

**Bigheartedness, or the Affinity Between Buddhists and Unitarian Universalists**  
**Brigitte Bechtold**  
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We are here today as members of the Central Michigan Sangha, which is one of the groups, or you could say, ministries of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan. Indeed, such arrangements are not at all unheard of in UU fellowships or churches. So, one might ask, is there a natural affinity between Unitarian Universalists and Buddhists? If so, how did this come about historically and theologically? Or is it due to certain principles or values that are typically held by UUs as well as by Buddhists? How are these expressed in religious practices and spiritual sources? How do they show up in hymnals like the grey hymnal called *Singing The Living Tradition*? If there is such an affinity, is it becoming looser or tighter over time? Does it help us in thinking about the changes that are currently being considered by UUs who are deciding whether or not to move from the seven principles to a set of six values that surround a central value of love? Addressing such questions, let alone answer them, could take a long time, so I will take a few nibbles.

Words like compassion, altruism, and loving kindness point to qualities that are important to Unitarian Universalists and also to people who practice other religions, like Judaism and Islam. So why is it so typical for UU congregations to have groups that practice Buddhism?

The historical development of Unitarian Universalism in the United States offers several insights into this connection. To begin, Universalist tenets in UUism were developed within the framework of interpretations of the bible, and more specifically, exegeses of the New Testament. Americans in the early 1800s had little knowledge of Buddhism, and most did not distinguish between Buddhism and Hinduism, and the non-theistic aspect of Buddhism was too alien for it to be considered a religion. Even today, I often hear or read opinions that Buddhism is a way of life rather than a religion. Well, yes. One would hope that all religions offer a way of life. Take the African concept of Ubuntu, for example. **I am because you are.** We can further during coffee hour to what extent Ubuntu is indeed a religion.

A generation after Hosea Ballou published the seminal Universalist Treatise on Atonement, a woman by the name of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody was working in Boston together with the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the famous William Ellery Channing. She had a printing press and published a magazine called *The Dial*, in which she printed writings like Margaret Fuller's essay on feminism, Henry David Thoreau's Essay on Civil Disobedience, and also an English translation of a chapter of the Lotus Sutra—supposedly the first such English translation. The Dial routinely published the ideas of the so-called transcendentalists—the most famous among them Emerson and Thoreau. According to the transcendentalists, what we call the divine is in and runs through all of nature, including humanity. This has obvious implications for universalism, feminisms, communal living and interbeing. The emphasis on the transcendent as the fundamental reality is one of the major affinities that exists between this influence on UUism and Buddhism.

Another major step in developing the affinity between UUs and Buddhism came through the development of Humanism as a religious home for non-theists, including inspiration for UUs of that persuasion. Focus on the self on this side of death rather than on a God or Gods or a form of life continuing after death helped establish sympathies between UUism, Humanism, and Buddhism. In an article in UU World published in 2005, James Ishmail Ford put it this way: "... Many humanists have been intrigued by the Buddhist analysis of consciousness, which speaks to the possibility of joy and peace within the human condition." Unquote. Moreover, Western Buddhists have been influenced by the social activism humanism invites and so have Unitarian Universalists.

Quite a few Unitarian Universalists have embraced both UUism and Buddhism, and the reverse is true as well. Our Central Michigan Sangha has practitioners who became members of the fellowship

following their participation in the sangha, while at the same time remaining members there. And in the US, some UUs serve as ministers, while also having taken Buddhist precepts. I am one of them, although I am not currently serving a specific congregation. I was ordained in the Soto Zen tradition in 2002. Overall, a quarter of all Unitarian Universalists see Buddhism as one of their spiritual influences, and nearly 10 percent ARE Buddhists (from an article in UU World).

This is not too surprising: Western Buddhists and UUs are concerned with ecology, and the seventh principle captures this very well. It could be named the UU principle of interbeing. Let us read it together from the back of today's order of service. At least on paper, they are also committed to economic justice, justice towards people regardless of gender identity, sexual identity, ethnicity, social class, and racial justice. Both offer ways to help us live fully in the world. That is not to say that spiritual materials and readings, like the hymnal, used by Unitarian Universalists incorporate Buddhist principles uniformly across denominational sects. Some hymns misquote texts, some still confuse Hinduism and Buddhism, and there is very little material from the Mahayana tradition—contrary to what some might expect. There is a richly detailed article on the “grey” hymnal and its predecessors, written by Jeff Wilson, published in the *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* in 2018. There is no time to dwell on that today. Let me just say that he describes how even the latest version of the hymnal is rife with cultural appropriation and triumphalism. This should not surprise us too much, as this adds to other critiques of the hymnal's content, such as racism and ableism. We are evolving, as a religion, however, and so is Western Buddhism. But for the foreseeable future, Buddhists will continue to meet in groups of their own.

Looking further into the values shared by Buddhists and Unitarian Universalists, we can see that regardless of hymns, sects, and specific words, the values of empathy, compassion, generosity, altruism, interbeing and others are important to both. A word that captures all of this is “Bigheartedness,” the topic we engage in today. /// Is this bigheartedness something that can be learned, discovered, or revealed, and be part of our every daily moment? If so, how? A Unitarian Universalist, a Buddhist, a humanist or others may go about it differently.

Scientists remind us that the capacity for basic morality, specifically altruism, became part of human nature tens of thousands of years ago. Of course, both history and daily life provide many examples of lack of altruism. While we have a natural capacity for altruism or bigheartedness, many other things play a role in how we behave: our upbringing, our circumstances, our education about moral values and ethics, our religion, and religious scripture and principles. In Mahayana Buddhism, for example, the compassionate human—called a bodhisattva-- makes a vow that they will save all those who are suffering—which is everybody, really—and will not accept salvation for themselves until every other being is saved.

There are secular ways to learn and practice bigheartedness, notably in public schools and the family. Here are two examples: In Germany there are elementary schools where children who finish their assignment do not get a gold star. Rather, they get to help the kids who struggle a bit to finish. This is bigheartedness at work. And in some countries, young school children alternate the tasks of scrubbing the floors of their classroom and serving meals in the cafeteria.

And then there is the Spanish runner in a competition last year who saw that the Kenyan runner who was ahead of him had become disoriented and thought he was at the finish line. So, the Spanish runner pushed him along, so that the Kenyan won the race. When asked by reporters why he was being so generous, he answered that he would not be able to look his mother in the eye if he had just run on and won the race for himself. This story will be re-told quite often two weeks from now, on the occasion of Mother's Day.

So, there are many different paths to bigheartedness, which use different justifications, different explanations, different cultural expectations, different words, different emphases. The specific words may differ and their interpretations are adjusted over time, but the value does not change.

And this brings me to the significant endeavor that Unitarian Universalists have been engaged in for several years, culminating in a proposal to change Article II of the UUA bylaws, which contains the “Seven Principles” (printed on your order of service). Following a survey of values considered important by Unitarian Universalists and tabulating the results in a so-called word cloud, two values were mentioned the most often: love and compassion. Overall, seven values were distilled, and with love placed at the center, it looked like a flower with six petals, consisting of justice, interdependence, equity, transformation, pluralism, and generosity. And the work will culminate in a vote on whether or not to adopt the new configuration, or an amended version. Some UUs favor the change; others are throwing in the towel and leaving their congregations, and others yet want to defend the seven—or perhaps 8 principles. This is a wonderful time to think about words versus their underlying intention. Bigheartedness will not become less important in a new configuration of important values. May we keep in mind that Unitarian Universalism is an evolving religion, just as is Western Buddhism. It is exciting to be able to participate in this work, which is indeed sacred work.

May we make it so.