

Three Lies about Buddhism – August 10, 2014

First Unitarian Church of Saint Louis

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IN the very short Buddhist scripture, *Donna Sutra*, a Brahmin asks Buddha if he is a god. Gautama Buddha says, "No." So the Brahmin asks if he is a divine incarnation, or a sorcerer, or a holy-man. Buddha replies "no" to each of these. Then, Gautama says, "Remember me as awakened." So, today, I am asking you to wake up.

Now, I must say that sleep is good. I have read scientific, theological and popular studies on the role of dreaming and sleep. We need sleep. In Hindu theology, it is said that gods sleep. The most sublime of these is of Vishnu beyond all time, beyond all samsara, in timelessness. His eyes closed he lies on a lotus above the waters, until he wakes up, and creation begins. Perhaps this is what the Spirit of God was doing before the opening lines of Torah and Bible, sleeping over the waters of chaos. But at some point God wakes up. And so too we must wake up. We have to start the day, to incarnate, to create.

For example, there is the old story of little Jonny Jr. His dad, John Senior, knocks on the door one morning and says, "Johnny, wake up son; it is getting late, and you have to go to school."

Johnny responds "I don't want to go to school."

His dad says, "You have to."

"No," says Johnny, "It is a terrible place, the kids are all mean to me, the teachers are mean to me and it is way too much work."

His dad repeats, "You have to go to school."

"Why?" Johnny asks, "Just give me one good reason to go!"

His dad says, "You have to go because you are the Principal!"

One of the key messages of Unitarian Universalism is Wake Up, become alive, and be responsible. As the great American intellectual Dr. Howard Thurman; an African-American interfaith leader of the 20th century said: "Do not ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." I give this message through Buddhism, but be clear, I speak a Buddhist flavored UU minister. There are many forms of Buddhism. I preach a Buddhism that is deeply informed by UU theology and tradition. In talking about lies about the Buddha, I am also speaking of lies about Unitarians. Ultimately, I am not interested in "Buddhism" or "Unitarian Universalism" but the universal truth, beyond labels, the truth that teaches us Wake up, and reconnect.

Now the first lie about Buddhism is that it is against the desire, against enjoying this life. Thus, it is in direct contradiction to core UU values. For example, I was told a story by a UUU: One day he and his wife had dinner with a Buddhist monk. After dinner, after learning about each other, the monk said, "You must free yourself from desire. Your lusts drive you. Lust causes suffering." Our Unitarian said, "It seems that lust is what makes life interesting." The problem here was differing definitions of the words 'lust,'

'desire' and 'suffering.' The Buddhism I speak about is not one disengaged from the world. Instead, it is one of waking up to peace and wholeness in this world. I draw heavily on the teachings of the Vietnamese Thich Nhat Hanh and "Engaged Buddhism," one that sees the dharma, the truth, as engaged with the world, not detached from it. Buddhism includes teachings about joy, happiness, and desiring liberation.

When I first started studying Buddhist ideas, I found my mind was full of busy thoughts. I am, always thinking about things, wondering about things, trying to understand the world. As a teenager, I did not want to follow the path of other teens who seemed determined to drive all thoughts from their heads with loud music. I was seeking a deep peace and serenity. Many people are drawn to Buddhist teachings or practice because they are looking for peace. They want to sit in a calm and quiet state of mind. So it was for me also. That is good, but it is only part of the practice. The spiritually awake person sees the whole world, the fullness of life. Not only the green bud on the tree, but they yellow leaf of fall, the bare branch of winter, the rotting trunk, the rich soil. The spiritually awake person is part of life in its wholeness, compassionate and awake to suffering and the causes of suffering, as well as Deep Peace and the roots of Peace. In seeing suffering as it is, one is moved not simply to eliminate desire but to be free from desire's clinging grief and dissatisfaction. When we are awake to pleasant and unpleasant, we are not pulled by one and repulsed by the other but alive to it all.

As Thich Nhat Hann said in the reading this morning, "When you are mindful, you are fully alive, you are fully present. You can get in touch with the wonders of life that can nourish you and heal you. And you are stronger, you are more solid in order to handle the suffering inside of you and around you. When you are mindful, you can recognize, embrace and handle the pain, the sorrow in you and around you..." This a universal goal: to transform life into something better than we find it. I uphold spirituality that is focused on reality, not just on good things, but also on injustice or troubles or suffering, so as to turn these things into compassionate action.

I have some colleagues who do Prison ministry. One of them gave me a poem written by someone in jail, and who wants to be a different person when released than the person he was when incarcerated. He started attending a Buddhist practice group only because he wanted some calm in his day. One of the early realizations he had, in those moments of silence and listening, was how angry he was that the anger followed him every moment, tugging in his sleeve, getting him into trouble. He might be angry at how a powerful inmate disrespected him, so he would then snap at someone else later in the day. And beyond that, all the anger of his life, rooted in his miserable childhood, was driving him to hurt others. Becoming aware of his anger he came to realize that he did not need to act on that anger. Becoming aware, of everything he could act more thoughtfully. Here are a few lines of a poem he wrote about being awake. In this poem the word 'cellie' means the other person in his cell.

Whahhh Wha- Wahh Whahh Whahh
Prison guard with a mouth full of marbles.
Early morning wake-up call.

Concrete. Steel. Prison cell. Home...

Morning's first light shining through the window.
The sound of distant toilets flushing.
Cellie stirring
Time to get up.

Thursday, Thursday, Thursday

Quiet, quiet, like a cat
Get dressed. Brush my teeth.
Clink of the toothbrush against the shelf.
Careful. Mindful.

Rumble and hiss of the ventilation duct.
I breathe. The prison breathes.
I'm in the belly of a great beast.
Wash my face. Comb my hair. Make funny face in the mirror.

Denim clad corpuscles careening through capillaries of the beast.

...
Thursday, Thursday, Thursday.

Guards at the dining room door.
Dour faces. Watching the animals.
...Chow hall.
Blast of moist heat.
Smells of fried eggs and wet mops.
Noise. Bad manners. Dirty dishes. Ruined food.

... Take the long capillary back to my cell...

Thursday, Thursday, Thursday.
Cellie is at work when I get home.
Peace, quiet, solitude. A hot cup of coffee.
It's great to be alive!

Folded blankets. One for the floor, two to sit on.
Posture. Breathing. Labeling.
Rumble and hiss of ventilation. Distant toilets. A radio.
I breathe. The beast breathes. -I awaken the Buddha.

In this poem he notices sources of anger or irritation, but also goodness. Spiritual practice is not about being free from good feelings, but holding them in balance, wholeness. It is not about eliminating desire or love, anger or joy, but about freedom. The goal is to be free from being determined or defined by such feelings. Meditation is about awakening in any moment, in every moment, to our freedom and wholeness.

This brings us to the second lie about Buddhism; it is all about sitting in meditation, navel gazing, or doing nothing. You may have seen a t-shirt with a picture of a seated Buddha and the words below, "Don't just do something, sit there." Certainly some activity in this world is full of sound and fury but meaningless. Our lives can be dominated by distractions and activities, cell phones and entertainments. Thus, we need to unplug. But the contemplative work of a monk, or a lay person, is not just about sitting. It is about taking the fruits of that sitting back out into the world, into "the capillaries", the mess-hall, the classroom, the office. Being awake is about being responsible. The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh calls this Engaged Buddhism.

Similarly, there is a key moment late in John's gospel where Peter is adoring Jesus. Three times Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" Each time Peter says "Yes" and each time Jesus says, "Feed my sheep" or "pasture my sheep." Every time Jesus says, in effect, "Devotion to God is not sitting in rapture, but waking up and doing what needs to be done." It is like the Sufi story where a man goes to see his master. He does not tie his camel to the post. Showing his great faith he tells the master, "I trust God so much I know he will protect and keep my camel." The Sufi master responds, "Tie your camel your fool, because God can't be bothered to do for you what you can do yourself!"

Buddhism contains methods for using meditation to change how we live. One of those is to connect with suffering —ours and that which is all around us— everywhere we go. The practice of *tonglen*, according to the Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron, is a Tibetan method for "...overcoming fear of suffering and for dissolving the tightness of our heart. Primarily it is a method for awakening the compassion that is inherent in all of us, no matter how cruel or cold we might seem to be." The discipline is to take on the suffering of others. Breathe in their pain, breathe out peace and healing for them. If we are feeling pain, (emotional or physical) breathe in our pain, and then breathe out healing for all others who are feeling the same pain or fear. Pema Chodron says, "Tonglen reverses the usual logic of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure." She points out the purpose is not to suffer but to transform. She writes,

"...in the process, we become liberated from a very ancient prison of selfishness. We begin to feel love both for ourselves and others and also we begin to take care of ourselves and others. It awakens our compassion, and it also introduces us to a far larger view of reality. It introduces us to the unlimited spaciousness that Buddhists call shunyata. By doing the practice, we begin to connect with the open dimension of our being."

The goal is to apply the insights from meditation practice and dharma teachings to situations of social, political, environmental, and economic suffering and injustice. In Chapter 26 of the collection of Buddhist sayings, *The Dhammapada*, says, "The sun shines by day; the moon glows by night; in his armor, the warrior gleams: in meditation gleams the saint, but all day and night, shines the awakened one." And the Catholic priest and storyteller, Antony DeMello, put it this way:

"People should think less about what they ought to do and more about what they ought to be. If only their being were good, their works would shine forth brightly. Do

not imagine that you can ground your salvation upon actions; it must rest on what you are. The ground upon which good character rests is the very same ground from which [our] work derives its value, namely, a mind wholly turned to God.”

Finally, the third lie about Buddhism is that it is about the individual alone. There are many images of the Buddha in which he is seated and alone. This communicates the idea that the truth, or dharma, is all about disconnecting. But after the Buddha woke up under the Bodhi tree, he spent sixty years walking the earth, engaging with people, showing them their delusion, purging them of the poisons of greed and hatred, looking directly at suffering of all sorts and alleviating that suffering. He created communities of monks and nuns and lay people. When a person becomes a Buddhist monk, they take refuge from suffering. They recite: “I seek refuge in the Buddha; I seek refuge in the Dharma; I seek refuge in the Sangha.” The sangha is the community of monks. For us the sangha is a community of all those who seek the truth in freedom and love, but especially those who covenant with us to form here a sanctuary where anyone can wake up. Community is essential to waking up. In the reading this morning the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh said that he did not want to be where there was no suffering because then he could not learn compassion. To be compassionate one needs not only suffering, but other people to be compassionate for. The prisoner in the poem has learned to meditate with a group of people. He writes a poem to share his experience, but also to inspire others to do likewise. He is seeking personal peace and living that is more in peace with guards and prison-mates and other people of the world.

Here, in this church, we awaken ourselves to community and connections. We awaken to the community of trees and insects and rabbits. We awaken to the community encompassing gay and straight, black and white. Here, as Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed noted in church we are assured,

“...that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

Wake up to the fact that Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism are not mere intellectual faiths, but traditions that nurture awareness. Specifically, we nurture an awareness that will not remove or repress desire, liberate us from desire's bonds. We seek an awareness that awakens not a faith in thinking or feeling alone, but the faith of acting on the thoughts and compassion we awaken within our minds. This awareness leads us from the aloneness of the spiritual journey, to a journey of ever-widening community. Here, in this church, we trust and nurture not merely the free individual, but the liberated individual in a free and liberating community. Shake off lies and delusions: wake up.