

BUDDHISM. A SACRED PATH

Sermon preached by the Rev. Lilia Cuervo
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History tells us that Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, or *the enlightened one*, was born in the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains in what is now Nepal, in 563 B.C.E. His father was a King from the Sakyas tribe who raised Siddhartha in luxury. From all accounts, he was an extremely handsome prince. He married his neighbor princess Yasodhara at the age of sixteen, and had a son whom they named Rahula.

As with all great heroes, his birth became the stuff of legends. One of them says that his mother conceived him in a dream where she was visited by a white elephant which touched her left side with a white lotus held in its trunk. He came to this world from his mother's right side while she stood in a garden. At that moment the world was flooded with light, the blind saw, the deaf heard, and the lame and maimed ran toward the infant.¹

Another tale is that of the Four Passing Sights. Soon after his birth, fortune tellers were consulted on the future of Siddhartha. All agreed about the specialness of the child. Depending on his upbringing he could become the unifier of India and its greatest conqueror. For this, he had to be of the world. Or he could become a world redeemer. Wanting the first option for his son, the king lavished all kinds of pleasures and riches on him; three palaces and 40,000 dancing girls, to name just two. The king also isolated Siddhartha from the outside

world to make sure he did not become in contact with the painful realities of the less fortunate. Any time the prince went out, runners in front of him cleared the roads of anything that could upset him.

One day however, he saw an old decrepit man, who was trembling, toothless and bent. Even with doubled precautions established by the king, on three more outings, Siddhartha learned about poverty, sickness, and death. Having lost interest in worldly things, he decided to become a true seeker and, at the age of 29, with great sadness, left his wife and son in search of enlightenment. He vowed to find the causes and cures of humanity's pain and suffering.

His search had three important phases: One, the life of the lonely forest dweller. As such, he sought two of the most advanced Hindu masters to learn the wisdom of their Hindu tradition, mainly philosophy and Raja Yoga. Two, having learned all he could from these teachers he joined a group of ascetics. He took to extreme their practices of subduing the body and in one of his rigorous fasts he ate only six grains of rice a day. He almost died, were it not for a companion who fed him some rice gruel. This experience led him to develop his principle of the Middle Way, neither letting be absorbed by extreme asceticism nor by indulgence.

The third phase of his quest was aided by rigorous thought and mystic concentration through Raja Yoga. It was during this stage that he sat in meditation under the Bodi tree, vowing not to

rise until he became enlightened. From the first night of his sitting, all kinds of temptations assailed him. However, no matter how fierce they were, he persevered with great concentration. He was rewarded with spectacular bursts of bliss. After sitting for 49 days, he returned to the world.

In his first sermon, which was to become one of the most celebrated in the history of religion, he proclaimed the Four Noble Truths:

The first Noble Truth is that life is *dukkha*, a word usually translated as suffering. However, in the Pali language used by the Buddha, *dukkha* means a wheel whose axles are off center, or a bone out of its socket. Applying this notion to our lives, when in *dukkha*, we would be out of kilter; lacking balance, doomed to suffer.

The second Noble Truth is that the reason for suffering is *tanha*, a word usually translated as thirst or desire. However, in the Buddha's terms *tanha* meant specifically a craving for individual fulfillment. Thus, as long as we strive for our own interest, we will be dislocated from the universe, and therefore, we will suffer.

The third Noble Truth is that the craving for selfish individuality must be overcome if one is to find peace; and, the fourth Noble Truth is that the means for overcoming that craving is the Eightfold Path. The following is a quick overview of the eight steps.

First step. Right views. The path to enlightenment begins by

using one's reason to grasp and understand the Four Noble Truths.

Second step. Right intent, meaning knowing what is our heart's desire and to persistently and passionately work to attain it.

Third step. Right speech. Be attentive to what one reveals of one's self through language. Are we telling the truth? Are we charitable in our speech? To be avoided are false witness, gossip, slander, and abusive language.

Fourth step. Right conduct. Discerning the real motives of our actions. In giving, how much is generosity and how much is looking for approval? The following are the Precepts given by Buddha to help attain right conduct: do not kill, steal, lie, be unchaste, or drink intoxicants.

Fifth step. Right livelihood. Buddha condemned certain professions that were incompatible with the path, while promoting those that enhanced life. He considered incompatible professions such as those of poison peddlers, slave traders, prostitutes, arms makers, and the like.

Sixth step. Right effort. It is obvious from his teachings and example that Buddha placed a tremendous value on persistence and the will. Reaching any goal, let alone enlightenment, requires steady effort and discipline. I was disappointed when in a meditation class we were told that the meditation of counting was done from one to ten in the East, while here in the West was done only from one to four to accommodate our easily distracted minds.

Seventh step. Right mindfulness. Scholars of religion agree that no great teacher other than Buddha have put more emphasis in the influence of mind over life. The beginning of the Dhammapada the sacred book that contains Buddha's teachings, says: *Mind is the forerunner of all actions. All deeds are led by mind, created by mind. If one speaks or acts with a corrupt mind, suffering follows, as the wheel follows the hoof of an ox pulling a cart. Mind is the forerunner of all actions. All deeds are led by mind, created by mind. If one speaks or acts with a serene mind, happiness follows, as surely as one's shadow.*

The secret of happiness then, consists in speaking and acting with a serene mind. But what is a serene mind and how can we attain it? A serene mind is the mind attuned to the reality of life. It is the mind that knows how to let go of expectations. It is the mind that can concentrate on the miracle of the here and now.

Imagine how mindfulness could enable us to live our Unitarian Universalists principles to the fullest. Around the world, millions of Buddhists salute each other with their hands in an attitude of prayer and bowing their heads while saying: "Namaste", like the title of the beautiful Anthem today, which loosely translated means: "I salute, or honor the Light, or the Divine within you".

Wouldn't it be easier to affirm and promote our first principle *the inherent worth and dignity of every person* if we were to salute each one we meet in the manner just described? We could easily do our greetings mentally, being mindful of the

fact that indeed in each of us resides the spark of divinity.

By greeting mindfully, we would be also practicing our third principle since we would be *affirming and promoting the acceptance of one another and the encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.*

Eight step. Right concentration. We remember Buddha's concentration under the Bodi tree. Concentration is one of the main requisites if one is to seriously meditate and attain deliverance from distracting temptations along the path to enlightenment.

So far, we have an idea of Buddha's basic teachings; yet, the question remains: What kind of religion did Buddha found? In his book *The World Religions* from where I have drawn many ideas for this sermon, Huston Smith writes: *Six aspects of religion surface so regularly as to suggest that their seeds are in the human makeup.* Those six aspects are: authority, ritual, speculation, tradition, grace, (the universe is friendly, one can feel at home in it), and mystery. Says Smith: *Being finite, the human mind cannot begin to fathom the Infinite it is drawn to.*ⁱⁱ

Having such great mind and heart, Buddha was aware of the pitfalls in each of these aspects of religion, and of how when applied the wrong way could cause all sorts of ills in society, just as he had observed in India. That is why the original Buddhist religion is devoid of external authority, of rituals and of metaphysical speculations.

Buddha's appeal was to the individual to pursue his/her

own Nirvana, the supreme blissful union with the mystery, and to do it, unimpeded either by external or internal distractions. He commanded his disciples: *...be lamps unto yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Work out your own salvation with diligence.*ⁱⁱⁱ

There are those who speculate whether Buddhism is a religion since it does not profess a god, and those who say that because Buddhism is a godless religion, then a religion does not necessarily needs a god.

Smith suggest that we take a quick look at what we mean by god. Are we talking about a personal god, or about the Godhead? The divine essence? What was Buddha referring to when he said: *There is, O monks, an Unborn, neither become nor created nor formed ... Were there not, there would be no deliverance from the formed, the made, the compounded,?*

Then the question arises: Is Nirvana the same as God? I found fascinating the work of Edward Gonze, as cited by Smith, where he compiled from Buddhists texts a series of attributes that apply to both the Godhead and Nirvana. Gonze found that Nirvana has been described as: *permanent, stable, imperishable, immovable, ageless, deathless, unborn, and unbecome, power, bliss, and happiness, the secure refuge, the shelter, and the place of unassailable safety; the real Truth and the supreme Reality; the Good, the supreme goal and the one and only consummation of our life, the eternal, hidden and incomprehensible Peace.*^{iv}

It is easy to appreciate how these attributes are similar to

those of the Godhead found in Hinduism and Christianity. I for one believe that Nirvana and the Godhead could be taken as similar concepts in Buddhism thus negating the idea that Buddhism is a religion without an ultimate reality and mystery. This probably does not sit well with the rationalists who prefer to see Buddhism as godless and as a philosophy rather than a religion.

I like the following description of Buddhism given by Smith: *Buddhism is a voyage across life's river, a transport from the common-sense shore of ignorance, grasping, and death, to the further bank of wisdom and enlightenment.*^v He adds: *Before the river was crossed the two shores, human and divine had to appear distinct from each other, different as life and death, as day and night. But once the crossing has been made, no dichotomy remains.*^{vi}

Before crossing the river it makes sense to discard as much baggage as possible particularly if one is to cross the river alone, following Buddha's teachings of self-reliance and trust in one's ability to find the truth within ourselves. For some of us much letting go and detachment has to take place. Detachment, and letting go in normal times require effort and sacrifice. In times of tragedy and loss or deep hurt, requires an immense amount of courage since it could be very difficult not to let pain, horror, anger, despair and any other attendant feelings paralyze and destroy us.

Voluntary surrender in the face of tragedy also demands an immense amount of trust. Trust that if we do whatever is in our

power to improve a situation, to correct a wrong, to forgive those who cause us hurts, to love those who reject us, life will continue growing in us. Not just any kind of life; a much better life, more vibrantly and consciously lived, more deeply enjoyed and appreciated.

Surrendering, detaching, letting go, also require a good dose of wisdom, to know when and what to let go of, and when and what to keep. Those who surrender and let go of the bitterness and temptation of becoming victims, are the true heroes and heroines of life. Judging by the experience of those who have been able to follow this path of renunciation the rewards are so gratifying that it is worthwhile to try to follow their example.

I called this sermon *Buddhism - A Sacred Path*, because its practice can lead to Nirvana, the ultimate state of bliss and union with the divine. May we all be blessed with the drive to cross the river of life and reach the shore where fear, pain, craving, and attachments cease to shackle our minds. May we all, through the engagement in a spiritual practice, be able to live lives of compassion, service, and love as we endeavor to build the beloved community here at First Parish and in the world.

Amen and blessed be.

ⁱ Historic India. The Great Ages of Man collection. Time-Life Books. 1968.

ⁱⁱ Huston Smith. The World Religions. 1991. Pages 94-99.

ⁱⁱⁱ Smith. Page 99.

^{iv} Smith. Pages 114-115.

^v Smith. Page 144.

^{vi} Smith. Page 148.
