

Our UU Tapestry of Faith: The Middle Path of Buddhism

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4/15/18

My first introduction to Buddhism came when I was a Junior in college. I asked one of my Jesuit theology professors if he could tell me something about it. He told me that the Buddha had grown up as a prince called Siddhartha. When he came of age, Siddhartha began to realize that wealth and power did not stop someone from suffering, and so abandoning the comforts and privileges of his youth, he went on a spiritual journey in search of happiness. Eventually he became an enlightened being (or a Buddha) after meditating under a Bodhi tree.

But what do Buddhists believe? I asked.

Well, said my professor, I can tell you Buddhism's philosophy in three simple sentences. Number one: Life is suffering. Number two: You meditate to forget that life is suffering. Number three: Then you die.

For some reason I did not find those three major tenets of the Buddhist faith system to be inspiring enough to make me want to know more, and I'd have to wait fifteen years before I would dip my toe into any further inquiry.

Fast forward to when I was a ministerial student intern at First Parish in Framingham. The Adult Religious Education Coordinator organized a day-long retreat with a monk from Thich Nhat Hahn's monastery in upstate New York. About thirty people had signed-up for it, so I thought it was time for me to set aside my original biases against Buddhism and check-it-out more thoroughly. The monk had requested that we supply a strawberry for each person. It seemed like an odd request, but when the RE Coordinator asked me to pick some up at the grocery store, I dutifully obliged and even bought a few extra.

The morning of the workshop, we unexpectedly had more walk-ins and the room was packed. The monk spoke for about an hour about

Buddhism and the practice of mindfulness and then he asked me to pass out one strawberry to each person. Because of the additional walk-ins, I was one strawberry short...for me. I rifled through my desk and found a small box of raisins. Since I hadn't had time for breakfast beforehand, I figured if I squished a bunch of them together, they would equal the size of one decent strawberry. The monk saw what I was doing and came over to me shaking his head. He plucked one raisin out of the bunch, dropped it into my empty hand and held the box open for me to pour the others back into it. At that moment I decided Buddhism might not be the right path for me, after all.

The monk then proceeded to have the class breathe in the aroma of their strawberries and thoughtfully nibble them very, very slowly over the course of the next hour...savoring every morsel, honoring the nourishment they offered in each tiny bite, thanking the strawberry for sacrificing itself for the betterment and enjoyment of the receiver. *I, of course, was told to do the same thing with my raisin.* During that agonizing hour, smelling the aroma of everyone else's strawberries, all I could think about was the small box of raisins sitting next to the silent monk who was perched on a desk meditating. I thought of all possible ways that I might be able to steal them back and slip out of the room, but alas I was in the middle with no way out. I'm sure there was a Buddhist lesson being offered to me in that moment, but my growling tummy would have nothing of it.

Eventually he called us out of our focussed meditation and people began to talk about their amazing experience savoring their strawberry. I momentarily hated them all. Then, we were asked to form a circle around the room with our chairs facing the wall. It was a very tight circle and I was excited to see that I would be facing the window, only the angle of the sun was such that it blinded me. Nonetheless, it was my mental escape into the world, or so I thought.

The monk told us to close our eyes with just a sliver of sight left. Then he instructed us to focus on our breath. If any thought came into our mind, we were to return our focus to our breath. Again, we were going to sit **for another hour**. I'm not certain of this fact, but I thought

the whole room could hear my interior scream of agony. I figured if I fell asleep no one could see me. As long as I didn't fall over, I would be safe from embarrassment.

I tried to settle-in. Honestly, I did try. But then, as if to punish me for all my evil thoughts, a fly started buzzing around my head. Then, it started bouncing off of the window with that incredibly annoying sound that they make when they buzz against glass. Then, it would fly into my ear and even got stuck in my hair at one point. Now, I hated the fly. I hated the monk. I hated the happy meditators. And I really hated the Buddha. *If we have to suffer anyway, I thought, wouldn't it be better to do it in a nice house, in a comfortable chair, with a fly swatter, and eating an entire bowl of strawberries all by yourself?*

When the hour was up, the monk sent us off on a slow walking meditation toward the Social Hall for a silent lunch of rice and vegetable broth. As the single file line went left into the hall, I slowly walked to the right...right out the door, into my car, and off to the nearest McDonalds. Buddhism was losing me, big time.

Well, a few years passed, and I found myself in rehab following the steeple accident that left me with a traumatic brain injury. One of the fourteen therapists who worked on my body, mind and spirit over the course of the next two-and-half years was asked to create a meditation course of treatment for me. My injuries had thrust me into a crisis of faith and purpose that had stripped me of all my self-identity. My mind was racing non-stop, and I needed help in slowing it down. I was wallowing in my suffering and I was desperate to rediscover who I was without all my titles and accomplishments. Who was I in this broken body, and what was the meaning and purpose of my life now?

The team at New England Rehabilitation Hospital were desperate to get this minister put back together. So, this amazing therapist introduced me to a little book by Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hahn, called *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*.

At the time I could not comprehend anything that I read, so she carefully guided me through some of its practices. She taught me to meditate for ten seconds. Then fifteen. Then twenty...until after three months I could meditate for one full minute.

I learned to breathe in peace and exhale stress. I learned to quiet down the cacophony that was wreaking havoc in my head. I learned to observe and honor my suffering but not become my suffering...two distinctions that took me a long time to comprehend and put into practice. Meditation helped me to find moments of peace in my broken body, and in turn helped to lighten the load that I carried on my road toward recovery. Then, my therapist would offer me brief snippets of Buddhist thoughts about mindfulness and **being present to your life**. Soon the guys in my Brain Injury Survivors' Group wanted to know more of what I was doing, and we created our own little Sanga, or Buddhist community and started each morning practicing letting go and just being present to our breath. Some days were more successful than others, but overall I can say that this aspect of Buddhism helped to save my life.

Buddhism had finally caught my attention and held it, and eventually I wanted to learn more about it. More years passed and I would go on to study with Thich Nhat Hanh (By the way, MLK, Jr. nominated Thich Nhat Hahn for a Nobel Peace Prize.) I also had the privilege of attending a day-long teaching with the Dalai Lama.

So we begin with Siddhartha and what he learned. Although born a prince, he realized that conditioned experiences could not provide lasting happiness or protection from suffering. After a long spiritual search he went into deep meditation, where he realized the nature of the mind. He was able to achieve the state of unconditional and lasting happiness: the state of enlightenment, of buddhahood. This state of mind is free from disturbing emotions and expresses itself through fearlessness, joy and active compassion. For the rest of his life, the Buddha taught anyone who asked how they could reach the same state.

Like all of the world's religions (and some people would argue that Buddhism isn't a religion at all, but rather a way of life), Buddhism has many different expressions. There are Zen Buddhists and Tibetan Buddhists, and Tantric Buddhists, to name just a few of its branches. Some Buddhists believe in a Divinity while many others don't. Some believe in reincarnation, while others don't. Some live an ascetic lifestyle, while others do not.

Yet, the basic tenets from which all Buddhists draw from are the sutras or teachings of the Buddha himself: to walk consciously and humbly upon the earth, to live between the extremes (unattached yet present to all aspects of living) to liberate all sentient beings from suffering, and to find happiness from within in any given moment. Buddhists have a deep reverence for all life and are motivated by love and compassion, a profound groundedness and wisdom, and practice non-self and work for the benefit of others.

To live thoughtfully and intentionally with compassion is the heart of Unitarian Universalism. In so many ways the principles of both Buddhism and UUism are interconnected. While its teachings, *which can be quite complex and somewhat varied from our own*, are not extensively explored by most UUs, the practice of meditation and living intentionally speaks to us all. You could say that Buddhism takes mindfulness to a whole different level.

To live with fearlessness, joy and active compassion is something to which we can all choose to attain. It is therefore not hard to understand why many of our UU congregations have established Sangas for communal meditation and learning. Community for Buddhists is the sacred ground where we meet. It recognizes the essence of each individual and the shared human path upon which we walk.

In so many ways Buddhism reflects what is best in all the world's religions, and it teaches us to awaken to the miraculous that is within us and around us at any given moment. From personal experience I can truly say that it can be lifesaving. So...strawberry season is almost

around the corner, and I wonder if you will ever look at a strawberry in quite the same way again?

Amen and Blessed Be