

Widest Possible Audience

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Reportedly Groucho Marx, upon receiving a letter from a Hollywood Club accepting him as their newest member, sent this response: “Please accept my resignation, I don’t care to belong to any club that would accept me as a member.” A surprising similar view seems to influence religious traditions. Many which are inflexible, allowing only one way of being, seem to thrive. Traditions teach that few will be enlightened, or saved, as few as 144,000 people in some conservative Christian sects, seem to grow and endure with regularity. Other traditions, which hold that spiritual growth, salvation, or enlightenment is open to all, perhaps even an inherent part of being human, these traditions often seem to struggle to grow. It doesn’t make any sense to me, except that some of us seem to feel like Groucho Marx, only seeking that which we cannot be certain of attaining, and if we attain it, it loses value for us.

Siddhartha Gautama, a prince of the Sakya clan in northern India, lived from 560 to 480 BCE. At the age of 29 he left his royal palace, his wife and young son, to go in search of a way for all humanity to overcome suffering and misery in this life. After many years of asceticism, meditation, and renunciation, he achieved enlightenment while meditating upon his despair sitting under a Bodhi tree. He saw all things as they really are. His response was to devote the remainder of his life to teaching everyone who would listen the noble truths he encountered. First: that suffering is an inherent part of living. Second: that suffering results from that which we desire or crave. Third: suffering can be transcended if we can let go of our cravings and desires. Fourth: that a life pursued along the eightfold path, or middle way, focusing upon right understanding, right intentions, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right efforts, right mindfulness, and right concentration, can bring a person to peace, knowledge of the good, and enlightenment. He presented the path he had discovered as a practical means of achieving a lasting sense of personal wellbeing. Not merely to escape life’s suffering, but rather a path through that maze of personal pain, discomfort, and despair that is present in everyday life, and learn to laugh at everything as life’s lessons. Deep peace and good humor are sure signs of enlightenment.

In his lifetime, Buddha, the enlightened one, didn’t write down any of his teachings, but taught many people the eightfold path, and gathered large numbers of monks and nuns who devoted their lives to pursuing this middle way. He taught that any seeker could find refuge and support in these three things: Buddha’s teachings, meditative practice, and a community of faith (called a Sangha). Over the next 400 years these monks and nuns spread the Buddha’s teachings through oral lessons, meditations, and communities of practice through Southeast Asia, until it became

the dominant religion in many parts of Southern India, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Sri Lanka. The period of greatest expansion for this form of Buddhism, called Theravada (or teachings of the elders) Buddhism, was under the Indian ruler Ashoka the Great, in the 3rd century BCE, who converted the peoples of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Bangladesh to Buddhism while adding these to his kingdom. Of course, by then interpretations of the Buddha's teachings varied quite widely, so Ashoka called a council of Buddhist monk elders to gather in his capital of Patna, to agree on the language of Pali and a common canon for Buddhist teachings. Theravada Buddhism remains essentially unchanged ever since. Theravada monks strive individually to become enlightened and so enter Nirvana, freed at last from the cycle of birth and death.

However as Theravada Buddhism became fixed in stone, and as enlightenment became increasingly possible only for monks and nuns who devoted their entire lives to living that eightfold path in community, a more accessible and liberal Buddhism sprang up for everyone else. This path is called Mahayana Buddhism because it is available to people from all walks of life, not just monks and ascetics, wherever they may be upon their life's journey. Mahayana Buddhism became quite popular in its turn and is now the dominant form of Buddhism throughout Northern Asia, including China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, and Mongolia. Mahayana Buddhism includes the Pali Canon, as well as many other sutras or teachings, and also many folk traditions such as the veneration of saints or celestial beings. Mahayana Buddhists seek through diligent practice of the eightfold path to become bodhisattvas or saints who can help all other people along this path as well. Different paths within Mahayana Buddhism have emerged over the last 2,000 years, including Tibetan, Pure Land, Peace, and Zen paths to enlightenment within one lifetime. Mahayana Buddhist teachings often include the goal of uplifting all sentient beings to an awakening or enlightenment. This is perhaps why it is the most popular form of Buddhism to be explored and practiced within UU congregations. It shares with us a universality of approach, without dictating a fixed doctrine of belief, but rather relying upon diligent pursuit of one's path within the form and structure of a faith community of support.

In his book "What the Buddha Taught," Walpola Rahula tells us: "If one desires to become a Buddhist, there is no initiation ceremony (or baptism) which one has to undergo. If one understands the Buddha's teaching, and if one is convinced that his teaching is the right Path, and if one tries to follow it, then one is a Buddhist.... The Buddha was interested in... happiness. To him happiness was not possible without leading a life based on moral and spiritual principles.... The Buddha tells [spiritual seekers] that there are four things which are conducive to a [person's] happiness in this world: First... be skilled, efficient, earnest, and energetic in whatever profession [one] is engaged, and know it well; second: protect his income, which he has thus earned righteously, with the sweat of his brow; third: have good friends who are faithful, learned, virtuous, liberal and intelligent, who will help along the right path away from evil; [and] fourth: spend reasonably, in proportion to [your] income, neither too much or

too little.... Sometimes the Buddha even went into details about saving money and spending it, as when he told the young man Sigala that he should spend one fourth of his income on his daily expenses, invest half in his business, and put aside one fourth for any emergency.” Think how we might be dealing with the current financial crisis if more of us were following some version of the eightfold path! For me, a UU eightfold path would certainly include financial prudence, giving 10% of income to charity (church or other good causes) and investing 10% annually, so that never more than 75% of gross income is devoted to personal consumption and taxes. That approach to family finances leads to peace and happiness.

The Zen teacher Les Kaye, writing on the impermanence of American corporate life, says: “It often happens that even in the midst of a so-called good life we discover that we feel unhappy or off balance in some way. I think we feel this way when we sense the impermanence and transience of life but do not fully accept it. Instead, we try to hold on to what cannot be truly possessed. It is like trying to grasp water. We can hold water in the palm of our hands, but we cannot close our fingers around it. Too often, we deny the reality of impermanence and the frightening feelings that accompany it, and continue to act as if it were not true. We refuse to give up what should be given up: our belief in permanence. It is important for us not to deny something that needs to be accepted. Otherwise, our lives and our practice become very difficult. We make our lives difficult by letting our minds be filled with self-oriented ideas and desires that we do not let go.” Are there lessons here we would do well to learn to make sense of our lives in this time?

Perhaps you are a skeptic when it comes to spiritual paths? Perhaps you have been burned or otherwise harmed by the path of your childhood? Perhaps you are even now telling yourself that enlightenment cannot truly exist, or that it can't be worth all that much effort, since you will continue to be yourself afterwards. The American Zen master Jack Kornfield, in his introduction to his book *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* assures us that: “Enlightenment does exist. It is possible to awaken. Unbounded freedom and joy, oneness with the Divine, awakening into a state of timeless grace—these experiences are more common than you know, and not far away. There is one further truth, however: They don't last. Our realizations and awakenings show us the reality of the world, and they bring transformation, but they pass. Of course, you may have read accounts of fully enlightened sages in Asia, or of wholly unblemished saints and mystics in the West. But these ideal narratives can be misleading. In the awakening of the heart there is no such thing as enlightened retirement. That is not how it happens to us. We all know that after the honeymoon comes the marriage, after the election comes the hard task of governance. In spiritual life it is the same: after the ecstasy comes the laundry. Most spiritual accounts end with illumination or enlightenment. But what if we ask what happens after that? What happens when the Zen master returns home to spouse and children? What happens when the Christian mystic goes shopping? What is life like after the ecstasy? How do we live our understanding with a full heart?”

This life is transitory and much too brief. Too often we spend too much of our time and financial resources pursuing things that are not a fundamental component of our happiness. True happiness is possible, and quite common in this life, even if it also proves to be transitory. We are beings in motion, making our way through an ever-emergent reality, in a perpetual state of becoming something else entirely. This is the way of life: accepting this reality can bring joy; trying to ignore this reality, in order to hold onto something which is already passing, will bring us much pain and suffering. That which is fixed in stone, or in any invariable dogma or creed, is most likely already dead. A living faith by definition is open to change and growth, over time and throughout our lives, as our own experience deepens within our particular spiritual paths, and prepares us to try ever new forms and expressions of the goodness and joy in our lives. So why bother with enlightenment if all of life is so transitory? Why not just enjoy whatever we have before us and not worry too much about whether our life has meaning and purpose? This is indeed an appropriate question to ask, and Buddha in his Dhammapada (or last lecture) addressed it as follows: “Why is there laughter, why merriment, when the world is on fire? When you are living in darkness, why don’t you look for light? This body is a painted image, subject to disease, decay and death, activated by thoughts that come and go. What joy can there be for him who sees that his white bones will be cast away like gourds in the autumn? Around the bones is built a house, plastered over with flesh and blood, in which dwell pride and pretence, old age and death. Even the chariot of a king loses its glitter in the course of time; so also the body loses its health and strength. But goodness does not grow old with the passage of time. A man who does not learn from life grows old like an ox: his body grows, but not his wisdom.... Those who have not practiced spiritual disciplines in their youth pine away like old cranes in a lake without fish. Like worn-out bows they lie in old age, sighing over the past.” So the eightfold path is difficult. Its ascent requires constant vigilance against the cravings of our own nature. But the alternatives are even less attractive, less likely to bring us to ecstasy and joy. Who wants to pine away like old cranes in a lake without fish; or to be worn-out arrows sighing over our pasts? The Buddha offers the teachings, the vigilance, the practice, and the community of joy.

Let’s end with a brief tale from Camden Benares’ *Zen without Zen Masters*. It seems “An actor picked up a hitchhiker who revealed that he was a Catholic priest who had left the Church. Explaining his current situation, the former cleric said ‘I’m living with a woman. I love her and we want to get married. This morning two representatives of the church came to where I live. They told me to appear at a hearing in San Francisco to determine my relationship to the Church. I told them that I’m doing God’s will, but they didn’t believe me. Do you believe me?’ The actor replied, ‘Yes, I believe you. As part of my preparation to become an actor, I studied Zen [Buddhism]. One of the things I learned is that if God’s actions appear irrational and inconsistent, you must remember that he is playing to the broadest possible audience.” So this is also our approach to religion, when Rev. Martha and I consider how best to interweave these

various religious traditions into a worship experience that may aid at least some of you upon your own unique spiritual journeys of transformation, we seek to find those spiritual paths most capable of playing to the widest possible audience, for what we are doing is uniquely human.

The Christianity that you will find here is hopefully an open, generous, kind form of Christianity that helps you on your path. The Judaism you find here hopefully encourages you to love the divine, and by so doing learn to love your neighbor as yourself. Our ethical humanism is not selfish and self-centered but is concerned with the good of all humanity, ourselves included. As for those faiths that insist only the few are saved and many are therefore damned, I hope you will not find them here. For like the God we serve, we seek to play to the widest possible audience; like the Buddha we hope to teach everyone who will listen whatever noble truths we have found here, and also learn from others their truths as well. When we introduce Taoism, Hinduism, or Buddhism, we will always seek to bring the broadest and most universal forms of these paths into our practice here so that we may grow together in wisdom and joy as a practicing community of faith. This is my hope and my prayer for all that we do and say here. I love you all dearly, and wish you many pleasant surprises upon your life's own strange and particular spiritual journey. Blessed Be and Amen.