

The Faith of a UU Buddhist

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I've been a Buddhist for more than thirty years. I've also been a Unitarian Universalist for more than fifteen years. Since 1991, I've been a UU minister serving congregations in Wisconsin and Arizona. It is from this perspective that I find myself reflecting on what it might mean to be a Unitarian Universalist Buddhist.

My mother was a fundamentalist Christian. My father was a Robert Ingersoll atheist. Reflecting on this, I see that perhaps I was destined to become a Unitarian Universalist. Or maybe a Buddhist. That blending of a deeply felt sense of spirituality with a fierce devotion to reason could take one to either Unitarian Universalism or Buddhism. As it turned out I found both.

I remember a time not long after I left the Buddhist monastery that had been my home for several years. I needed a new spiritual home where I would not be asked to deny my previous experiences but where I could process those years of intensive monastic training, and from where I could go forward in new directions.

While I felt deep appreciation for the techniques of Zen meditation and the spiritual perspectives I found at the core of Buddhism, I also felt a deep need to reconnect with my Western religious roots. I visited a number of churches, but orthodox Christianity just didn't work for me.

Then one day, while arranging some old musty pamphlets at the used bookstore where I was working, I came across a reprint of William Ellery Channing's *Unitarian Christianity*, also known as the Baltimore Sermon. I remember so clearly standing at the pamphlet rack reading through it and feeling a tingle of recognition run down my spine. I thought, "This is a kind of Christianity that makes sense."

That Sunday I attended the local UU church. I quickly saw that there had been some movement away from Channing's faith. But I was even more excited by what I did find. During the coffee hour following the service some members introduced themselves to me and we talked. Eventually one of them asked what brought me to their church.

I said that I was a Buddhist although I had a great respect for the Christianity of my childhood and that I was looking for a spiritual home that would allow my continuing quest. When I was asked what I meant by "Buddhism," I briefly outlined my belief that the human condition is marked by disease, dissatisfaction, angst. There is some fundamental sadness to our human condition.

The Buddha examined this apparently universal human experience closely. He came to believe this pervasive unrest occurs as a natural consequence of our human

consciousness. Looking at his analysis as a modern Westerner, I would frame what he said in the following way: We seem to have emerged as animals that can divide the world with our minds. Perhaps it starts with the ability to distinguish between not-me and me. Perhaps it is even more fundamental, the on and off of our firing brain synapses. However it comes about, this dualism is the source of human creativity and has made us the dominant species on this planet. But this way of engaging the world also has a peculiar side effect—we fall in love with the world that is created by our own perceptions. We desperately want that world to be complete, permanent, and real.

But as the Buddha observed, our grasping after permanency, for our loved ones and for ourselves, is doomed. The universe and everything in it, including you and me, are in flux. And what each of us perceives as "me" is actually a composite of many consequences. They will fall apart at some point to reshape in new ways. Change is the rule, and nothing is exempt.

The Buddha asserted, and I've come to believe, that as we cling to what is passing as if it is permanent, we find that pervasive angst, the terrible sadness that seems to live within our human hearts. But there is good news—we don't have to suffer this way. The Buddha outlined a "middle way" to insight and peace.

Essentially this middle way has three parts: meditation, morality, and wisdom. Meditation is a spiritual technology, wherein we closely examine without judgment everything, every thought, every emotion, as it rises and as it falls. Morality is a way of harmony in the universe and among our fellow creatures. Wisdom is what emerges out of these practices of presence and harmony.

As I spoke to those UUs so many years ago, one said, "Except for meditation, what you describe sounds like a Unitarian Universalist perspective" and suggested that Unitarian Universalists might be even better at "seeking ways to live in harmony" than Buddhists, especially when they manifest this quest as a concern for social justice.

My new friends went on to suggest that a Buddhist would find similar perspectives in all the currents of contemporary Unitarian Universalism, particularly in religious humanism. But there also seem to be commonalities between the "liberal Buddhism" I described and the liberal Christianity, Judaism, and earth-centered faith embraced by many other UUs. And over the years, I've come to believe they were right.

This blending of Buddhism with Unitarian Universalism began with nineteenth-century Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Unitarian Elizabeth Palmer Peabody translated the first Buddhist text into English. Buddhist reflections about the nature of the world have continued in Unitarian Universalism and have become especially dynamic in recent years.

Western Buddhists of many different schools who are now seeking ways to integrate their experiences of East and West are discovering Unitarian Universalism as a true home.

Increasingly Buddhists have been integrated into this great Western tradition as a rich variation on our liberal religious theme.

Certainly we UU Buddhists have found many treasures. Possibly the most important offering of Unitarian Universalism is religious education for our children. UU religious education programs are perfect for Western Buddhists who want to raise children with some knowledge of our ancestral religions but also with a world religion perspective and, of course, with an openness to Buddhism.

Many Western Buddhists have been looking for ways to bring our perspectives into the world in a more engaged way. My first UU friends were right. Unitarian Universalism has long been committed to justice and social activism in ways that make sense to many Western Buddhists. Here we found both possibilities for enriching our lives and the lives of those we care about.

And, I'm pleased to point out, we Western Buddhists also come bringing gifts. Probably the greatest gift we bring to Unitarian Universalism is meditation. There are a host of practices that might be useful to Unitarian Universalists. Among these are concentration disciplines and the powerful practice of *Metta*, loving kindness. I believe the most important are the practices of pure attention-*Vipassana*, *Zen*, and *Dzog-chen*. Each is a variation of the original disciplines taught by the Buddha and his immediate followers. Each has to do with simple and plain attention.

Out of this paying attention, bare attention, just noticing, generations of people have found a way through the traps of our dividing consciousness to see that we share a common ground of being. One teacher puts it this way: We are each of us different, stars and people, flies and dirt. But we all belong to the same family. We have a single family name. And that name is the great silence. Sometimes it is called *sunyata*, emptiness.

This is an emptiness that includes all things. We are unique but we are also all of one family. Here we find an ethic that supports Unitarian Universalist longings for moral choice and social justice.

We Western Buddhists bring a host of perspectives to Unitarian Universalism. Our perspectives might be as scholarly as investigations of ancient texts like the *Lotus Sutra* or the rigorous logic of the *Therevada* or as simple as faithful chanting of one of the revered mantras from China or Tibet. We represent the full range of Asian Buddhist possibilities, blending here in the West in new and exciting ways.

As with all faith traditions encompassed in Unitarian Universalism it is impossible to describe Unitarian Universalist Buddhism in terms of any one perspective. It is a rich and varied thing we bring into Unitarian Universalism. And the joy for me is that, even as I am transformed by my life as a Unitarian Universalist, I am beginning to see ways in which Unitarian Universalism is transformed by our Buddhist presence.

No one knows where this meeting of East and West in our Unitarian Universalist congregations will lead. Certainly, only time will tell. But the journey is already wonderful and filled with splendid possibilities.

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