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Awakening the Heart: Buddhism And Unitarian Universalism

In his later years, when Northern India was afire with his message, people would come from all over to hear the man who had come to be known as the Buddha. And they would ask him – not “who are you?” but “what are you? “Are you a God?” and the Buddha would answer “No!” A messenger from God?” No! “A Saint?” No! “Then what are you?” And the Buddha would answer, “I am awake!” The Sanskrit word “budh” means to wake up, or to know. Buddha, then, means “the enlightened one,” or “the awakened one.” And so he would be known through the centuries.

What we know today as Buddhism began with a human being. Much of his story consists of legends, and we really don't know what is fact and what is “myth.” But, just as with early Jewish and Christian myths and legends, the distinction isn't terribly important. The Buddha's story has become the foundation of a truly world-wide religion. The Buddha was born some time in the 6th Century B.C.E., in what is now Nepal, near the Indian border. His name was Siddhartha Gautama, and his father was a king. Of course, there were many small kingdoms in India, and his father was probably more like a feudal lord. So young Siddhartha grew up in privilege and luxury. His family was wealthy and powerful; he was handsome and well-favored in every way; he was married to a beautiful princess from a neighboring kingdom, and they had a lively young son.

Despite all that, during his twenties, Siddhartha experienced a deep sense of discontent. His father hoped that Siddhartha would become a great king. He gave the young prince everything he could possibly want. And to protect him, he gave orders that Siddhartha should never encounter ugliness or suffering. Specifically, he was to be shielded from disease, decrepitude, and death. When Siddhartha would go out riding in the countryside, runners would go ahead of him to clear the roadways of such sights. One day, however, an elderly man was overlooked, and Siddhartha saw him: broken-toothed, gray-haired, bent over, leaning on his staff and trembling. Siddhartha learned the fact of old age. On another day, Siddhartha saw a person racked with disease lying by the side of the road. And on yet another ride, he saw a corpse.

His encounters with sickness, old age, and death, and his realization that they are inescapable, led Siddhartha to despair of ever finding fulfillment on the physical plane of existence. On another of his rides, he saw a mendicant monk, with shaved head and begging bowl, and he learned of the possibility of withdrawal from the world. He decided to quit the snare of distractions that life in the palace had become, and to escape into the forest to seek the truth as an ascetic. He said a silent goodbye to his sleeping wife and son, and he snuck out of the palace. He shaved his head, clad himself in rags, and he plunged into the forest to seek enlightenment. From other monks, he learned much of yogic teachings; from Hindu masters, he learned of that tradition. He joined a band of ascetics, hoping to overcome the limitations of his body. He outdid the ascetics in their austerities – at one point he subsisted on six grains of rice a day. He learned to hold his breath for inhumanly long periods. After six years of

this, however, he realized the futility of asceticism. He had done everything he could, and yet he had not attained enlightenment!

He had lived a life of indulgence and pleasure, and that hadn't brought him wisdom, and he tried extreme asceticism, and that hadn't worked. So Siddhartha concluded that enlightenment must be found through a "Middle way" between these two extremes. In the town of Gaya, in Northern India, he sat down under a tree and he vowed not to rise until he had become enlightened. That type of tree came to be known as the "bodhi" tree (Bodhi means enlightenment), and the town came to be known as Bodhi Gaya, the place where the Buddha became enlightened.

There followed almost 50 years of a wandering ministry throughout India, and Siddhartha Guatama came to be known as the Buddha. He traveled the dusty roadways tirelessly, teaching everywhere he went, and he formed bands of monks and nuns who tried to follow his teachings. He was known as someone with the rare combination of a cool head and a warm heart. He was one of the great rationalists of all time – he would dissect any problem that came to him with a cool, dispassionate analysis. And soon scribes began to write down his teachings into what would become many volumes. But his rationality was combined with a tenderness and compassion that reminds one of St. Francis. And his infinite sense of compassion extended not just to humans but to all living things. Although kings came to bow before him, he remained a simple monk throughout his life, walking the roads with his begging bowl and an air of incredible patience and simplicity.

The monks who first gathered around the Buddha were known as "arhats, or "worthy ones," who sought to attain wisdom and enlightenment. Out of these arhats would come the first, and purest, school of Buddhism, what we know now as Theravada Buddhism. The key virtue for the Theravada school is wisdom, and its human ideal is the arhat, who seeks to attain emancipation from the cycle of birth and re-birth through constant striving and effort. Theravada Buddhism is practiced today in Southern Asia, in places such as Thailand, Burma, Laos, and Sri Lanka.

Later, a second school of Buddhism would develop. It came to be known as Mahayana Buddhism. (*Maha* means "great", and *yana* is a vehicle or path), so Mahayana literally means the "greater vehicle," or "greater way." The key virtue of the Mahayana school is compassion, and the ideal is the *bodhisattva*. Rather than seeking to attain enlightenment in this life, the *bodhisattva* commits himself or herself to work for the enlightenment of all beings, even though this will take many lifetimes. Mahayana Buddhism exists today as Zen in Japan, and in the teachings of the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, among others. Mahayana Buddhists sometimes refer to the Theravada school of the arhats as "Hinayana Buddhism." Because "Hinayana" means "lesser vehicle," however, Theravadans do not refer to themselves that way.

There is another school of Buddhism, practiced mostly in Tibet, known as "Vajrayana," which means "the diamond way." Most of my experience of Buddhism is with this school. I studied with a Tibetan teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche for many years. Vajrayana Buddhism includes the teachings of the other two traditions, and as with them, its foundational core is the practice of sitting meditation. However, Vajrayana teachings go beyond the other two. It is a *tantric* tradition, which means that it seeks to use *all* human energies, including the energy of the body, as part of the spiritual quest. The spiritual goal is a state of ecstatic, egoless bliss, as the practitioner comes to a

realization of transcendent identity, a sense of melded oneness with the Cosmos. As you might expect, this tradition holds many dangers for the unwary practitioner, especially in the West. The genius of the founders of this tradition was their ability to bring *upaya*, or “skillful means” from channeling physical energies into currents that can enhance one’s spiritual experience, rather than derailing it.

So – what are the basic Buddhist teachings, and how do they apply to us as 21st Century Unitarian Universalists? One problem at the outset is the vastness and often contradictory nature of these teachings. For this morning, we’ll have to content ourselves with a few essentials. After he had sat under the Bodhi tree and arisen enlightened, the Buddha’s first sermon was given at the Deer Park at Sarnath, near Benares, in Northern India. In it, preaching to a small group of followers, he introduced his core teaching about the Four Noble Truths. Remember young Siddhartha’s discontent when he first discovered sickness, old age, and death. He wanted to find a way to escape the inevitability of these and other forms of suffering. What he realized sitting under the Bodhi tree is that there is no escape. Thus, the first noble truth is the universality of *dukkha*, which is usually translated as “suffering.” A better translation might be “discontent.” This was not a pessimistic philosophy, as it is sometimes characterized in the west, but rather a realistic, and ultimately optimistic, one. The Buddha’s point was that human life is typically unfulfilling and filled with insecurity. On one level, we know that we, and everything and everyone around us, are impermanent. But we constantly try to make things solid and permanent. Rather than facing the reality of a life filled with impermanence, we create stories to shield ourselves and our fragile egos from our discontent.

The second truth tells us the source of our suffering. The Sanskrit word is *Tanha*, which is sometimes translated as “desire,” but which might better be called “craving.” *Tanha* is our sense of “attachment” to other people, to material things, to anything that we think will help us to overcome the reality of impermanence. It consists of all those inclinations that tend to continue or increase our separateness; to convince us of the separate existence of whatever we want to hold onto.

The third Noble Truth follows from the second: if the cause of life’s dislocation is selfish craving, the cure lies in overcoming our craving. We could lose our sense of discontent if we could be released from the narrow limits of our self-interest into the vast expanse of the universe. And the fourth noble truth is that the way to escape our craving is through the eight-fold path. (Obviously, Buddhists love to make lists. It can get a little mind-numbing at times for the student and practitioner).

The eight-fold path, in turn, prescribes the steps that humans can take to transform our lives and to begin to lessen our sense of attachment: Right views, right intent, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Underlying these is the notion that we work at becoming mindful in everything we do. This is one way of looking at the Buddha’s statement that he was “awake.” We try to awake from our habitual fog, and to begin to be aware that life consists only of the present moment. Everything that is past is indeed past, although we try to hold onto it. And everything in the future – even one nanosecond into the future -- is nothing but a dream at this point.

And the key to doing this lies in the last three steps of the eight-fold path, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. They refer to the techniques that the

Buddha learned and then honed, and they all come back to the practice of sitting meditation. Whichever school of Buddhism you approach, you will soon see how central meditation is to following that particular path. This morning, with the children, we had a brief introduction to meditation practice. Remember how, as we began to run through our stories, we simply labeled them “thinking” and went back to our breath. Buddhists believe that effort, mindfulness, and concentration must be applied in our meditation practice, if are to have even brief glimpses of what it might be like to cease our sense of craving, of attachment. And this window of insight is called *Sunyata*, or “emptiness.” The Buddhist notion of emptiness is often misconstrued, so let me try to explain it.

This podium is real, as real as anything in the world – Buddhists would not deny that. But, in our perception of it, we immediately begin to apply stories about it that we carry in our minds – I know that’s a podium because I have seen other ones; this podium was donated to the Fellowship by Rev. Greene; it is heavy when we try to put it away, and so forth. That’s with a simple piece of furniture. Imagine how quickly this all gets complicated when we turn our thoughts to other people, our homes, objects we treasure, and so on. We are filled with stories about all those objects of our craving, or of our revulsion, and our perceptions are colored by those stories. When Buddhists talk of emptiness, they mean a momentary state in which we are able to be mindful of this process in our minds. We are able for an instant to see our lives free of all the stories, to exist purely in the moment, to see things free of our preconceptions. These moments of insight are fleeting. In fact, to hold on to them would be to fall into the very trap we are trying to avoid – it would be to try to make those insights solid and permanent.

And, Buddhists would say, once we have experienced this sense of emptiness, we can open our hearts in true compassion. Compassion without a need for ego-gratification; compassion without all the stories we attach to our lives. This sense of compassion out of emptiness is called *bodhicitta*, which means “awakened heart.”

One feature of Buddhism that sets it apart from other religions, I believe, is that you can study like mad and be very knowledgeable about it and yet not really “get” Buddhism at all. In order to understand what the Buddha experienced and then taught, there is really no other way to do it than to undertake the practice of sitting meditation. In this respect, UUs could learn a lot from the Buddhists. We simply have no practice or discipline that is equivalent to meditation. As a community, we don’t tend to pray or to engage in any other sort of religious practice. Would we benefit from developing some form of community practice? I believe that we would.,

On the other hand, many UUs are attracted to Buddhism, and for good reason. We have many points of commonality. Buddhists believe in striving for enlightenment in this lifetime, and in living in the present rather than the past or future. So do UUs. Buddhism is in many ways more a school of psychology or a philosophy than it is a religion. Unitarian Universalists similarly tend to focus on how to live an ethical, fulfilled life, rather than on either the promise of a hereafter or on religious doctrine. Buddhists view themselves as non-theistic; the concept of a deity is simply not very important in Buddhism. Similarly, the concept of divinity is not central to Unitarian Universalism either. And nothing in Unitarian Universalism would interfere with our having a spiritual practice, such as meditation.

Of all the various religions, it seems to me that Buddhism comes closest to Unitarian Universalism. The image of the full moon is often used to characterize

Buddhism. But, it is said, the Buddha's life and teachings are not the moon itself; they are a signpost pointing the way to the moon. As our 19th Century ancestors, the Transcendentalists discovered, there is much that we can learn from Eastern traditions, including Buddhism. And in many respects, Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha, was a religious giant to rank with Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, as prophets whose lives and teachings would transform the world.

As we strive to learn what is important from all the world's religious traditions, may we learn from those Buddhist prophets and teachers who have gone before us!

Following the example of the Buddha, may we learn to awaken our minds and our hearts!