

Adventures of a UU Buddhist

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Before beginning my Buddhist journey – or before I understood what Buddhism was about – I know there were elements in my life that were already steering me along my Buddhist path. Over the course of my life, I recall my happiest moments weren't associated with a material event or attainment - such as buying my first car. It wasn't long before it was just a car, requiring a lot of maintenance and money, oftentimes unreliable – oh, and the cost of insurance and gas. I soon realized my happiest moments were experiential – like my Oakcrest highschool's Spanish club's trip to Spain where for the first time I experienced the beauty of an alien culture, speaking Spanish to real Spanish people, lapping up café au laits, falling in love about 6 times, exchanging ideas with students from France and Germany, the trepidation at my first encounter with the Spanish Civil Police (at this time Franco was still in power) and gaining a small understanding of what it was like to live under a fascist regime. On a somewhat smaller scale, I realized I was happiest when I felt like a child – or could re-experience child-like wonder. Climbing trees, exploring that new path in the woods, finding and being careful not to disturb that beautiful blue robin's egg in the nest; the excitement at the appearance of the first snow flakes on a cold, cloudy day. These experiences were accompanied by a sense of wonder and awe – and of mystery, adventure and discovery. Beyond pure physical experience, this sense of awe was also recreated for me in the arts, such as poetry, literature, painting, music, and cinema. On first hearing the Mary Oliver poem Richard read to you, I too wanted to be a bride married to Amazement – and a bridegroom taking the world into my arms. What I

now realize spoke to me in these genres, was the elicitation of emotion that effected me within a moment in time – a chord I found that resonates in Buddhist teachings.

In my more recent past, when I was formally introduced to Buddhism in readings and lectures – but to the greatest extent under the tutelage of Alan Oliver, I really began making the connections, and as my husband Richard can tell you, the “Oh my – that’s so Buddhist” exclamations began pouring out – to include our own 7 UU Principles.

So what is it in Buddhism that connects these feelings and opened my eyes to the here and now? To explain this, I’d like to go over some fundamental Buddhist principles, beginning with the Buddha’s own journey. His story begins around 540 BC. Sidhartha Gautama, as we was known name before his great enlightenment, was a pampered Indian prince whose father shielded him from the harsh realities of life. He was rarely allowed to venture away from his protected environs, and when he did, his father was careful to ensure Sidhartha would never be aggrieved by anything he saw by removing any objectionable views from his son. However, the father was not omnipotent, and from time to time, Sidartha would catch a glimpse of old age, disease and suffering. The shock and reality of these experiences drove him to reexamine his life – which he’d already begun to evince as empty shallowness, despite the beauty and ease of his sheltered existence. He decides to leave his home, his family, his beautiful wife and infant son, to venture forth and discover the causes of suffering and the way to end or alleviate them. His path leads him to many disciplines – including ascetisim, wherein he nearly starves himself almost to death – living on one grain of rice a day. Still, even this

austere way of life did not bring him the knowledge he desired. Only after meditating for weeks under a Bodhi tree (aside: which is a very old and large fig tree), did Siddhartha (aka Buddha) have an epiphany. He attained enlightenment. What is meant by enlightenment? Buddhists believe that He attained a state of being that goes beyond anything else in the world. If normal experience is based on conditions - upbringing, psychology, opinions, perceptions, and so on - Enlightenment is Unconditioned. It was a state in which the Buddha gained insight into the deepest workings of life and therefore, into the cause of human suffering, the problem that had set Him on His spiritual quest in the first place.

If you recall Mike Cluff's talk on atheism a few months ago, he mentioned the Buddhist term Dukkha, which means suffering and its roots in attachment. Attachment can take many forms. Not only is it attachment to physical possessions, such as your house or cool car or new wi-fi phone app, but also those great intangibles that our egos crave and are conditioned to want, such as success, attaining the highest grades, making a lot of money, soliciting admiration, or simply being liked. The ego is a stern task master – it carefully defines who we are, what we're about, how everything "should be" and will not tolerate anything outside of its own illusory persona. Yes, we need an ego – it is after all a survival mechanism, gets us through the day, navigating ourselves through the intricacies of life. But in order for the ego to maintain this persona, it must attach itself to what it believes. Suffering caused by ego attachment comes in many forms. As a very simplistic example (as I do a lot of report writing for my job).....let's say a report I wrote for work was negatively critiqued by my non-gender co-worker - J. Whether or not the criticism was well meant or deserved isn't my first reaction. The attachment I had to the idea of me as an exceptional report writer is shattered. I

am full of self doubt. Or maybe it's J – trying to be malicious and upset me. Or maybe J doesn't like me? Wait until J asks me a favor!..... Etc., ad nauseum. All that anger, fear, self-doubt, resentment, and vindictiveness was expended over something as minor as a negative critique – which my ego interpreted as an onslaught on my good character and abilities. Was it worth it? I'm sure J has long forgotten it. The incident is already in the past. Yet I had become so engrossed in my self-righteous reverie that I drove home and didn't know how I got there – I was on automatic pilot - not noticing the beautiful afterglow of the sunset, how the sunlight reflected off the golden late, autumn leaves, or that J was smiling and waving good-bye to me on the other side of the parking lot before I got into my car. My reaction was based on my conditioning, and had little to do with the actual situation. I was anywhere but in the moment, living and reliving a past “offense” that was certainly unwarranted.

How would my reaction differ today? In applying Buddhist teachings, I would begin by understanding my initial negative reaction is simply my ego's response to a perceived attack, realizing my negative emotions are based on my conditioning. What happened is already in the past – there's nothing I can do to alter it. I dispassionately observe my negative feelings and accept them (It doesn't mean they're not there or I'm not experiencing them), understanding that this was my ego's conditioned response to what transpired. In observing and accepting these unwanted feelings, I have diffused them. I then try to make myself aware – what is going on at this moment – listening to my breathing or the sound of my footsteps – getting on with my life, unfettering myself from a lot of unwanted emotional baggage.

To help me effect this de-conditioning, I've found and embraced another very useful Buddhist principle: the acceptance of impermanence. The cycle of birth, life, and death is endless and irrefutable. It is dynamic and ever changing. Every day we die a little bit – in the cellular or biological realm our bodies are decaying, and we will all eventually die. Living through the ego, whether it's in the past or whatever you think the future has in store, distracts us from the very essence of life as it is now in this moment in time. This is where I live – this is what I inhabit – and this is what I really think. In accepting change as inevitable, I find it is easier to let go of certain expectations and deal with loss. Nothing lasts forever.

This leads to another aspect of Buddhism which speaks very profoundly to me – the concept of finding one's own truth. Basic Buddhism does not ascribe to a dogmatic or deistic ideal. The Buddha himself thwarted any idea or belief that he was a god and did not speak about faith or belief. He explained his ideas logically and asked people not to blindly follow the words of any teacher, including himself, but to look at their own experience and consider which ideas helped them cultivate compassion and avoid delusions.

The silent meditation hymn we just sang “Be Ye Lamps Unto Yourself” is taken from the Buddha's dying words to his young disciple Ananda. I'd mentioned earlier the inspiration I derived from the arts and their relationship to my Buddhist journey. To illustrate this, I take you to a scene in the movie “The Dead Poet's Society”. To briefly summarize, the movie takes place at a boy's prep school in New England in the 1950's. The protagonist of the movie, an English teacher named John Keating, extolls his students to be extraordinary and think for themselves – beginning with the medium of exploring poetry (which I find to be a

very “in the moment” genre) of the dead poets such as Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. Keating quotes a poignant stanza from Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken”...

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Keating imparted this gift of beauty and meaning in words – to include the fleeting nature of life. In one scene he gathers his class around an old team picture of former students, long departed (or as Keating said, ‘fertilizing daisys’), looking as alive, youthful and energetic as the boys he has gathered around him. He tells them: “They're not that different from you, are they? But if you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. carpe diem, seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary.” For Keating, the definition of “extraordinary” was not getting the best grades, making the most touchdowns, or becoming the highest paid professional. Rather, extraordinary meant questioning the status quo, challenging yourself to think, and taking the road less traveled. Here I believe the Buddhist themes of being in the moment, impermanence, and seeking your own truth are beautifully intertwined.

The Buddhist concept of awareness, or being in the moment, also comes alive for me in the play “Our Town”, by Thornton Wilder. The play is about so-called

ordinary people, living in a small, Americana town called Grovers Corners, giving voice to their every day lives through the medium of a narrator/interviewer, known simply as “the Stage Manager”. We see Emily, one of the main characters, growing up, falling in love, marrying George, the boy next door, having a baby, and then tragically dying from childbirth. The scene I refer to is one near the end of the play where the mourners have left Emily’s graveside. She is given the gift of returning unseen to the living for one day - any day in her life. Although her graveside co-habitants caution her not to return, Emily decides to revisit on the day of her 12th birthday – she is in the kitchen where her mother is preparing breakfast. I would like to reenact this scene with Debra reading the part of Emily, and me playing the Stage Manager.

Emily: Oh, Mama, look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, fourteen years have gone by. I'm dead. You're a grandmother, Mama! Wally's dead, too. His appendix burst on a camping trip to North Conway. We felt just terrible about it - don't you remember? But, just for a moment now we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. Let's really look at one another!...I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back -- up the hill -- to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. Good-bye , Good-bye world. Good-bye, Grover's Corners....Mama and Papa. Good-bye to clocks ticking....and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new ironed dresses and hot baths....and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you are too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it-- every, every minute?

Stage Manager: No. (pause) The saints and poets, maybe they do some.

Emily: I'm ready to go back.

To reiterate Emily's lament, do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?

Being in the moment not only brings us awareness of our surroundings, the here and now, but the awareness of all living things – the life we are an inexorable part of. When we truly feel a part of all life, we can then truly feel “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part”, our 7th UU principle. From this awareness springs wisdom and compassion, 2 dynamically interchangeable Buddhist constructs – where one relies on the presence of the other. This is aptly described by the Dalai Lama in *The Essence of the Heart Sutra*.

Quote "According to Buddhism, compassion is an aspiration, a state of mind, wanting others to be free from suffering. It's not passive -- it's not empathy alone -- but rather an empathetic altruism that actively strives to free others from suffering. Genuine compassion must have both wisdom and lovingkindness. That is to say, one must understand the nature of the suffering from which we wish to free others (this is wisdom), and one must experience deep intimacy and empathy with other sentient beings (this is lovingkindness)." (end of quote)

I believe many of you feel good, as I do, when I know I've helped some person or living thing who is suffering, needs help, or simply in need of a compassionate ear. In these true compassionate moments, there is no need for thanks or public acknowledgement. Simply knowing that life was made a little easier for a fellow being is reward enough. I am reminded of this in a scene from a story written by a famous Unitarian author, Charles Dickens, entitled “A Christmas Carol”. While

the main character, Ebenezer Scrooge undergoes his visitations by the Christmas spirits, he is forced to confront the cruel realities of life, and his part in perpetuating them. The poverty of the Cratchetts and the slave wages he provides his chief clerk Bob, Tiny Tim's illness and the reality of his very short life span without additional monetary support; the resentment he harbors toward his nephew, whose birth resulted in Scrooge's sister's death; his insensitivity to his partner's death; and his soulless love of money. He is also reminded of love – love of his dear sister, his sweetheart, and the friends he made working at Fezziwigs as a young clerk – and the loss of it. His sharp rebuke to the charity-worker who entreats him to donate to the poor so they may avoid the horrors of the Victorian work house, haunt him “wouldn't they be better off dead and reduce the surplus population?”. Scrooge's journey with the spirits effects an epiphany within him, a new awakening, not unlike Sidhartha's experience when confronted with death and suffering, or the enlightenment he received beneath the Bodhi tree. Scrooge's epiphany manifested itself in his renewed compassion and love of life. In the outcome of the story, Scrooge anonymously helps his clerk and his poor family; reconciles relations with his nephew, turning resentment into love; and becomes a kind, giving being – happily giving not only of his money, but himself. Here Scrooge's epiphany, or wisdom gained from opening his eyes to what was real, resulted in loving-kindness, or compassion. To me, the moral of the story in “A Christmas Carol” beautifully illustrates the duality in Buddhism between wisdom and compassion.

Since most of us will not have the opportunity to be visited by Christmas spirits or sit for weeks underneath a Bodhi tree, how can we attain and maintain awareness? Begin to free ourselves from attachments, especially our conditioned ego

attachments? In Buddhism, the answer is seemingly simple: meditation. I find meditation or other mindfulness practices, such as walking meditation on a regular basis, an excellent means to help calm my chattering, overactive mind and helps to bring me into a state of conscious mindfulness. I've purposely not focused on meditation in my talk today, simply because it is personal and I am not a Buddhist meditation instructor. Everyone must find their own meditative style, however, I strongly encourage you to practice it.

Finally, if you take only one Buddhist principle away with you today, let it be the Buddha's dying words: Be a lamp unto yourself – to yourself find your own truth and let that truth be your refuge. This “truth” should not be bound by egoistic attachment or expectation – but what you know and feel is real within the spirit of openness and awareness.

Thank you