

Why the Dalai Lama  
Does Not Want You To Become Buddhist

By Guy Newland

In the days preceding World War II, the Boston-based Unitarian Service Committee was attempting to rescue Unitarians and other religious liberals from those parts of Europe (notably Czechoslovakia) where their lives were threatened by Nazis. The flaming chalice was the code by which those needing to be rescued identified themselves.<sup>1</sup> Originally, then, the flaming chalice was a sort of beacon, helping people toward safety from fascist violence. “Beacon,” of course, is the name of the UU publishing house.

But a great many of us, UUs today, are also refugees in a sense. Eighty-percent of Unitarian Universalist were not raised that way.<sup>2</sup> This is a very high number compared to other religions, and it is particularly striking given that we do not proselytize. Not just here in our fellowship, but across the country, most of us found our way to these doors. We tend to think of ourselves as seekers, questioners, whose search has led us here, to a place where we are supported in continuing to seek. But I would like to suggest this morning that many of us are not just seeking FOR spiritual truth, we are seeking a refuge, a safe haven, FROM places where dogmatic religious doctrines that violated us in various ways were authoritatively or even violently enforced upon us.

Many of us, in varying degrees, suffer from **post-dogmatic stress disorder**, a phenomenon I imagine by analogy with post-traumatic stress disorder. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a treatable emotional illness that develops as a result of terribly frightening experiences.<sup>3</sup> PTSD sufferers tend to avoid places, people, or other things that remind them of traumatic events; they can be exquisitely sensitive to normal life experiences that remind them of those events. Such ordinary life experiences are called “triggers” because they set off unexpectedly intense reactions through the association with past trauma.

Although the condition has almost certainly existed as long as humans have endured trauma, PTSD has only been recognized as a formal diagnosis since 1980. Prior to that, combat veterans with PTSD were said to suffer "soldier's heart," "shell shock," "combat or battle fatigue," "gross stress reaction," or "post-Vietnam syndrome". Now it is recognized that while PTSD is widespread in combat, it is not just related to combat. It can arise from experiencing or witnessing a severe accident or catastrophe, being the victim of rape, robbery or assault; or enduring physical, sexual, emotional or other forms of abuse. People with PTSD begin to heal by talking to friends, family, professionals, and other PTSD survivors, joining a support group, and working with a skilled psychotherapist.

It seems that many of us are, to one degree or another, survivors of emotional and spiritual violence—or, we might say, dogma-trauma. Most Christian churches and many other religions require of their adherents belief that the sexuality of gay and lesbian peoples is inherently sinful. This engrained dogma wreaks havoc on young boys and girls for whom having questions about their sexuality automatically means having questions about whether they will be rejected and abandoned by their families and burn in hell forever. Religion enforces and indoctrinates people to believe in the natural right of men, not women, to lead, the eternal torments of hell, the innate depravity of all human nature, and the imminence of the end of the world. In the name of religion, pastors will claim that some horrible events like 9/11 or the death of child from leukemia is part of God's perfect plan. It is hard to count the ways that religion has put almost all of us, at some point in our lives, in a place of outrage or terror. Terrifying children with fear of the end of the world or fear of gay people or fear of eternal damnation—this is not just LIKE emotional abuse, it is emotional abuse and so it causes trauma for some who

endure it. The fact that it is normal and pervasive does not make it less traumatic. Many of us have survived such abuse, but not necessarily unscathed. And the way those experiences still condition us is what I mean by post-dogmatic stress disorder.

This helps answer our lay minister Dawn Daniel's question about why words like "God" and "sin" can be landmines in this place of spiritual freedom. It is not just an intellectual issue of redefinition, where we can all decide together what words to use for what meanings, as though those words had no history. For some, the word "sin" is a trigger; it sets off visceral reactions analogous to those of a combat veteran hearing a car backfire. Some here are uncomfortable with the word "church," some with the word "congregation," some with the words "worship" and "reverence." Many people were uncomfortable when, temporarily, we had services on Sunday afternoons at St. John's. There were pews, crucifixes, a big pipe organ—it was a "real" church, full of small landmines, and precisely for that reason about 90% of survey respondents indicated no interest in having future services there.

Most of you know me of course--I am the President of this fellowship and one of its founding members. I am also among the estimated 9% of UUs who are Buddhists, and the 25% who cite Buddhism as a major influence. For UUs, Buddhism offers confirmation of the viability of authentic non-theistic spirituality and an intriguing invitation to explore, refine and transform human consciousness through meditation. At the same time, Buddhists have benefited from and been influenced by the UU call to social action. Today there are about 10 active teachers of well-known Buddhist lineages who are also UUs and more than 100 UU Buddhist groups, organized into an international fellowship.<sup>4</sup> Yet I still sometimes get curious or even skeptical responses

from UUs who hear that I am a Buddhist--and I get the same or sometimes worse from fellow Buddhists who hear that I am a UU.

I was raised Roman Catholic. During a typical teenage faith-crisis, I got interested in mysticism, which led me to study Hinduism and Buddhism in high school and college. I was also fascinated by Christian and Sufi mysticism, but it seemed to me that in Christianity and Islam people who had amazing religious experiences were always getting into big trouble with the enforcers of the correct dogmas, and sometimes getting killed. Whereas, it seemed to me, that in Buddhism and Hinduism direct religious experience, rather than dogma, was at or near the core of the living faith.

As it happens, I was not beaten by nuns or hurt by priests. I just grew away from my roots. As I studied Buddhism deeply, learning Tibetan and Sanskrit, I gradually found myself at home in that tradition. I am now a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism and my publications translate, explain, and analyze Tibetan Buddhist teachings. But I am certainly not a Tibetan Buddhist—the idea is absurd. For one thing, I am not Tibetan! I am an independent American Buddhist; I don't pledge unique allegiance to any particular teacher or any particular school.

Today I want to say a little about the Dalai Lama. Can his teachings tell us anything about how to handle the issue of religious dogma? I first met Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama, in 1981; I had a 1/2 hour private audience with him in 1985. The Dalai Lama is a Buddhist monk and the spiritual leader of most Tibetan Buddhists. He is regarded by most Tibetan Buddhists as a divine being, a living embodiment of compassion and love. The Dalai Lama is also the head of state of the Tibetan government in exile. He has lived in India, in exile from Tibet, since 1959. The Chinese communists invaded Tibet—or as they say, “liberated Tibet”—in the 1950s, and they were about to

capture the young Dalai Lama when he fled, along with more than 100,000 other refugees.

The Dalai Lama is regarded by the Chinese government and by most Chinese as a “splittist,” someone trying to tear their country apart. He is considered a political criminal, a traitor; it is illegal in China to possess an image of him. There are many Tibetans who have served long prison sentences for having a photograph of the Dalai Lama on their home altars. Yet in the rest of the world, outside the sphere of Chinese propaganda, the Dalai Lama is almost universally revered. When he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the committee emphasized that in the struggle for the liberation of Tibet from China, the Dalai Lama consistently opposed the use of violence, advocating instead peaceful solutions based upon tolerance and mutual respect.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1980s and 1990s there was surging interest among Westerners in helping the Tibetans. This did not lead to any particular improvement in the human rights situation in Tibet; since then, China has quickly moved closer to a dominant position in international affairs. Western activism on behalf of Tibet has dropped off now, but—oddly—the fame of the Dalai Lama just continues to grow. The crowds of people who go to see him have grown from hundreds, to thousands, and now often tens of thousands; as a “draw” at this particular moment, I think only the only single speaker who surpasses him is Obama. He is established as a sort of global saint and spiritual leader, transcending Buddhism and also transcending the cause of Tibet, in the way that the global appeal of Mahatma Gandhi transcended Hinduism and the cause of freedom for India, and the appeal of Mother Teresa of Calcutta transcended Christianity.

I got a sense of his charisma when I spent time with him this summer at Lehigh U. in Pennsylvania. During the 1990s I participated in and helped oversee a massive group

effort to translate into English, in three volumes, the first major treatise by the 14/15<sup>th</sup> century scholar who founded the Dalai Lama's particular sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Taking note of this, the Dalai Lama agreed to come to Lehigh University in 2008 and teach this text over a week. Sitting close to him for a week at this event, I can summarize my impressions as follows: The Dalai Lama is seventy-three years old and surrounded by an astounding and constant press of people desperately wanting something from him. He lives in exile and under extreme pressure to solve the intractable problem of Tibet's situation in China. Yet everyone he meets in person, even those initially skeptical or hostile, finds him radiantly happy and full of surging mental vitality. And most people who meet him—regardless of religious belief—are struck with a powerful sense that he is a truly extraordinary person.

In his comments during the week, the Dalai Lama did not stay close to the text he was there to explain; he said what he thought would be most helpful to his audience of 4,500 Westerners. "There are six billion people in the world, and none of them wakes up in the morning wanting more problems. Yet there are so many problems. This is because of afflictions in the mind." Here the Dalai Lama refers to the Buddhist teaching that we suffer needlessly under the influence of greed, hatred, delusion, jealousy, and so forth. He pointed out that people compete with one another to get money, thinking this will solve problems, but then "they find that they cannot purchase a remedy for their real problems in any of the stores."

He taught the crowd to calm their minds in meditation, and then to recognize their intimate connections to other living beings. We all want happiness; none of us want suffering. From within this recognition, love and compassion arise in our hearts. We get up and go out to serve, to help others. Our efforts may be appreciated or we may be

rejected. But either way, we have found the key to happiness—something the store does not sell.

The Dalai Lama said that when he talks about compassion, some people feel that there are so many demands on them; it is just too much to ask them to care for others. Why should they? However, he noted, compassion sometimes does and sometimes does not succeed in helping others. We cannot force others to make good choices or to adopt attitudes that would truly bring them happiness. The one person who is SURE to be helped is the person who is compassionate.

**But** while the Dalai Lama gave this sort of general advice on the basis of his Buddhist faith, he specifically advised the non-Buddhists in the audience of 4,500 **NOT** to convert to Buddhism. He commented that while religion has brought much benefit to people around the world, religious conflict has also been the source of needless misery. Many wars that are said to be about religion actually have major causes in political or economic problems, but religious differences can make these conflicts much worse. He expressed his deep sadness that some violence and harm is actually grounded in very sincerely held religious differences. At the same time, “All major religions of the world present the same potential to promote wholeheartedness or compassion. Through that way, genuine and lasting world peace can exist. For that reason, harmony among different traditions is very essential.”

This was not unique advice for this event; it is typical of teachings on this point the Dalai Lama has given repeatedly in the West. He said that just as almost everyone in Tibet was traditionally a Buddhist, there are other religions that are traditional to the West. Since kind-heartedness, love, and compassion *can be developed* through deep practice of those traditions, and since these mental attitudes are the basis for individual

happiness and world peace, there really is no urgent need for people to convert to a different religion. And when one considers the intellectual difficulties, the psychological difficulties, and the serious social and cultural problems of converting to a tradition that your family and community do not understand, it seems best to the Dalai Lama to advise Western spiritual seekers to look more deeply within their home traditions.

On the other hand, he noted, there were always a few Muslims in Tibet. It was never 100% Buddhist. Just so, he acknowledged that there might be some *small* number of people in the West who are spiritually and psychologically constituted so as to make Buddhism the best tradition for them.

The moves that the Dalai Lama makes here, in combination with the huge crowds he is drawing, have elicited suspicious murmurs from a few Christian leaders. The fear is that telling people not to become Buddhists is part of a scheme to seduce them into becoming Buddhists. A cynic might see it like this: Those who raise their guard to resist high-pressure evangelizing and dogmatic spiels become easy-pickings for the Dalai Lama's "shucks, you really don't need to become a Buddhist, but if you insist, then ok" pitch. In the *Upali Sutta*, we see the Buddha's example: the Buddha refuses to accept Upali's conversion in the first flush of enthusiasm, and insists that he return to his teacher.<sup>6</sup> But this only has the effect of impressing Upali even more, and making him determined to follow the Buddha.

I think it is unfair to say that the Buddha or the Dalai Lama is somehow being nefarious or underhanded in taking this approach. Being broad-minded, tolerant, and inclusive simply is more appealing to some people. Would Christian critics of this soft-sell be happier if the Dalai Lama were insisting that people become Buddhists and stop going to church, etc.? Of course, they would not.

Moreover, unlike Upali, most of the people who are inspired by the Dalai Lama and attend these huge events take his advice at face value. They feel that they met an amazing person and that that person happens to be a Buddhist and that person has advised them that they in no way need to become a Buddhist in order to cultivate a good heart. Over the last ten years, the Dalai Lama's popularity seems NOT to have led to an increase in membership in among Buddhist groups in the West or even to an increase in the sales of Buddhism-related books.

The Dalai Lama's sincere recognition of what is good in other religions appeals to a wide swath of Westerners much more than the dogmatic and intolerant exclusivism of traditional Christianity. And the traditional Christian claim that no can come to Truth, salvation, peace, or spiritual fulfillment except through Christ and Christ alone, is not just an old-fashioned traditional Christian dogma. It is a core tenet even of liberal Christian churches--such as St. John's Episcopal. Not to say that everyone who attends or leads that church actually believes such. They most definitely do not. But, because this is a core dogma of Episcopalian faith, their priest was required to sign a document affirming that salvation is through Christ and through Christ *alone*.

It is fortunate that most Christians now do not take traditional orthodoxy too seriously--or at least do not stop to think through its moral and logical consequences. Suppose that you really did believe with total conviction that for every human there is just one lifetime followed by eternal torment in hell or eternal bliss in heaven. And suppose that you really believe that heaven comes *exclusively* to those who accept and affirm Jesus Christ as their savior. Would you not be morally obliged to help others come to Christ *by any means necessary*, even force if it is useful? If we could forcibly convert a non-Christian country to Christianity and raise its children--say Native

Americans at a mission school in Mount Pleasant-- as good Christians, then any violence we have done was not just morally justified, but morally required of us. For without our efforts, without our violence, all of those children would have burned in hell *forever*.<sup>7</sup>

But what about Buddhists? Don't they at some level, in some part of their tradition, believe that the Buddha taught something new, something deeper or better, something that could *not* just as well be had in any other religion? And if so, then how can the Dalai Lama be so tolerant and inclusive? The fact is that Buddhism, like Christianity and Islam, *does* claim to have an exclusive and uniquely deep teaching. This is understood in the following way: Buddha's teachings involves teachings about **ethics**, teachings about training the mind in **meditation**, and teaching about the fundamental nature of **reality**. The teachings in ethics include not only advice to avoid violating others, but also includes advice on how to cultivate love and compassion. Such ethical guidance is found in different forms in many traditions through the world. It is vitally important, but not unique to Buddhism. Teachings about how to meditate are also found in different traditions.

It is only with regard to the fundamental nature of reality that Buddhism differs; while other traditions tend to believe in some fundamental ground of Being, or Divine Creator, Buddhism believes that all things arise through the web of interdependent connection; all things are **empty** of self-existence. Since everything that exists, exists **ONLY** interdependently, there is no God in the sense of some absolute self-existent being. Buddhists do believe that, in the long run, sooner or later, in order to attain perfect happiness and total peace, one will have to come to know this fact not just intellectually, but with one's guts. And in that sense, just as very traditional Christians believe in

salvation through Christ alone, we might say that some very traditional Buddhists believe in salvation through emptiness alone.

Yet somehow in Buddhism this has almost never led to anything remotely comparable to the history of inquisitions and forced conversions that one finds in Christianity and Islam. Some have speculated that this is because Buddhists believe in many lifetimes. The path to spiritual perfection is in any case not going to be finished in one lifetime; we have to start somewhere and a great place to start is by developing an attitude of loving-kindness. And since that can be developed by Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, or Christian practices just as well as by Buddhist ones, what is the rush? The moral logic of forced conversion completely changes when you have multiple lives to work with.

Another factor is that the Buddha was never seen as a prophet of the divine creator, let alone an incarnation of that creator. Buddhists revere the Buddha as the supreme doctor, a human who found himself in the midst of existential distress, figured out how to work with it, and then passed those instructions down to us as spiritual medicine. Buddhist teachings are seen as good advice, good medicine, not commandments. The Buddha's approach in teaching was said to be "ehi passako," which means "come and see". He invited people to see whether practicing what he preached really did or did not help them. He specifically told people NOT to believe things just because he said them. And since everyone's situation is a bit different, there are different kinds of advice, different practices that are best suited for each person according to their different situation. If someone treats acne, back pain, and cancer with the same medicine, then we call that medicine snake oil and we call that doctor a quack.

As a good doctor, the Buddha taught different things to different people. Not everyone gets a clear, direct explanation of the fundamental nature of reality. Maybe

what they need instead is advice about not gambling. Or how to be more loving. In fact, in Buddhism it is said that although the teachings on emptiness as the fundamental nature of reality are the most profound, they are toxic to some who are not ready for them.

Whereas teachings on love and compassion are like a tonic that hurts no one and brings most people some benefit.

Within this context, we can understand that when the Dalai Lama tells people not to convert, but to focus on developing a good and loving heart through their home traditions, he is exemplifying traditional Buddhist attitudes and teaching practices. For him, this is completely consistent with his personal and traditional understanding that only Buddhism teaches the final truth about the fundamental nature of reality.

Clearly concerns about dogma, exclusivism, and religious tolerance are very important for us in the UUFCM. We base our fellowship *not* upon a shared truth claim about the fundamental nature of reality, but on a common commitment to support one another in our respective spiritual journeys. While we do have the problem of how to worship together while privately walking different paths, it works well as long as people keep asking questions, searching for deeper meaning. But if someone feels they have *found* some answers and comes forward to say: “This is truth as I have seen it,” then people get a bit nervous. But I think that everyone has to allow for the possibility that all of our seeking might actually lead, for some, to answers. And those who find answers that help them must allow that some of these answers will be unhelpful for others in the fellowship. Even so, we can be together and support each other, on the model of the Dalai Lama—who believes that emptiness is the ultimate reality—but does not at all insist that others think that way. He just leaves the door open a crack.

These issues are very sensitive among us because, as I have suggested, many of us are refugees from and/or survivors of dogmatic trauma. Even though I do not believe in God, I feel no need to evangelize others to my disbelief. It seems natural to me that belief in God is the medicine that some people need some of the time. In this way, I think our fellowship reflects the spirit of the Dalai Lama's approach. We can support each other in seeking and even sometimes in finding different ways of looking at and talking about the mystery of life and death.

We are safe here with each other. No one among us will impose her answers or his spiritual medicine on the group. We have found a place where we can heal.

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<sup>1</sup> These words appear at several places on the internet including <http://www.uunashua.org/100q/c11.shtml>. Their original source is unclear.

<sup>2</sup> *100 Questions That Non-Members Ask About Unitarian Universalism* by John Sias based on interviews with Rev. Steve Edington. Nashua, New Hampshire: Transition Publishing, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> This and what follows on PTSD is based on and/or taken verbatim from [http://www.medicinenet.com/posttraumatic\\_stress\\_disorder/article.htm](http://www.medicinenet.com/posttraumatic_stress_disorder/article.htm). The only exception are the words "trigger" and "landmine" which come out of conversations with Valerie Stephens, Ph.D. in clinical psychology.

<sup>4</sup> James Ishmael Ford at <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/23667.shtml>

<sup>5</sup> [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1989/press.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1989/press.html)

<sup>6</sup> This refers to the reading preceding this talk, which was as follows: Upali was a wealthy lay follower of a non-Buddhist teacher, Mahavira, who established Jainism. Because of his intelligence, Upali often appeared in public debates on behalf of his teacher. Eventually, Upali had a debate with the Buddha over the nature of karma. At the end of the debate, Upali was so impressed with the Buddha's teachings that he asked to become the Buddha's follower. To that, the Buddha answered, "Upali, you are at the height of your emotions. Go home and reconsider it carefully before you ask me again." Now Upali was extremely impressed. He said, "If it was any other guru, he will parade a banner saying, 'Mahavira's chief lay-disciple has become my follower'. But you, Venerable Sir, you asked me to go home and reconsider. Now, I want to be your follower even more. I will not stand up until you accept me". After repeated requests, the Buddha finally agreed to accept Upali, under one condition, "Upali, as a Jain, you have always

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made offerings to your Jain monks. Even when you become my follower, you will CONTINUE to give generously to Jain monks. This is my condition". Upali agreed to this condition. He later became one of the Buddha's chief disciples.

<sup>7</sup> I develop this argument based on my recollections of a talk by Professor Edwin Curley of the University of Michigan delivered at Central Michigan University in 2007.