The Dalai Lama is the leading figure of this branch. And since the other branches don’t

place nearly so much emphasis on individual leaders, the Dalai Lama emerges as the leading figure in world Buddhism, a status enhanced by the current Dalai Lama's tremendous personal wisdom and magnetism.

Tibetan Buddhism is distinguished by its use of meditation on elaborate visual patterns and archetypal deity images, as well as employing a deluge of sound to overwhelm the meditator's senses and pave the way for breakthroughs. In the U.S., this branch of Buddhism is popular among people with a psychoanalytic or Jungian bent.

Personally, I've studied the teachings of all three of these schools and found much that was useful in each one. But most of the Buddhist teachers with whom I have studied have been in the Mahayana tradition: from the Chinese, Japanese, or Vietnamese Zen traditions. My teacher for the last twelve years has been the Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh.

One of the most striking similarities between Unitarian Universalism and Buddhism is that they both emerged as individualistic protests against established religious orthodoxies that had grown rigid, harsh, and judgmental.

Unitarian Universalism started as a revolt against the authority of tradition, freeing the individual to evaluate religious ideas for her- or himself. The idea that religion's source was to be found within direct human experience rather than in texts and traditions was a liberating one, an approach that was particularly American, based on principles of freedom and individual conscience. It rejected the idea that Jesus was the unique incarnation of God and respected him, instead, as a great and profound religious teacher.

The American Transcendentalists championed the shift to direct experience of joy and wonder as the basis for religion. They searched for evidence of common religious themes by studying traditions other than Christianity. Buddhism was a particularly exciting discovery. It featured an undeniably real historical figure who left behind teachings that were piercingly clear in their wisdom, and morality, a tradition that assumed both the goodness of human nature and the value of individual judgment.

Elizabeth Peabody, the nineteenth-century Unitarian Transcendentalist who edited *The Dial* magazine, was the first to translate a Buddhist sutra into English. When she published a chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* in her magazine, fellow Transcendentalist and frequent contributor, Henry David Thoreau, praised Buddha as a religious and moral teacher every bit as great as Jesus. Buddha represented a tremendous discovery for the Transcendentalists, because his example helped them to counter claims of Jesus' uniqueness. Finding comparable teachings in a non-Christian religious culture also supported their idea of the universality of religious experience.

And what tradition based on critical thinking could resist a teacher who declared, as the Buddha did, "Do not be satisfied with hearsay or with tradition or with legendary lore or with what has come down in scriptures . . . When you know in yourselves: 'These things are wholesome, . . . and lead to welfare and happiness,' then you should practice and abide in them." And there are also Buddha's last words to his followers as they grieved about losing his wise guidance, that they should "Be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be your own confidence. Hold to the truth within yourselves as to the only lamp."

This empowerment of individual conscience fit like a glove with the ideas that formed Unitarianism. However, the Transcendentalists' embrace of Buddhism was mostly a romantic one, based more on the thrill of discovering an ancient tradition that reinforced their beliefs, rather than any deep understanding of Buddhism itself. They took the parts that fit their assumptions and left out those which were more challenging. They didn't notice that, along with scripture and tradition, Buddha also rejected logical inference and the weighing evidence as sources of authority. Buddhism didn't just grant freedom, it offered a system of wisdom and practice that could lead to deep understanding of the human condition and one's own self.

And it's awfully hard to understand ourselves. The human mind and personality are extremely complex, and our deepest motivations and biases often remain out of our reach. We often don't even know why we do what we do.

I know I don't. A few years ago when I visited Charlottesville, Virginia, something happened that drove this point home for me. Charlottesville has a lovely downtown pedestrian mall a half-dozen blocks long that is lined with boutiques, shops, and restaurants. There were street musicians and outdoor cafes, strolling couples and families enjoying the growing cool of the evening under the shade of leafy tress. I was with my wife, Doris, and we wanted to choose a place to eat, but decided to walk up one side and down the other before we made up our minds. We became one of the tranquil strolling couples, looking this way and that, stopping to read a menu posted in a window, quietly chatting in between.

As we reached the last block, instead of walking all the way to the end, I turned, crossing over and heading down the other side. Since we were holding hands at the time and I didn't let go, my companion came along. She remarked, "Wow, we sure did turn around in a hurry!" I was surprised. I hadn't been aware of anything happening in a hurry, just turning. But she pointed out that we had not gone to the end as we had agreed to, and asked me why not. I couldn't answer her question. In fact, I felt a little annoyed and rather resented that she asked me to account for my actions at all.

I suddenly realized that my behavior had been constrained by influences of which I was entirely unaware. I'd felt a vague sense of anxiety as we approached the final block that went away when I turned around. The anxiety may have been the product of other experiences in my past, but I don't even know which ones they would be. But the result was clear: I was walking down the street and suddenly reversed direction without any clear decision on my part, but with the conviction that I was acting of my own free will.

I realized that this was not really any different from the invisible fencing that restricts many dogs. Is a dog free because the fence that holds it cannot be seen, but only felt? I think not. I wasn't free either. But the amazing thing was that what I felt was not coercion, but volition: I wanted to turn around. Upon

examination, it became obvious that I neither knew why I wanted to turn around nor why I wanted to abandon my original course.

I think this is how many of our beliefs and actions are determined. We have far less control over ourselves than we like to think. I propose a simple test we can try right now: if the thoughts in your mind are your own, you ought to be able to control them. Tell them to stop right now. Let's see what happens. OK, stop thinking: Now! Well? Did they stop?

If we look deeply, these insights are already present in Unitarian Universalism in its seventh principle: the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. Buddhism extends this understanding by pointing out that we don't have a decision-making self that is separate from the web of relationships of which we are a part. All people, all creatures and plants, all of the earth and its history. Our being is made up of the interaction of an infinite number of influences, only some of which are we aware.

This points toward our need for what Buddhists call the Dharma, or wisdom. The Unitarian revolution was rooted in individual freedom, and we agree that freedom is a good thing. But you don't have to look very far to see that freedom without wisdom can be a license for unconstrained foolishness.

Part of the wisdom that Buddhism offers us is an analysis of the human condition. I referred to a version of it when I described the Theravada tradition. Basically, it states that people suffer because they don't understand themselves. And that it's possible to overcome their suffering by following a path of morality, wisdom, and practice.

The most important first step toward this is the belief that things could be different. Many Unitarian Universalists take their stand firmly in the post-modern position that one's thoughts are the only reality that can be known and that they need to accept that limitation. Buddhism would agree that we need to accept the limited nature of human thought. But they would tell us that the good news is that there ways of understanding ourselves that are more reliable than

our thinking. I think this wisdom underlies a bumper sticker I saw recently that said: “Don’t believe everything you think!”

Buddhism would say that the Unitarian Universalist critical examination of our traditions is absolutely the right thing to do, but that the project just doesn’t go far enough. We need to turn our critical eye on our own thoughts, assumptions and biases as well. And this is where the practice of meditation comes in. In meditation, we learn to gently move center of awareness out of our stream of thought. We find a place where we can sit on the banks of impartiality and observe the river of our sensations, feelings, thoughts and beliefs with the eyes of acceptance and compassion. We can come to understand how they arise and how they influence us. Meditation is the laboratory where the path leading toward radical freedom can be discovered. We can be free from the tyranny of our compulsions, anxieties, needs and fears. We don’t have to overthrow them; we just discover that we don’t have to give them authority over us.

When we learn to see through ourselves, to see the sources and compulsiveness of our inner monologue, we can break free from that compulsion. Have you ever been watching a movie or TV program that filled your whole mind with its story and when it ended you suddenly came back to yourself and realized that, a moment ago, you didn’t have the self-awareness you do now? It’s like waking up from a dream, isn’t it? Well, the workings of our own minds can be like that movie, like a dream from which we can awaken. When Siddhartha Gautama had first attained this clarity, this full awareness of a reality apart from his thoughts, he met someone on the road who asked him who he was. He answered, “I am awake.” The word he used for “awake” was “buddha.” Buddha means, simply, “one who is awake.”

And this is what Buddha offers us: he said that waking up was possible for any person who wanted to do it. And this is what the example of the Buddha does for us: He’s proof that it can be done. We know that it’s possible to live with clarity, wisdom, and compassion because he did it, and he said we can, too.

Earlier, I pointed out that freedom without wisdom can be a license for foolishness. Well, freedom without a goal can be a license for aimlessness. Unitarian Universalists sometimes find themselves at a loss for a clear goal. Our diversity of belief can make it hard to agree on where we're going.

Well, Buddhism can help us with our goals, too. The Buddha said that we can't know whether there is a God or not; we can't know whether or not there is life after death. He said that all that we can know is what is before us here and now. We can seek to awaken to clear perception. We can seek wisdom. And the most important thing we can do with that wisdom is create a community of justice and compassion. And community is a goal Unitarian Universalists can agree on. But how do we get there? How can we get along with each other?

The Buddha's solution was a program of kindness and compassion. He said, "In this world, hate never dispelled hate. Only love dispels hate."

How do we build a community of justice and compassion? By committing ourselves to being understanding and loving. Of all the world's religious traditions, Buddhism's goals are perhaps the most like our own. Buddhism offers us its three refuges: The Buddha, the one who shows that a life of clarity and compassion is possible; the Dharma, the way to achieve that goal; and the Sangha, the community that lives in harmony and awareness. These are things Unitarian Universalists need. Let's accept the offer to be a community that lives in harmony and awareness.

May it be so.