

The Places We Meet: Unitarian Universalism and the Buddhist Traditionⁱ
by Guy Newland

Reading (adapted from “Interbeing” in *Peace is Every Step* by Thich Nhat Hanh):

There is a cloud in this piece of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either.

The cloud and the paper inter-are. Perhaps the word “interbeing” should be in the dictionary.

If we look deeply, we see that in the paper there is also the sun; nothing can grow without sunshine. The paper and the sun inter-are.

We can see the logger. The lumber-mill. We see the wheat from fields that fed the logger. For there is no paper without the logger, and the logger cannot log without bread. Likewise, the logger's father and mother are also in this paper.

Looking deeply, we see ourselves in the paper. When we look at the paper, it is our perception; your mind and my mind meet in this paper, and we are both there.

What is NOT here in the sheet of paper? Time, space, the earth, rain, minerals, the sun, cloud, river, heat—everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains the universe in it. How can it fit?

The paper *entirely depends upon non-paper elements*, things that are not paper, such as carbon, and the sun, and the logger's mother. And yet without them, there is no paper.

To be is to inter-be; like the paper, we *cannot* just be by ourselves alone. We cannot but inter-be with everything. Like the paper, we are inevitably vast; we include what seems other than ourselves.

As one Civil War nurse (Walt Whitman) said, “I am large, I contain multitudes.” When we pay close attention to who we really are, there is no one *else*, no one who is left out.

Acting from this understanding, service is not a strained sacrifice, but a natural activity. Within this mind, helpful care is not exactly compassion for *another*, but more like a reflex, a spontaneous gesture.

The right hand does not congratulate the left hand on having given to the poor.

No credit, no blame. No trace. This is Buddha.

I've been a Buddhist for thirty years; half of that time I have *also* been a Unitarian Universalist. As a Buddhist, I have taught at eight Buddhist centers and meditation groups—in Washington, Colorado, California, New Jersey, New York, and Michigan. As a UU, I am a founding member, past president and sometime sermon-giver right here.

I was raised Roman Catholic. In high school, under the influence of Aldous Huxley's book *The Perennial Philosophy*, I became more mystical and less orthodox. In college, I sought courses on personal religious experience, but the only courses that touched on this were those on Hinduism and Buddhism. For a few years, I was a sort of Hindu-Christian . . . but with a growing academic interest in Buddhism. As I studied Buddhism deeply in graduate school, I found that to say, "I am a Buddhist," was the best way to explain myself to others . . . and so, at last, the best way to understand myself. I rejected utterly any notion of God. I practiced various types of Buddhist meditation and attended Buddhist retreats.

Then, I married a clinical psychologist who was an atheist and the survivor of a Pentecostal, fundamentalist upbringing. As we raised kids here in Mount Pleasant, the lack of a community of shared values nagged at us. If it takes a village, where was ours? So, fulfilling the joke-definition of UUs as "atheists with children," we helped re-establish Mt. Pleasant's UU tradition. Our tradition has a Christian ancestry, which it gratefully acknowledges—without being specifically Christian now . . . and the same is true of me. Now my heart truly has two homes: UU and the Buddhist tradition. The perspective I gain from each enriches my understanding of the other.

The Buddhist tradition, like UU, is not based on a core creed; like UUs, Buddhists have many diverse beliefs. Deriving from the teachings of the Buddha, a being who awoke from the sleep of ignorance to see the world just as it is, the Buddhist tradition explicitly understands itself in terms of a medical metaphor: A Buddhist relies on Dr. Buddha, the medicine of his teaching (Dharma), and the nursing of the spiritual community (Sangha) he began.

So . . . what *does* the Buddha teach? *He teaches that we suffer needlessly because we don't see things as they are.* He explains this in a way that reflects his role as a compassionate spiritual doctor: (1) First

identifying the miserable symptoms, (2) then diagnosing their underlying causes, (3) then offering a prognosis of a cure, and (4) and finally prescribing a course of therapy for the alleviation of symptoms and attainment of a cure.

As for the symptoms, we suffer physical pain and mental anguish; we suffer from the fleeting nature of what we love, hold precious, and enjoy. We suffer as we find ourselves trapped in cycles of frustration, addiction, escapism, the existential rat race.

Such suffering arises because we don't see things as they are: We mistake as sources of true happiness things that actually perpetuate our misery; we mistake as unchanging and stable things and persons that are actually constantly changing; and we reflexively mistake--as independently real--things and persons that in fact exist **ONLY** via their participation in vast networks of interconnection. Based on such mistakes we act in ways that further the cycles of frustration; for example when we act out of greed—burning our mouths on the hot pizza—or anger—getting in a fight due to road rage, or sending an flaming e-mail to a boss, a sibling, or a friend.

But, good news: this misery is needless; it is possible to interrupt this cycle; it is possible to see things as they are. And the practice of seeing things realistically leads to a condition of peace and freedom. And so, for UU Buddhists, our principle #4 “seeking the truth” and principle #6 “working for peace” converge.

To be free of needless suffering we must experience things as impermanent and as existing only interdependently. Since this is contrary to long-established habit and reflexes, it requires the strong mental focus we develop by training the mind in meditation. But such mental focus is practically impossible to attain unless one first creates a superficially peaceful mind and a calmer environment by restraining harmful actions. So Dr. Buddha recommends that, at the outset, we voluntarily make commitments to restrain ourselves from acts of violence, deception, and thievery and so forth.

The blending of Buddhism with UU goes back to nineteenth-century Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The Unitarian Elizabeth Palmer Peabody was

the first to translate a Buddhist text into English.ⁱⁱ Nowadays, our seven principles framework is especially hospitable to Buddhists. In many towns and smaller cities, the only Buddhist practice groups are affiliated with and sheltered within UU communities. Some say that there are 10,000 self-identified UU Buddhists.ⁱⁱⁱ

Like most UU Buddhists, I wish my fellow UUs would learn more about the Buddhist tradition. Because UU so generously makes plenty of room for Buddhists, Buddhists can bring UU a number of important gifts. But let me first explain how UU has opened up and liberated my relationship to the Buddhist tradition.

I believe in participatory democracy, human rights, the profound power of the scientific method, GLBT rights, and of course—the full spiritual and political equality of men and women. Among *my* spiritual ancestors I would wish to count Susan B. Anthony and Audre Lorde; Harvey Milk and Charles Darwin—along with Śākyamuni Buddha. Of course, I would hope to be considered a feminist—but NOTE: even today, this is *not* something I can comfortably say at most of the Buddhist centers I visit. Such language is regarded as divisive. Like many other religions, Buddhism has inherited practices deriving from old patriarchal cultures.

Traditional Buddhism stresses nonviolence, compassion, love, and kindness on a personal level and also, sometimes, as an explicit matter of social policy. But it brings to the table no well-developed concepts or traditions of social justice and human rights.^{iv} Notions of justice and rights are powerful because they impose reciprocal duties and obligations. Buddhists know intimately that those who are wounded, oppressed, and locked out need compassion and active care—but it is the lineage running through the Prophet Amos and the philosopher John Locke that makes helping not only the most skilful option—but often a *moral obligation* as well. In UU, we take this as *given*—it is in our DNA, so to speak. And fortunately, ideas like these have begun to spread into Buddhist Asia. We hear the Dalai Lama speak often speak of human *rights*; his fellow Buddhist Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi

risks her life fighting for democracy in Myanmar; and the Humanist Buddhists of Taiwan work to build a Buddhist heaven—right here in *this* world.

Also, today many people live much longer and healthier lives because of medical knowledge derived from rigorous application of the *scientific method*. Whatever their virtues, traditional forms of medicine from Buddhist Asia produced *no* antibiotics, *no* smallpox vaccinations. In Tibet, until the 20th century, the ordinary Tibetan Buddhist typically lived only about 40 years.

And—it is fantastic and liberating gift that we now understand our very existence as human beings through the work of Charles Darwin and his successors. Like traditional Christians, traditional Buddhists are still working out how to reconcile genetics and evolution with the framework of their received cosmology. The cosmology implicit in traditional Buddhist rituals emerged in India even before the Buddha was born 2500 years ago.

On the other hand: Buddhism brings a great deal to UU. Probably the greatest gift we bring is meditation—which means systematic, intentional, mind training.^v Here is the first UU joke I heard: UUs come into a lobby where there are two signs: one points to the right and says “Heaven” and the other to the left labeled “lecture about Heaven”. All the UUs choose the lecture! Discourse is so much safer than actual experience . . . but really, why are we so timid? Meditation challenges us to investigate and to change our intimate experience of and relationship to the world. Westerners who have not actually meditated tend to associate meditation with relaxation and passive withdrawal. Those who have meditated a bit may associate meditation with physical pain. But those who persist discover that meditation definitely changes them, over time—so that they become kinder and better able to help others.

We Americans have a cultural emphasis on physical training, changing the shape and composition of our bodies through persistent effort, lots of “reps”. Think of meditation as the same sort of training—but for the mind, the character. With persistent effort—and not without it—we can improve our minds and our hearts, and thus improve our actions. Absent this some inner

transformation, there is a low ceiling to what social justice movements can accomplish. Mohandas Gandhi understood this. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King certainly understood this. Changing hearts and changing social structures—they go hand in hand, or else they falter.

One common type of meditation is the powerful practice of loving-kindness, known as *metta*. Have you heard of Metta World Peace? Formerly Ron Artest, he is just now in China winding down a long basketball career. He had become notorious for his anger issues; his decision to rebrand himself as Metta makes it clear that loving-kindness meditation has gained some popular currency in the West.

To practice *metta*, first you focus on developing an uncontrived sense of love for yourself: Forgive yourself. Wish yourself well. Have compassion for your own misery. This can be a real challenge for some of us, but is a necessary first step. But don't stop there! When you feel some real sense of tender care for yourself, then extend that feeling out to one other specific human. Train in likewise wishing that person well, feeling real care for that person. Then continue to expand the circle of love farther, so as to include even your jerk ex-brother-in-law, and even serial killers, and even insects . . . until you strongly feel an uncontrived sense of love for all living beings who suffer pain. Let's consider what a great teacher had to say:

“As we advance, small tribes are united into larger communities and reason tells us that all individuals should extend their sympathies to all members of the same nation, even those personally unknown to them. At this point, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent extending their sympathies to all. Unfortunately, when there are great differences in habit and appearance, it is a long time before we look at everyone as our fellow creatures. Extending sympathy beyond humans to lower animals seems to be a still later moral acquisition. This most noble virtue arises as our sympathies become more tender and more widely diffused—until they extend to all sentient beings.”^{vi}

Who said that? Maybe the Dalai Lama? No, that is Charles Darwin. To me, it seems that Buddhist loving-kindness meditation gives us a technique for advancing *intentionally* through the moral evolution Darwin envisions.

By far the most widely appropriated Buddhist meditation practice is mindfulness. Here, we first develop some focused attention by training our minds to stay clear and concentrated on a chosen point of attention, such as the breath as it moves through the nostrils. It takes time and persistence to do this; at first we very quickly become distracted. We must firmly but *very* gently, kindly, bring the mind back into focus *again* and *again*. Reps. When we have some success in stabilizing the mind, we release the narrow focus and use our mental clarity to notice whatever presents itself to our attention. Notice what you notice—as Allen Ginsberg put it. Try to maintain clear awareness, moment by moment, of whatever is arising in your experience. If your head itches or your knee throbs or you feel bored, then watch very closely what those experiences are, how they change. For a while, at least, put each instant of lived experience under the microscope of concentrated attention.

This kind of practice has been so widely adopted and modified in the West that the majority of therapists now use some type of mindfulness exercises with at least some of their clients. In the Buddhist tradition, the purpose of mindfulness is to help us wake up to reality, to gain insight into the fleeting, contingent, and composite nature of everything we take as solid, stable and unitary. The things we grasp at—including our selves and our families—are, by their very nature, ungraspable.

Many non-Buddhist Westerners use Buddhism-derived mindfulness to gain insight into their own personalities and control over their behavior. Through such practice, we can take notice, very precisely, of just what we are feeling here and now in our bodies. If we give ourselves permission to feel our feelings, and recognize them, then we can learn from them and work with them. Less and less often will we find ourselves acting impulsively, driven helplessly by what we have refused to allow into the light. For example, when we are intentional in noticing exactly how we feel anger rising in our bodies, then we can see it starting. We have a moment to reflect before we act, a chance to choose to be assertive, or empathetic, rather than cruel.

The UU tradition is heir to a great many metaphors for the divine—(God as father, God as shepherd, God as judge, etc.) but since we don't have a shared doctrine about the nature of the divine,

these don't get much play; we have uncomfortable differences about "the language of reverence".

Perhaps over time, we will use metaphors from Buddhism as well. For example, based on the therapeutic model wherein the Buddha is like a doctor, Buddhists very, very frequently speak of what is "helpful" and what is "not helpful". As it is not clear who, if anyone, can give UUs commandments about right and wrong, so it could be useful (helpful) to have this pragmatic way to choose among possible courses of action.

Finally, Buddhists bring to our common table the concept of *emptiness*: that nothing at all exists *in and of itself*. In UU we have the seventh principle: respect for the interdependent web of which we are all a part. As a Buddhist UU, I read the seventh principle to mean that each thing and every person exists ONLY in relationship to other things and persons. The open heart and open mind know that each and every thing and person is created by, and creating, hosts of other things in a dance or a web of intimacy, a flickering, shimmering play of reality. We know the sacred when we see this and attune our lives to the rhythms of this dance.^{vii}

For the Buddhist UU, this means that things are *not* out there, on their own, using their natural existence as a basis from which to connect and to form a web that we should respect. This misses the point. No one, and no thing, can ever exist *at all* except in dependence upon other parts of the web; and those other parts exist only dependently as well, and so forth—so that there *never is and never has been* any absolute ground. This is what Thich Nhat Hanh calls interbeing. Things don't exist first, and then hook up. Rather: *There is no such thing as unrelated existence*. To be is, in every case, already to interbe.

When I was writing this, Ralph Reed—the conservative evangelical—appeared on the Bill Maher show. I found Bill Maher's scornful and smug, offhanded dismissal of *all* religious faith even more disturbing than Reed's self-satisfied Bible thumping. But . . . it was really hard to choose. I got the sense that this is our problem: Most of the world divides between the Reed camp and Maher camp. On the one hand, there are those who cling ever more tightly to a narrow set of religious dogmas taken to be the absolute truth. In fear of the abyss of nihilism, they turn their living traditions into frozen

fundamentalisms. And they deny what seems obvious: that all really important stories are open to diverse interpretation—and that this a big part of why we keep telling them!

On the other hand, there are many secularists—on the left and the right—who disparage religion without understanding it, and judge well-being in narrowly material terms. In terms of the Buddhist UU path, these both seem like missteps.

Many secularists who genuinely pursue broader ethical values still try to avoid any contamination by religion cooties; even UU feels risky to some of them. Often folks who are queasy about religion are on the rebound, in recovery from some form of fundamentalism. They are victims of post-dogmatic trauma disorder. They flinch a bit, reacting viscerally to pews or organs or stained glass, or to words like scripture and God. These trigger mini-flashbacks to the *real trauma* that fundamentalist dogmatism has caused them.

But . . . *religion is a very powerful cultural technology*—whether it is used to help or to harm, it seems too useful to discard. Even the Maoists, seeking to destroy all Chinese religion, found themselves inventing socialist martyrs, the scripture of the little Red Book, images of Mao as a god-like figure, and rituals of communist solidarity. We don't live by bread or rice alone; we need meaning and community and motivation; we need symbols and narratives that point to things we value even more than our own lives.

Liberal and liberating religion—in my case UU Buddhism—is a middle path between secularism and dogmatic religion. It seems that only a tiny fraction of religious folks around the world take this approach. But religious liberals are much more important than our low headcount would suggest. We are vital links between religious communities, on the one hand, and, on the other, secular reformers who ready to march for justice. The abolition of slavery and the Civil Rights movement are clear cases where liberal religion showed its muscle by linking the secular left to the power of faith-based justice traditions.^{viii}

Well . . . no one knows where this communion of East and West will lead. I don't know how much will come of it. The historian Arnold Toynbee is supposed to have said, "The coming of Buddhism to the West may well prove to be the most important event in the 20th Century."^{ix} This prophecy always faced long odds and, even with all that has changed, remains unfulfilled. We've come so far from the days when the word Buddhism conjured up in the American mind only idol-worship and navel-gazing.

UU and Buddhism work well together for me. I hope that more UUs will actually practice Buddhist meditation—don't be content to listen to sermons about it! Likewise, I hope that Buddhists in the West will come to see UU not just as a safe place to be a bit different, but also as a liberating community inspired by a vision of the absolutely integral relationship between spirituality and social justice.

ⁱ A version of this sermon was delivered to Spokane Unitarian Universalist Church; June 29, 2014; this version was delivered to UUFCM in Mount Pleasant Michigan October 12, 2014. Personal and general inspiration for this sermon comes to me from Rev. James Ford's very helpful comments at: <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/welcome/buddhism/151243.shtml>.

ⁱⁱ A portion of the Lotus Sutra, from French.

ⁱⁱⁱ From *Zen Master Who?* by UU minister and Zen teacher James Ford; page 187.

^{iv} See "Compassion and Human Rights: Toward a Unified Moral Framework" in *Empty Words* by Jay Garfield.

^v A good place to start learning about Buddhist-style meditation in a very accessible *and fully secularized* format: *Search Inside Yourself* by Chade-Meng Tan.

^{vi} Cited in *Emotional Awareness* by Dalai Lama and Paul Ekman, page 149. Slightly adapted (switch to plural) to eliminate sexist language, which would be distracting here.

^{vii} James Ford at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/monkeymind/2014/06/ behold-the-spirit-a-meditation-on-alan-watts-his-brief-experiment-in-a-mystical-christianity.html>

^{viii} Inspired by oral comments of Princeton scholar Jeffrey Stout.

^{ix} This statement is very often cited, but seems not to appear in Toynbee's published works. It is sometimes claimed to be something he said in response to a question near the time of his death in 1975. Compare "Why Buddhism Needs the West" by David Loy in *Tricycle*, spring 2009.