

The Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism include the words and wisdom of the world's religions as a resource for inspiration and insight. I plan on speaking of a number of religious traditions in sermons this year, exploring how the various practices and points of view found in these have impacted our UU understanding and practice of our own faith.

One of the growing influences in our denomination in the last few years has been Buddhism, particularly the inclusion of practices like meditation within our congregations' worship life. About three years ago, UUFLG completed a Fellowship survey process that included a question about the religious traditions which participants in this congregation feel influence their theological views and faith practice. Along with Christianity and earth-centered traditions, humanist, and Jewish influences, about 18 percent said that they included Buddhism as a spiritual influence, as well.

That's a bit higher than the percentage in the denomination, as a whole, where it's reported that about 10% say they would identify themselves as incorporating Buddhist thinking or practices in their UU theology. I suspect that that percentage is actually higher, and that it will continue to grow within our denomination.

I think this is true because there are a number of commonalities and synchronicities between UU and Buddhism that make it easy to see one's self embracing and practicing both. I'm not saying either is EASY to practice, but rather that there is a relationship between the two that makes them compatible as spiritual paths and life philosophies.

It was actually Unitarians who facilitated the introduction of Buddhism to the United States, and to the rest of the English-speaking world, by publishing the first translation of a Buddhist *sutra* in the Transcendentalist journal, the *Dial*. The translator was Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, although it has been erroneously attributed to Thoreau, and she presented her work for publication in 1844. Those of our religious ancestors associated with the Transcendental movement of the mid-1800s were particularly attracted to the religions of the East, including Thoreau, Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and others. They read about the traditions of India, China, and Japan and tried to relate them to their understanding of Western religious thought. Even so, it is unclear that they fully understood what those faith traditions were attempting to teach. For example, Emerson once described the Hindu classic, *The Bhagavad Gita*, as a Buddhist text. In 1855, Unitarian writer Lydia Child wrote of the Buddha as a "heavenly spirit," a term which most Buddhists would not use as a characterization of the Buddha. Despite their confusion about the details, however, the influence of Buddhism on our faith tradition cannot be ignored. Nor can we dismiss how Buddhist thought and practice are influencing how we "do church" today.

The story of the life that led Prince Siddhartha to become the Buddha, the awakened one, is now shrouded in mythic tales of a miraculous birth, life-altering encounters, and amazing acts to highlight the wisdom and enlightenment of the man. In his search to find the answer to the universal suffering of humanity, the Buddha left a comfortable life at court, becoming an ascetic monk and studying with religious teachers throughout India.

Finally, it is told, the Buddha sat below the branches of the bodhi tree to rest, and while sitting there, his enlightenment became complete. With his understanding of suffering now complete, he began preaching and teaching the Four Noble Truths: all life is suffering, there is a release from suffering, the release from suffering is Nirvana (or death into nothingness), and the way to find this release is by following the Eight Fold Path.

Here are the Buddha's words, taken from Thomas Byrom's translation of the Dhammapada, the sayings of Buddha, on how to find "The Way":

The way is eightfold. There are four truths.

All virtue lies in detachment. The master has an open eye.

This is the only way, the only way to the opening of the eye.

Follow it. Outwit desire.

When I pulled out sorrow's shaft, I showed you the way.

It is you who must make the effort, the masters only point the way.

But if you meditate and follow the way, you will free yourself from desire.

"Everything arises and passes away." When you see this, you are above sorrow. This is the shining way.

"Existence is sorrow." Understand, and go beyond sorrow. This is the way of brightness.

"Existence is illusion." Understand, go beyond.

This is the way of clarity.

You are strong, you are young. It is time to arise. So arise!

Lest through irresolution and idleness, you lose the way.

Master your words, master your thought. Never allow your body to do harm. Follow these three roads with purity, and you will find yourself upon the one way, the way of wisdom.

Sit in the world, sit in darkness.

Sit in meditation, sit in light.

Choose your seat. Let wisdom grow.

Since our congregations embrace people of many backgrounds and religious perspectives, it is not surprising to find people who identify themselves as UU and something else. There are UU Jews, UU Christians, UU Pagans, and there are UU Buddhists. There is a national Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship, officially affiliated with the UUA, which acknowledges and supports the work of over 100 practice groups who meet to explore Buddhism in UU churches throughout the United States. It's not uncommon to hear us use the words of the Buddha, or from Buddhist writings, in our worship, or to find us meditating together in worship or in small groups within the life of the congregation.

At UUFLG, we are fortunate to have a local Buddhist group who provide the opportunity to meditate and learn more about Buddhism on Wednesday evenings here at the Fellowship. I know some of you take advantage of this opportunity, and others of you actively pursue the practice of Buddhism in other local communities and sanghas.

Why have we found ourselves so drawn to Buddhism? Here's the perspective of Jeff Wilson, an active participant in the UU Buddhist Fellowship, who says: "Perhaps the main reason UUs are drawn to Buddhism is that it offers a wide range of deep spiritual

practices.” As Unitarian Universalists have evolved and adapted to theological and philosophical diversity over the years, we’ve let many “traditional” spiritual practices drop by the wayside, things like group prayer, religious ritual, scripture reading and interpretation, and so forth.

Our modern take on Unitarian Universalism emphasizes personal responsibility for the quest for truth and meaning, along with social justice and the promotion of tolerance and safe community. While this is a great strength of what we offer in our congregations, it also has its drawbacks. We often do not, as a rule, teach or practice systematic methods to cultivate spirituality within the body of our worship or congregational life. We encourage the search, and we may talk a lot, but we often don’t provide specific tools or roadmaps to make the trip. For some, this lack of spiritual practice is a relief, but others yearn to have something to do as a part of their spiritual life, especially in times of transition, questioning, or stagnation. Some people seek a way to bridge the rational/spiritual dichotomy in Unitarian Universalism.

Buddhism’s practices can function as that bridge. Buddhism, over its 2500 year history, has developed a broad and deep set of spiritual practices to support the process of connecting with self and responding to spirit. These include meditating (in various types and formats), as well as chanting, creating personal altars, making pilgrimages, reading texts and the words of the Buddha, and so forth. These tools have been developed over the years to support one’s search for greater wisdom, understanding, and compassion, all foundational to the practice of Buddhism. It is by engaging in a practice over time that one develops one’s skills in attending and focusing, listening and being guided to greater understanding. Engaging in a practice involves not only the mind, but the body and spirit, as well.

There are those whose experience in the various adaptations of Western Christianity has been painful, who have left the religious path of their youth with wounds that cannot seem to be healed within the confines of an old faith or rituals that come to close to the tender spots. Some of us, aware of the violent history of the Western church, feel alienated from traditions that allowed, or perhaps even promoted, the suffering and death that religion is supposed to alleviate. For many, there is a perception that Buddhism lacks this history of sectarian violence that characterizes Western religion. Therefore, for some, Buddhism represents a “safe” religious alternative – a way to practice faith without running up against the problematic aspects of one’s former faith tradition.

Unitarian Universalists and Buddhists have many similar values, as expressed in our Seven Principles and in the Five Precepts of Buddhism. When one chooses the Buddhist path, one adopts the Five Precepts as a pattern for life. They include:

1. Cultivating compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, plants, and animals. This is done in response to one’s awareness of the suffering caused when life is destroyed through killing.
2. Cultivating loving kindness and generosity, and learning to be mindful of the well-being of others. This comes from knowing the impacts of social injustice, anger, ideology, or oppression.
3. Cultivating responsibility, especially for the safety and integrity of others. This comes from an understanding of the need to protect others, especially from sexual misconduct.

4. Cultivating loving speech and deep listening, in order to bring joy to others and reduce their suffering. We understand this need when we see the results of unmindful speech or the inability to listen. And,
5. Cultivating mindful habits of consumption, leading to good health for mind, body, and spirit. This comes from understanding the effects of consuming anything in ways that might cause us harm, whether it be food and drink, or television and the Internet.

These Precepts dovetail nicely with the values we hold dear in the Seven Principles, including our respect for the dignity and worth of others, and our understanding of ourselves as part of an interconnected web of existence with all beings.

I believe that another attractor for UUs is the fact that Buddhism can be practiced without the need for belief in a deity. This non-theistic approach to religious practice resonates with UUs, especially those who don't have a belief in a "god" or "gods," or for those who are unsure about their views on theology. Buddhists are not concerned about devotion to a god, but rather focus on developing skills in personal introspection which lead to a true understanding of the self and the development of compassion toward others.

Well, that provides some explanation for why UUs would embrace Buddhism. Now, you ask, why would Buddhists be attracted to Unitarian Universalism? There are a couple of reasons, I think, that Buddhists can benefit from being a part of the UU community.

First, Unitarian Universalists emphasize the need for positive action and influence in the realm of social justice and political action. We believe that our values, our Seven Principles, need to be acted out in the larger world. Buddhism, traditionally, has not had such a focus on active involvement and influence in the larger world, on attempting to make a real difference in the lives of others. UUs can help Buddhists find a way to act on their compassion in real life forums and impact real life needs with their concern for the well-being of others.

UU communities have moved to adapt the best of the cultural changes, embracing the leadership of women and people of color, including youth and young people in the life of the community, and encouraging an open-minded and non-dogmatic approach to religious thinking. This UU spirit of adaptation and inclusion are a positive influence on Buddhism, which while not producing holy wars, has a history of competing sects, along with inherited cultural biases, bigotries, and rituals which may be outdated for the needs of the modern world.

Incorporating the ancient path of Buddhism has become a more and more common practice in Unitarian Universalism, both for individuals and for congregations, as we continue to discover the value of its spiritual practices and the wisdom contained within its view of life. We embrace the wisdom, while also influencing the practice to be more socially engaged and democratic, modern and inclusive. Let us continue to find ways to develop the ties between these two complementary traditions, for the strength and vitality that they can provide to one another and for the richness and depth each can bring to the other's spiritual practice.

May it be so.