“BEING HERE NOW”

A sermon delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister of The Community Church of NY Unitarian Universalist, Sunday, May 15, 2011

Be you a lamp unto yourself. Trust your own experience and not some external help. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp and work out your own salvation with diligence. The Buddha’s last words

I begin this morning first with one of the more annoying, instructive and for me liberating and challenging teachings from Buddhist tradition, and then a story.

First, and I am still working on these lines from the Lankavatara Sutra:

Things are not what they seem;
Nor are they otherwise….

Things are not what they seem;
Nor are they otherwise….

And the story from Buddhist tradition:

Once there was a young warrior. Her teacher told her that she had to do battle with fear. She didn’t want to do that. It seemed too aggressive; it was scary; it seemed unfriendly. But the teacher said she had to do it and gave her the instructions for the battle.

The day arrived. The student warrior stood on one side, and fear stood on the other. The warrior was feeling very small, and fear was looking big and wrathful. They both had their weapons. The young warrior roused herself and went toward fear, prostrated three times, and asked, “May I have permission to go into battle with you?”

Fear said, “Thank you for showing me so much respect that you ask permission.” Then the young warrior said, “How can I defeat you?”

Fear replied, “My weapons are that I talk fast, and get very close to your face. Then you get completely unnerved, and you do whatever I say. If you don’t do what I tell you, I have no power. You can listen to me, and you can have respect for me. You can
even be convinced by me. But if you don’t do what I say, I have no power.”

In that way, Pema Chodron says, “the student warrior learned how to defeat fear”, and she says, that is how it works…. We do have to, as she says, respect “the jitters”, and respect how our emotions work and how they can lead us into circles where we do harm to ourselves… because of our confusion.

In the face of fear or confusion, we need to be in the moment, as calm as possible, open as possible, respectful as possible, and open to change…. And we find our own power and wisdom.

Once upon a time, actually, not very long ago, I visited a friend who has a complicated series of medical conditions. It was at the hospital, and surgery was on the horizon in a day or two. We visited a bit, and I learned that it was for the surgeon a routine few hours work, but of course not so routine for my friend as the patient.

It was a conversation that was quickly deep and serious, and equally filled with laughter and warmth, and with honest anxiety and a goodly dose of serenity… My worries for my friend – at least most of them – were put to ease…

Having had brain surgery of the super-high-risk kind years earlier, she/he had experienced more than many of us in terms of fear, vulnerability, and risk.

Yet, even before that I had already been astounded by this person’s centeredness, a kind of Buddha nature that is the result of a life-time of seeking to be attuned to the ways of Life, which also means attuned to Life’s transience, its joys and its wounds.

This friend as far as I have learned has never been a practicing Buddhist except perhaps for the overtones found in our Unitarian Transcendentalist heritage. Perhaps, you know that Henry David Thoreau in the 1840s helped prepare some Buddhist texts for translation into English, and his writings echo the importance of “being here now” in the moment, escaping materialism’s seductions, honoring the truth of one’s life and embracing a life of compassion – a life of the kindly heart.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, our Unitarian progenitor of Transcendentalism who was so important in shaping our tradition, surely embraced life in its complexity, and I offer again his words: “[We have] seen but half the universe who never… [have] seen the house of pain.”

This morning as part of our celebrations of Universal Religion I return to insights and blessings from Buddhism as we join in recognizing Wesak,
Buddhism’s holiest festival celebrating the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and death. It occurs at the time of the full moon each May and so is near at hand.

As I have noted on some of these Sundays, this Buddhist bell we have with us today comes from Japan. It is typical of those used in many homes. I introduced it here more than 25 years ago after finding it in Tokyo when I was representing our congregation at a meeting of the International Association for Religious Freedom. That group – the International Association for Religious Freedom is a worldwide, interfaith gathering of liberal Buddhists, Shintoists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Jews as well as Unitarian Universalists. We have a long history of support and involvement.

One of the highpoints for me was leading a congregation of about 8000 persons in saying our Unison Affirmation, “Unto the Church Universal….“ A Japanese colleague and I alternated phrases in English and Japanese.

From my travels in Japan, it was evident how Buddhism along with Shintoism suffuses Japanese culture. The temples, shrines, artwork, the music and gardens – especially the Zen rock gardens – deepened my sense of these religious paths.

We had gathered at the Risho Kosei-Kai worship center, whose focus is the Lotus Sutra, and there was a small store for books and other items. As I was being given a lesson in how to strike such a bell, I liked this bell’s tone and its summons to mindfulness. And this one was about the largest I could fit into my suitcase. (The ones for the morning worship service, however, were about five feet in height and weighed more than a ton each.)

Beginning in college, I have found spiritual guidance in many religious traditions, and one of the most nurturing for me is Buddhism. This morning as we celebrate the Church Universal, I return again to some of the wisdom of a Buddhist path of mindfulness, compassion… and spiritual centering.

Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths are voiced in many ways, and briefly the core ideas are:

1. This world is full of suffering, but we need not be overwhelmed by it.
2. Our ego attachments and private selves are seductive and surely can be destructive, but are not ultimate.
3. We can learn to see eternity in the transient events and become awake to the world, to Life, and to Creativity, overcoming these attachments.
4. And the bottom line, the main thing, the Big Thing is compassionate living and spiritual enlightenment and freedom (through the Eightfold Path).
Those are the qualities I see in my modern Transcendentalist friend who has a Buddha presence.

In reading my colleague Dr. Gene Reeves’ new book titled *Stories from the Lotus Sutra* (and Gene was here with us last December but now in China as a University Professor in Beijing), I am quick to say as he teaches so well that we all have a Buddha nature… that potential, even if we have not as fully realized it as my friend.

It is a radically open and inviting affirmation, and he goes on to explain the goal of Buddhist stories to awaken listeners, the many paths, the patience, and the fruits of a life of mindfulness and compassion.

The Eight-fold path, symbolized in our banner of the eight-spoked wheel, is a short-hand course in the Buddhist practices and are printed in the order of service.

- Right knowledge
- Right aspiration
- Right speech
- Right action
- Right livelihood
- Right effort
- Right mindfulness
- Right concentration

There are something like 350 to 400 million Buddhists across the globe, and it is a path growing here in our country. When the Dalai Lama of Tibet was asked about its popularity here, he attributed it to our culture of open-mindedness. He said that we “have an educational system that teaches… [us] to find out for… [ourselves] why things are the way they are.” He goes on to say, “Open-minded people tend to be interested in Buddhism because the Buddha urged people to investigate things – he didn’t just command them to believe.” (MOTHER JONES, Nov/Dec 1997)

The Rev. Robert Fulghum, who has written a variety of books, the most popular being *ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED IN KINDERGARTEN*, is also a Unitarian Universalist minister, and he writes about a visit he took to Japan. He was seeking, as he reports, “instant” enlightenment at the foot of a master and realized later how presumptuous he had been, how ego-filled, and how foolish in his approach.

He was too full of himself, and sometimes we encounter people like that. People we like, but too much ego, and they may just wear us down – too little sincere caring, too much, too much, and they end up damaging themselves and others – sometimes.
As full of himself as he was, Fulghum did have some insight. He was mindful enough to recall a conversation with a particular Zen master who spoke about the stress in his own life.

[There is stress] “From worrying about tourists burning down this firetrap of a temple. From worrying about trying to get enough funding from businessmen to keep it in repair. From arguing with my wife and children, who are not as holy” – he smiled – as I am. And from despairing over the quality of the lazy young fools who want to be priests nowadays. Sometimes I think I would like to get a little place in Hawaii and just play golf for the rest of my life.”

The Zen master continued, “It was this way before I was enlightened, you know. And now it is the same after enlightenment.”

As Fulghum was leaving, the Zen master surmised that Fulghum was, as he said, “a thirsty man looking for a drink and all the while standing knee deep in a flowing stream.” Then he read him a scroll posted on the Temple:

There is really nothing you must be.
And there is nothing you must do.
There is really nothing you must have.
And there is nothing you must know.
There is really nothing you must become.

However, it helps to understand that fire burns,
And when it rains, the earth gets wet.

Then with a wink, the Zen master added, “Whatever, there are consequences. Nobody is exempt.”

Buddhism for me is attractive because it so simple and direct but not simplistic. It is also so very annoying in its simple, ordinary profound wisdom:

Be Mindful and be Care Full, full of care – filled with compassion. The Mind and Heart, just as we too celebrate.

It says, “respect the jitters”… confront fears…. Embrace Life and let go of attachments that distract, alienate, debilitate.

As Vietnamese Buddhist monk and activist Thich Nhat Hanh says, “Our appointment is in the present moment.”

In the spirit of mindfulness, Alice Walker, who has a Buddhist flavor, says, “Helped are those who find something in Creation to admire each and every
hour. Their days will overflow with beauty and the darkest dungeon will offer gifts."

And of course, from Zen tradition one of the most powerful exhortations in my own life: "Seven times down, eight times up."

Remember the teacher in the mirror. May we with compassion and understanding, with mindfulness and boldness, live with that spirit of Jimmy Durante when he said, "Sometimes I sing so pretty I like to break my own heart."

Accept your beauty and worth, and rejoice in it.

Even when it is hard….

I’m still learning to let go of attachment to unhelpful emotions and to expand compassion that does change behavior…

Perhaps you carry within you some hurt and you spend some time blaming others. Chodron would gently suggest such blaming is an act of aggression and diminishes your own health…. among other things. And she would also suggest to us to let go of blaming God for we carry our own truth within us and responsibility for how we live and think.

Gilda Radner, the wonderful comic on NBC’s television show Saturday Night Live who at age 42 had ovarian cancer, expressed the reality of our hopes and the spirit and wisdom of Buddhism as she reflected on life:

I wanted a perfect ending. Now I’ve learned, the hard way, that some poems don’t rhyme, and some stories don’t have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it.

My friend, the modern Transcendentalist and a spirited Unitarian Universalist, with a Buddha-like wisdom lives with faith, which is to say trust in this Life’s gifts and possibilities and with gratitude… for all of it… all of it.

That spirit reminds me as well of one of our forebears William Henry Channing, nephew of William Ellery Channing. William Henry Channing was also a Unitarian minister, a leading socialist, a minister in Washington, D.C., and at one point in 1863 and 1864, the Chaplain of the U. S. House of Representatives. He is probably best known now for words that he titled, "Symphony."

To live content with small means;
to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion;
to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich;
to listen to stars and birds, babes and sages, with open heart;
to study hard;
to think quietly, act frankly, talk gently, await occasions, hurry never;
in a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through
the common – this is my symphony.

“to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the
common”

Enlightenment – becoming awake – comes in such simple things.

- A bell.
- The silence.
- A flute.
- A smile.
- Knowing that fire burns and the earth gets wet when it rains.
- A touch of connection.
- A shared dream alive.
- A day of survival… a day of new life.
- An old wound shifted to the side rather than living too
tenderly at the heart’s center.
- Walking in wonder.
- Taking time for contemplation, mindfulness and for
compassionate action.

May the music bless us once again and open us to deeper understanding
that we own nothing and that we must share everything.