

The Faith of Unitarian Universalist Buddhists

Many Unitarian Universalists find wisdom in the Buddhist tradition and/or are grounded and centered by individual and communal Buddhist practices. In theologically diverse Unitarian Universalist community, Buddhists can engage directly with the deep suffering of our society. Buddhism provides spiritual practices that sustain Unitarian Universalists pursuing justice in our broken world. Many find joy and freedom in the dual religious identity of UU-Buddhist with a sense of responsibility to both traditions. The following writers include those who identify as women, men, queer, trans, black, white, and Asian. They represent a sampling of those who have come to Buddhist practices as part of their Unitarian Universalist faith journey and those who have come from a Buddhist practice to Unitarian Universalism.

Unable to reconcile my intersecting identities with my church of origin, I found in Unitarian Universalism a safe place to question. Introduced to Buddhism in adult religious education, I saw a promise of relief and a roadmap for my spiritual journey. A Unitarian Universalist minister advised me to go deep into the path I chose, and and warned not to pick and choose beliefs and/or practices based on ease or whim.

When I first read about the Hindu, and later Buddhist, metaphor of Indra's net, I was entranced. Put simply, Indra's net cradles a jewel at each intersection of its infinite strands, so that any tiny change in one jewel is reflected in every single other jewel. As a metaphor, it can beautifully represent the Unitarian Universalist Principle of the "interdependent web of all existence."

—Kathleen McGregor

It seems unlikely to me that any one tradition in one part of the world at one time can contain everything worth knowing for all cultures and times. The danger lies not in looking elsewhere, any more than it lies in looking only where one is. Instead, the danger lies in not being able to see clearly wherever one looks. Many of us have come to identify strongly with Buddhism while maintaining our Unitarian Universalist identity and faith. Our efforts represent a step in the right direction for depth, growth, dialogue, and the mutual appreciation and benefit of both Unitarian Universalism and Buddhism.

—Rev. Terry Sims, Unitarian Universalist Church of Surprise, Arizona

I was the only African-American in the sanghas I tried on the East Coast in the early 1990s. Years later I found Unitarian Universalism and a church that welcomed all of who I was. I began identifying as a UU. For the first time, I felt deep religious roots grow. I kept my meditation practice, but since I stopped seeking a Buddhist community or Buddhist teacher, two basic tenets of Buddhism, I stopped calling myself a Buddhist. In the last several years, however, the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhất Hạnh have encouraged Westerners to practice Buddhist meditation but not cut themselves off from their religious roots. I now fully embrace my identity as a humanist Unitarian Universalist with a Zen Buddhism-inspired meditation practice. I claim all of it joyfully.

—Rev. Patrice Curtis, Unitarian
Universalists of Clearwater, Florida

While I find wisdom in all the world's great religions, I experience the teachings of Buddhism as most profound and useful—that all things are interdependent and thus impermanent and that

we are bound by karma to repeat the same mistakes unless greater awareness frees us to act differently. Taken seriously, these recognitions can shape how we respond to the world. Buddhism is also a bridge to my ancestral culture. Buddhism came to China around two thousand years ago and syncretized with indigenous Taoism, Confucianism, and folk traditions to create the mix of beliefs and customs practiced by my ancestors. Unlike Western Buddhism, which is generally stripped of most Asian cultural influences (except the ones that appeal), Chinese Buddhism is full of holidays and rituals, food, and folklore. When I celebrate the Buddha's birthday with stories of his miraculous birth or observe the customary dietary restrictions on each new and full moon, I feel connected to my grandmothers and their grandmothers before them. That said, there are aspects of traditional Asian Buddhism that I would rather leave to the past—the sexism, trans/homophobia, excessive deference to leaders, and general social conservatism. Like the Abrahamic traditions in the West, Asian Buddhism generally reflects and solidifies the systemic oppressions of the cultures in which it has been formed. I am grateful for progressive, socially engaged Buddhist communities, including UU Buddhists and especially UU Buddhists of color. At the intersection of Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism, I can both affirm my cultural identity and act for a more just world in recognition of our interdependence.

—Kat Liu, First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco, California

I was raised a Unitarian Universalist and UU values are deep in my bones, but I had an unsatisfied spiritual longing. As a teen, I read about Buddhism and began a Vipassana meditation practice. On my first week-long retreat, I had a revelation that has been a touchstone ever since: “You don't have to believe everything you think!” Later I met the Soto Zen teacher Zoketsu Norman Fischer and became his student. After many years of Zen practice, I took lay and then priest vows. As an activist, I struggled to find a Buddhist community that was dedicated to addressing justice issues as a central part of spiritual life. As a UU, I saw how much the practice and understanding of the dharma could provide resilience, perspective, and grounding for the work of mending our broken world. As a Zen priest and teacher, Board member of the UU Buddhist Fellowship, and UU minister, I am dedicated to bringing the dharma, Unitarian Universalism, and activism together to benefit my congregation and, by extension, all beings. The world needs us, and there is no time to waste.

—Rev. Florence Caplow,
Unitarian Universalist Church
of Urbana-Champaign, Illinois

I pray that the Buddhist teachings, in whatever form you practice them, bring you and those around you happiness and freedom from suffering. May we, as Unitarian Universalist Buddhists, remain aware of the limits of our particular lens and be careful to include those from marginalized populations who have given us the gift of Buddhism as well as those from marginalized communities who come to the tradition for healing. May you feel the warm embrace of the Great Mother, whether she comes in the form of Kwan Yin, Prajnaparamita, or the mother of self-arising, non-conceptual wisdom and awareness.

—Rev. Jaelynn Pema-la Scott, Church of the Larger Fellowship

KATHLEEN MCGREGOR came to Unitarian Universalism in 1995. In the Eastern tradition of both/and, she chose Buddhism as her path yet earned a Master of Divinity at Claremont School of Theology.

Find Out More

Sarah Conover, *Kindness: A Treasury of Buddhist Wisdom for Children and Parents* (Skinner House)

James Ishmael Ford, *In This Very Moment: A Simple Guide to Zen Buddhism* (Skinner House)

Sam Trumbore and Wayne B. Arnason, eds., *Buddhist Voices in Unitarian Universalism* (Skinner House)

Packs of 25 copies of this pamphlet can be ordered from inSpirit: The UU Book and Gift Shop at uua.org/bookstore.