

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
**“Humanistic Buddhism”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore October 25, 2015

### Call to Celebration

So how many of you can do a full lotus position? For how long? How about a half lotus? How many of you can even sit still very long in a traditional meditation posture? Just want you all to know that the Buddha didn't require his followers to do zazen for hours and hours. He taught meditation for sitting, walking, standing and lying down. You can meditate in any posture!

Confusion about meditation postures, is just one of the problems of exploring a religious tradition that has no roots in Christian religion or European civilization. Even the word Buddhism is a western creation to group widely divergent traditions of spiritual practice under one umbrella.

Yet there are elements of this Buddhist tradition and Buddhist practice that have captured the imagination and enthusiasm of many people. We are witnessing the adaption of Buddhist mindfulness techniques across a number of different fields and disciplines. I'm very engaged with Buddhist practice and philosophy as many of you know. I can personally testify that my health is better, my heart is bigger and my mind is clearer and more perceptive because I practice meditation on a daily basis. I doubt I could even be a minister without my daily practice to keep me sane.

Because of my love of meditation practice and my calling as a Unitarian Universalist minister, I've been pondering for a long time now, how does Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism fit together? Are they compatible or in conflict?

This morning, I'd like to consider a subset of this larger question. I'd like to look at how Buddhism lines up with Humanism looking for conflicts and connections. Can a Humanist be a Buddhist too? Or could a UU friendly synthesis of Humanism and Buddhism be evolving as described by scholars like a fellow named Stephen Batchelor.

Let us honor Buddhism this morning and its potential affinity with Unitarian Universalism as we join together in the celebration of life.

### Reading

from Uttiya Sutta

Then Uttiya the wanderer went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, "Master Gotama, is it the case that 'The cosmos **is** eternal: Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless'?"

"Uttiya, I **haven't** declared that 'The cosmos is eternal: Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless.'"

"Very well, then, Master Gotama, is it the case that: 'The cosmos **is not** eternal: Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless'?"

"Uttiya, I haven't declared that 'The cosmos **is not** eternal: Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless.'"

"Very well, then, Master Gotama, is it the case that 'The cosmos is finite... The cosmos is infinite... The soul & the body are the same... The soul is one thing and the body another... After death a Tathagata exists... After death a Tathagata does not exist... After death a Tathagata both does & does not exist... After death a Tathagata neither does nor does not exist. Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless'?"

Each time, the Tathagata said, " I haven't declared that..." Then Uttiya asked, Now is there *anything* you have declared?"

"Uttiya, having directly known it, I teach the Dhamma to my disciples for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow & lamentation, for the disappearance of pain & distress, for the attainment of the right method, & for the realization of Unbinding."

"And, Master Gotama, when having directly known it, you teach the Dhamma to your disciples for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow & lamentation, for the disappearance of pain & distress, for the attainment of the right method, & for the realization of Unbinding, will all the cosmos be led [to release], or a half of it, or a third?"

When this was said, the Blessed One was silent.

from the Dhammapada

"All conditioned things are impermanent" ... "All conditioned things are unsatisfactory ... "All things are empty of an eternal-self" — when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering. This is the path to purification.

You yourselves must strive; the Buddhas only point the way...

Realizing this fact, let the wise one, restrained by morality, hasten to clear the path leading to Nibbana.

### **Sermon**

Little did I imagine over thirty years ago when I wandered into an introductory meditation class near the Rockridge BART station in a pleasant neighborhood of Oakland, California, that Buddhism and mindfulness practice would become as popular as they are today. I can't turn on the TV, listen to the radio or open the newspaper or a magazine without some reference to mindfulness popping up. Strong interest in Jon Kabat Zinn's skillful translation of Buddhist meditation techniques into the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program, the popularity of Buddhist leaders like the Dalai Lama, the austere elegance of Zen and the colorful complexity of Tibetan Buddhism, have all fueled

the Western fascination with Buddhism that continues to grow and doesn't show any signs of slowing down.

Back in those days, though, learning to meditate wasn't on anyone's bucket list. I was raised as a Unitarian Universalist in a small fellowship in Newark, Delaware in the 1960's. Those of you who were around back then might remember the humanist climate in our congregations. They cared about this world, and didn't worry much about any next one. They were guided by science and reason, rejected the supernatural, and sought truth and deeper meaning they found in the here and now. Certainly no one was doing any spiritual practices, meditation, prayer or any religious ritual. Heaven forbid anyone might burn a candle.

So coming from that secular humanist background, I approached my first meditation class in 1984 with a little caution. What surprised me right away in that first class, was the humanistic orientation of the Vipassana or Insight meditation. The psychologically oriented methods were extracted from Theravada Buddhism and brought back from Southeastern Asia by Americans like Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein in the early 1970's.

Here is a little background for those who may be new to Buddhism. Siddhartha Gotama, an Indian Hindu prince who lived 2500 years ago, abandoned his luxurious life in the palace because of his intense concern for worldly suffering. He wanted to find a way to relieve the agony of sickness, old age and anticipating death. He sought instruction from the gifted gurus of his day, mastered their methods of practice, but found them all unsatisfying. Under the famous Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya, he discovered the middle path to bring suffering to an end. He taught that middle path for the rest of his life, about forty years, taking the name Buddha, which means the awakened one, and calling himself the Tat-ha-ga-ta, a being liberated from the wheel of greed, hatred and delusion.

What I found immediately attractive in this first meditation class was the lack of any doctrines or deities I needed to accept if I wanted to meditate. The Buddha frequently challenged those skeptical of his teaching to sit down, watch their moment to moment experience, and validate those teachings for themselves. Everything he taught could be and should be recognized in the experience of the practitioner. Nothing should be taken on faith – though confidence that the practice was fruitful and valuable was helpful. Confidence is especially helpful when encountering one of the most difficult hindrances of any training method: [doubt](#).

The second aspect of the Buddha's teaching I appreciated was his silence on metaphysics and his reserve speaking about the paranormal. As you heard in the reading, he didn't like to speculate about things that could not be validated in human experience.

I suspect he had ideas about the nature of creation, eternity, the existence of God, and what happens after death. What he would say was having answers to these questions would not be useful in the process of liberation from suffering. He cared primarily about teaching the reality of suffering, the cause of it, the reality of an experience of cessation of that suffering state, and the way to live and practice that moves a person to that experience of cessation.

It wasn't long, though, before I encountered some problems with Buddhism. Much as I enjoyed the physiological, emotional and psychological benefits of meditation practice, I learned Buddhism was

embedded in the traditional Asian view of reincarnation. And the ticket to a better reincarnation, in that system, is accumulating merit.

I learned about how the importance of merit in Buddhist cultures when I visited Thailand in 2006. During that visit, and a visit to Sri Lanka in 2014, I saw a number of beautiful Buddhist temples. In each one, there were statues of the Buddha with boxes for donations in front of them. One could also light candles, say prayers or place a lotus flower on the altar. It felt like going to a Catholic church! Lay Buddhists can earn merit for a better rebirth through offering donations in the temple and offering food and support to the monks.

Reincarnation has other problems too. The Buddha, on one hand, said that we don't have an eternal soul. Our personalities are constructs of our past actions. That constructed self has no substantial reality. That sounds humanistic to me – the idea that there is no homunculus, no little being inside us that is eternal and survives our death. On the other hand, the Buddha clearly thought something or someone moves between lifetimes. It may not be an eternal soul but it does have some kind of existence.

The other problem, more specific to the earliest forms of Buddhism, is the self-serving emphasis on monks applying themselves so they could escape the wheel of birth and death. This focus on individual practice to cultivate individual liberation was controversial after the Buddha's death and led to the first big division in the Buddhist tradition. The concept of the [bodhisattva](#) who postponed their final liberation until everyone was liberated came out of that split.

These are a few of the problems scholars have been working on as Buddhism has become the subject of increasing study in academia. Stephen Batchelor is one of those scholars who studies the words of the Buddha looking for the wisdom and insight encoded in the language and symbols of the oldest Buddhist texts, striving to translate it in a way a secular, Western audience may hear it and appreciate it.

Batchelor, [born in Scotland in 1953](#), grew up in a humanist household north west of London. He traveled to India in 1972, finding his way to the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala, home of the Dalai Lama. He ordained first as a Tibetan monk in 1974, then later practiced Zen in South Korea before disrobing in 1985.

In the thirty years since that time he has been an independent scholar studying the Pali Canon, the oldest Buddhist texts, and writing many books. The one that brought him to the attention of many in the Humanist community was his book, *Buddhism Without Beliefs* published in 1997.

[\[Batchelor says he\]](#) considers Buddhism to be a constantly evolving culture of awakening rather than a religious system based on immutable dogmas and beliefs. In particular, he regards the doctrines of karma and rebirth to be features of ancient Indian civilization and not intrinsic to what the Buddha taught. Buddhism has survived for the past 2,500 years because of its capacity to reinvent itself.

I had the good fortune to spend a weekend with Batchelor. He was our featured presenter at our March 2015 convocation of the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship. The UUBF began in the

1980's. In 2005, the UUBF organized its first convocation at the Garrison Institute down the Hudson River from here. It brought together Unitarian Universalists practicing many different traditions of Buddhism. Video and audio recordings of these convocations, [especially the last one with Batchelor](#), can be found on our web site [uubf.org](http://uubf.org).

One of the most engaging insights Batchelor presented to us last March, addressed the core of the Buddhist tradition, commonly referred to as the [Four Noble Truths](#). Over the years they have become, for many Buddhists, like doctrine and dogma.

The first is the assertion of the unsatisfactory nature of being itself. To take form and be born is one day to have to die and lose our bodily form. Rarely do any of us escape the misery of sickness. And no matter how long we live, we cannot escape the unpleasantness of the aging process. That is the first truth.

Sad as our finiteness is, we make it far, far worse by behaving badly when confronting the dilemma of being alive and knowing we must die. We react by craving diamonds, fast cars, pleasant music, good sex and great drugs, by rejecting wrinkles and sagging body parts, smelly cheese and neighbors, flies, rodents, and paying our taxes, and by being confused about how to approach life in a way that doesn't increase our unhappiness. That's the second truth – we mal-adapt to the finiteness of our existence. That's the bad news.

The good news is we can experience life in a way that brings balance, peace, joy and happiness. Not only can we stumble upon this experience, we can intentionally cultivate it using what he called the eightfold path comprised of ethical living, developing the power and clarity of the mind, and using that mindfulness to cultivate wisdom and compassion. Those are the third and fourth truths.

In some forms of Buddhism these four truth claims are embraced as beliefs. Because the problems of suffering, craving, hatred and ignorance are almost self-evident, the real problem is the third truth claim. Just what does it mean to be enlightened? The goal of the eightfold path is to free oneself permanently from wrong views and attitudes, from behaviors, thoughts and habits that keep us bound and reactive. Such a fully awakened, enlightened person is called an [arhat](#).

The Buddhist teachings describe these arhats as people who no longer experience greed, hatred and delusion. They no longer create suffering for themselves or other beings. Yes they experience both the pleasantness and the unpleasantness of human existence like the rest of us, but unlike most of us, they are able to respond in non-harmful and non-destructive ways.

Rather than concerning himself with the metaphysics of Four Noble Truths, Batchelor's study of the early Buddhist texts leads him to think the Buddha was less interested in creating a belief system and more interested in identifying four *tasks*. The first task is to witness the stress that arises from direct encounters with the unpleasant aspects of existence. For example, imagine how getting a shoe wet in a puddle on a cold, rainy day feels and creates a moment of stress. In other words, unpleasant stuff just happens and there isn't much we can do to stop it every single time.

The next task is to investigate closely how we make this encounter with unpleasantness all the more miserable by resisting it and pushing it away or by distracting ourselves with pursuing the pleasant. Berating ourselves for not noticing the puddle doesn't help.

Probably the most important task is noticing the moments that arise when craving, hatred and delusion are completely absent. It might be possible to get one's shoes wet and not be bothered – think of little children who do it on purpose. That state is a compassionate, peaceful, and joyful state of equanimity and balance. Once recognized and replicated, this experience of cessation guides the awakening process, supported through following the last task set, the eightfold path.

Thus the Four Noble Truths become a path or a program rather than a belief system.

Batchelor wants us to know that if we get our shoes soaked, God didn't will it. We are not puppets of the Gods who determine what happens next. Buddhism recognizes no supernatural forces manipulating the levers of reality. It follows the impersonal laws of cause and effect. We have yet to discover any divine hand that disobeys the laws of chemistry, mathematics and physics.

While Batchelor rejects the idea of an eye in the sky watching us and intervening on our behalf, we need not face a harsh, impersonal universe alone.

The Buddha's attendant, Ananda, once asked him if admirable friendship, companionship, and camaraderie was half of the holy life. The Buddha responded, I don't say that, Ananda, admirable friendship, companionship and camaraderie is **the whole** of the path.

To relate to others in a way that protects them from harm, to treasure and to value them cultivates loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, known as the four sublime states or the [Brahmaviharas](#).

They provide, writes Nyanaponika Thera, the answer to all situations arising from social contact. They are the great removers of tension, the great peace-makers in social conflict, and the great healers of wounds suffered in the struggle of existence. They level social barriers, build harmonious communities, awaken slumbering magnanimity long forgotten, revive joy and hope long abandoned, and promote human brotherhood against the forces of egotism.

As Buddhism comes to the West and finds a home with secular people who think rationally and scientifically, we are witnessing its evolution and change. Batchelor is by no means the only person asserting this position. If you'd like to listen to a collection of these voices, look for the podcast, [the Secular Buddhist](#). ([I was interviewed](#) on this show a few years ago.)

What some humanists are finding in Buddhism is a method to stimulate their growth and development toward being healthier, happier, wiser, and more caring human beings. In Buddhism they are finding an affirmation of life that stimulates an interest in and commitment to alleviate the suffering of others as well as themselves. They find no need for any supernaturalism or worship of any deity. And they find a community of caring people from whom they can receive mutual support.

One of those homes for this new formulation of humanistic Buddhism is Unitarian Universalism. What that will actually look like is gradually evolving as I am speaking to you. I'm happy to be part of that process and I invite you to join me.

### **Benediction**

I close with a quote from Zen master Dogen, slightly adapted. It is used frequently to end the day in many zendos or at the end of sesshins or meditation retreats. I like to contemplate it as a motivator to do my practice regularly.

Let me respectfully remind you --  
Life and death are of supreme importance,  
Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost.  
This moment is an opportunity to awaken.  
Take heed. Do not squander this moment.