

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Lenten Dharma”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 21, 2010

Spoken Meditation

Sacred Phrases from Buddhism and Christianity

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.

Buddham Saranam Gacchāmi.
 Dhammam Saranam Gacchāmi.
 Sangham Saranam Gacchāmi.

Homage to the Triple Gems
 Honour To Him The Blessed One, The Worthy One,
 The Fully Enlightened One

I go to the Buddha as my refuge.
 I go to the Dhamma - The Teachings, as my Refuge.
 I go to the Sangha - The Community, as my Refuge.

[Aramic Lord's Prayer](#) – by Dr. Neil Douglas-Klotz

Abwoon d'bwashmaya
 Nethqadash shmakh
 Teytey malkuthakh (follow the link above to get the rest and the pronunciation)

O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos
 you create all that moves in light.
 Focus your light within us--make it useful:
 as the rays of a beacon show the way.
 Create your reign of unity now--
 through our firey hearts and willing hands.
 Your one desire then acts with ours, as in all light, so in all forms.
 Grant what we need each day in bread and insight:
 subsistence for the call of growing life.
 Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,
 as we release the strands we hold of others' guilt.

Don't let us enter forgetfulness
 But free us from unripeness
 From you is born all ruling will,
 the power and the life to do,
 the song that beautifies all, from age to age it renews. Ameyn.

Truly--power to these statements--
 may they be the source from which all my actions grow.
 Sealed in trust & faith. Amen.

RESPONSIVE READING

O Let us live in joy, free of hatred, among the spiteful; among the spiteful let us live without hatred.

I am telling you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

Whoever counters the malicious with malice can never be free, but one who feels no maliciousness pacifies those who hate. Hate brings misery to humanity so the wise man knows no hatred.

If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer your other cheek as well.

No matter what one does, whether one's deeds serve virtue or vice, nothing lacks importance. All actions bear a kind of fruit.

Are figs gathered from thorns, or grapes from thistles? Every tree is known by its fruit.

Whosoever has heard the law of virtue and vice is as one who has eyes and carries a lamp, seeing everything and will become completely wise.

The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is good your whole body will be full of light.

In this world the wise one holds onto confidence and wisdom. Those are the greatest treasures; all other riches are pushed aside

Seek after the treasure which does not perish, which endures in the place where no moth comes near to devour, and no worm ravages.

--- Words attributed to the Buddha and Jesus

Sermon

The atheistic Buddhist approach and the devotional, socially active Christian approach to religion, at first glance, seem to have little in common with each other. Their cosmologies are different. Their theologies are very different. Their ritualistic practices are different. Yet when they are considered together through dialogue, they can be mutually supportive and illuminating.

This was my personal experience during my time in seminary. Before applying to Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California, I discovered Theravadan Buddhist insight or mindfulness meditation. That discovery was a life changing experience for me, as I've spoken about before. The Buddha's attention to the misery of life that we can't seem to escape spoke directly to my long term struggle with chronic, painful intestinal problems. That attention to the unsatisfactory dimension of life helped me understand why it is so hard for people to get along with each other. The Great Physician as the Buddha is often called, had diagnosed my problem and given me a prescription, the eightfold path of skillful ethical living, skillful mental development, and skillful awareness practices, that brought me ease, comfort and increased my happiness. It also prepared me and inspired me to change professions and study for the ministry.

One of the requirements to become a Unitarian Universalist minister is studying Christianity. Growing up a secular, atheistic Humanist, I had little use for Christianity. Reviling Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, I'd accumulated many negative views of it based on the Bible thumping, holier than thou approach to Christianity I saw portrayed in the media. But I'd also been exposed to sincere Christians like my friend and co-worker Mike McKenna. We'd have long talks as he'd gently try to save my soul telling me how Jesus was working in his life. I'd respond that the Buddha was working for me just fine in my life.

My first year of seminary, I enrolled in a class about Buddhist Christian dialogue. I was amazed to see how much work had been and was being done in this area. Scholars from these two religious traditions were in conversation with each other to learn rather than dispute. I took that class almost twenty five years ago and that process has only accelerated and become wider, deeper and more productive.

The World Parliament of Religions in Chicago at the end of the Nineteenth Century really got the dialogue started. Some may remember Episcopal priest Alan Watts who did a lot popularize Eastern thought in the late 50's. Many first became aware of the dialogue through Thomas Merton's writings. Had his life not been tragically cut short, that dialogue might have advanced much more quickly. The Dalai Lama has been a leader in promoting Buddhist Christian dialogue today. His book, *The Good Heart, A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus*, published in 1996, did a great deal to break open the dialogue and encourage wider engagement.

Jesus Seminar leader, Marcus Borg, has also jumped into the dialogue. I read a nice summary in one of his books that captures some of the similarities between these two men that have fascinated scholars. Listen to this interesting list:

- As you heard Leah and I describe during kid's time, Jesus and Buddha are reported to have unusual birth stories with special signs of their importance.
- At the age of thirty both had life changing experiences that set them on quests that culminated in itinerant ministries.
- Both were reformers of the religious tradition in which they were born and raised.
- Both Jesus and the Buddha were teachers of world-subverting wisdom that undermined and challenged conventional ways of seeing and being in their time and in every time...they taught a "less traveled" path of transformation.
- The new way of being they taught has similar psychological and spiritual processes with similar moral and ethical foundations.
- Some of the metaphors these two teachers used have powerful resonance.
- Both rejected the adoration of their followers, encouraging them to follow their teachings rather than worshiping them.

There are more similarities I could list but I suspect we are more aware of their differences. The Buddha died about 500 years before Jesus was born. The Buddha grew up in the polytheistic world of India as a prince. Jesus grew up as a monotheistic Jewish peasant in Palestine under Roman rule. Their historic geo-political situations were vastly different. Their languages and religious symbols had little to do with each other. This might lead us to wonder about the source of these similarities.

Some have speculated Jesus might have traveled to India and studied Buddhism there. Palestine had been conquered by the Greeks who had had contact with India and brought home ideas that influenced Greek philosophers. Even if Jesus had never left Nazareth, ideas have a way of moving around. They can be passed from mind to mind in unusual, unexpected ways.

Critical to the process of dialogue is understanding that Jesus and the Buddha were driven by two different problems as they first put their feet on their respective religious paths. The Buddha took a chariot ride outside the walls of his protected compound and saw sickness, old age, death and a monk. He wanted to answer just one question, "What is the nature of this misery he saw and is there any remedy for it?"

The Buddha discovered, after 6 years of intensive spiritual practice, that, yes, there is the experience of freedom from this misery and there is a way to cultivate that freedom.

Jesus was moved by another question. As a disciple of John the Baptist, he was occupied by the question, "How should we live together in peace." The Jews groaned under the oppressive domination of the Romans. This was the way it had always been, the strong

dominated the weak. The temple worship excluded the poor and the impure. Was there another way for people to live together and worship together harmoniously?

Jesus discovered after 40 days in the desert that, yes, people could live together in peace and called his vision, the realm of God.

The Buddha's discovery didn't just help people feel better and find inner peace. The principles of how our minds work affected all of human life, including social relations. Jesus' understanding of the Realm of God also has implications that affect our individual quality of life. Together they have much to teach us about about how to be happy and get along with each other.

To illustrate how this works, I'd like to examine a parable from the Gospels and compare it with a teaching from the discourses of the Buddha.

The Pharisees and scribes were always testing Jesus to see if they could get him to say something blasphemous. They asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." He answered them with his own question. Jesus condemned them for allowing children to give their wealth to the temple and then shirk the commandment to honor (and thus support financially) their father and their mother.

What follows that passage is this abbreviated section I'd like to highlight for us now. It reads:

Then [Jesus] called the crowd to him and said to them, 'Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.' Then the disciples approached ... and Peter said to him, 'Explain this parable to us.' Then [Jesus] said, 'Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.'

What would seem obvious to us today confuses the disciples. Peter is so programmed by his upbringing and his tradition, what is obvious to him is that one IS defiled by what goes in the mouth. Shellfish and pork are forbidden foods. To mix meat and milk violates kosher dietary laws. You SHOULD wash your hands before eating meat. Yet Jesus lets them violate this law. Peter would probably say, what goes into AND out of your mouth defiles you.

Jesus has another vision of what is right and what is wrong. Jesus discards dietary laws and focuses on what he sees as crimes against other people. You might only harm yourself by what you ingest. What I eat only has consequences for me and my digestive

system. I will suffer the consequences if I forget to wash my hands, not others. What comes out of my mouth, however, has far reaching consequences for others, *especially* if they have evil intention. Note that these evils are all socially oriented: to kill another, sexual misconduct with another, stealing, lying and slander.

The Buddha is right on the same page as Jesus with one of the steps on the Eightfold Path, namely, skillful speech. Here is what the Buddha had to say to Cunda the silversmith about skillful speech in one of his discourses:

"And how is one made pure in four ways by verbal action?

"There is the case where a certain person, abandoning false speech, abstains from false speech. When he has been called to a town meeting, a group meeting, a gathering of his relatives, his guild, or of the royalty, if he is asked as a witness, 'Come & tell, good man, what you know': If he doesn't know, he says, 'I don't know.' If he does know, he says, 'I know.' If he hasn't seen, he says, 'I haven't seen.' If he has seen, he says, 'I have seen.' Thus he doesn't consciously tell a lie for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of any reward. Abandoning false speech, he abstains from false speech. He speaks the truth, holds to the truth, is firm, reliable, no deceiver of the world.

"Abandoning divisive speech he abstains from divisive speech. What he has heard here he does not tell there to break those people apart from these people here. What he has heard there he does not tell here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus reconciling those who have broken apart or cementing those who are united, he loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that create concord.

"Abandoning abusive speech, he abstains from abusive speech. He speaks words that are soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing & pleasing to people at large.

"Abandoning idle chatter, he abstains from idle chatter. He speaks in season, speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the goal, the [teachings and the discipline of the Buddha]. He speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal.

"This is how one is made pure in four ways by verbal action."

from Cunda Kammaraputta Sutta

Jesus said the same thing the Buddha did, but do you hear the additional depth and subtlety? I suspect if Jesus had taught for another 40 years like the Buddha had the good fortune to do, he'd have had time to refine his teachings also. But Jesus was in a hurry to make a difference. The turbulence of the times urged him into political action and he paid the ultimate price. When we recognize the Buddha and Jesus' complementarity and hold them together, we can better understand how to skillfully use and refrain from using our words.

This is the plan of the “Lenten Dharma Study” class I’m offering for six weeks starting Tuesday. We’ll look at the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus and see how the Buddha maps out a way to put those teachings into action. Jesus maps out just how we should relate to one another but is short on giving us a step by step plan of action. The Buddha’s teachings overflow with precise directions on the step by step process of developing virtue. If we do not purify ourselves of unskillful intentions, we will not be able to build the realm of God Jesus envisions. And without the social vision of Jesus, Buddhist practice can slip into a self-oriented escape from the wheel of birth and death.

When Christianity and Buddhism are practiced together, I believe they can be mutually reinforcing. That is one important dimension of my ministry. I strive to bring Jesus’ vision of the realm of God to earth, and train myself for that work through walking the Buddha’s Eightfold Path.

I welcome your company in the dialogue of these two great faith traditions, walking the path of liberation and bringing the realm of God to earth.

Benediction

Jesus wanted to be remembered when people ate and drank together. The sustenance that ritually enters their mouths, connects his followers together as one body, one church, one vision of the realm of God.

The Buddha’s last words are roughly translated as, “Be ye lamps unto yourselves, be your own confidence. Hold to the truth within yourselves, as to the only lamp.”

Following our own inner lamp while joining together as one community powerfully articulates the Unitarian Universalist religious vision. Following both Jesus and Buddha maps out one way to fulfill that vision.