

## Buddhism for Us Today; adapted from Rev. Tom Owen-Towle

In Japan and other East Asian countries, the months of April and May bring celebrations of the founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama. In Japan they celebrate the Buddha's birth on April 8, pouring tea (often licorice tea) over the images of Buddha in temples and homes. In other countries where Buddhism is practiced, such as Sri Lanka, Laos and Tibet, the triple celebration of Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death takes place on the day of the full moon in May. Known as "Wesak Day," the holiday is celebrated with plays depicting the life of Buddha as well as colorful parades that wind around the temple and through the town.

The story of Buddha's life comes from generations of oral tradition. The first known writing about Buddha comes five hundred years after his death. As in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the story contains many miraculous elements.

### **The Story of Buddha** compiled from *Holidays and Holy Days*

One night Queen Maya had a wonderful dream in which an elephant with six tusks, carrying a lotus flower in its trunk, touched her right side. At that moment a child was miraculously conceived. When Queen Maya told her husband of this dream he called the Brahmins (or wise men) to interpret it. They predicted that a son would be born who would become either a great king or a great religious leader. His name would be Siddhartha, which means "he whose aim is accomplished." According to legend, Siddhartha later emerged as an infant from his mother's right side walked seven steps in the four directions of the compass and said, "No further births have I to endure, for this is my last body. Now shall I destroy and pluck out by the roots the sorrow that is caused by birth and death." According to tradition, it rained flowers at the time of Siddhartha's birth.

The King very much wanted Siddhartha to grow up to become a great king, not a religious leader. So he decided to give Siddhartha everything he desired and to protect him from all sorrows and trouble, so he would never want to leave the palace. At age 16 he married a beautiful princess. In time they had a child and were very happy together.

But at age 29, Siddhartha called his faithful charioteer Channa to take him for a secret ride outside the palace grounds. As they drove through the city, Siddhartha saw three things he had never seen before. First was an old man lying on the road, groaning with pain. Channa told Siddhartha that pain is common in the world. Soon they came to another man, all bent over and hobbling along with a cane. Channa told Siddhartha that illness is common in the world. Finally, they came on a man in rags, lying beside the road as if he were asleep. Channa told Siddhartha that poverty is common in the world.

Then Siddhartha saw a man dressed in a yellow robe with a shaven head, begging for food. Siddhartha stopped the chariot and questioned the man, "I am a monk," the man replied, "I have adopted a homeless life to win salvation. I search for the most blessed state in which suffering, old age, and death are unknown."

Shocked by the suffering in the common world, Siddhartha returned to the palace and thought about what he had seen. For the first time he was aware of suffering in life, and he felt he could no longer enjoy his own life of ease and riches. That very night Siddhartha decided to leave the palace. "If I were to live like one of these monks, perhaps I could learn the truth about suffering and how to end it." Silently kissing his wife and child goodbye, he asked Channa to drive him to the outskirts of the city. There he took off his jeweled sword and cut off his hair and beard. He took off his princely clothes, put on the yellow robe of a monk, and told Channa to take his possessions back to his father.

For years Siddhartha wandered throughout northeast India, seeking holy men who taught him, among other things, techniques of meditation. He studied the teachings of Hinduism, the ancient religion of India. The common Hindu belief at the time was that only by leading a highly spiritual life (or several lives) could a person break the endless cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. Siddhartha was attracted by this idea and he adopted a life of extreme self-denial, not

eating or sleeping and meditating constantly. For six years he stayed along the bank of the Nairanjana River, eating and drinking only enough to stay alive. He was determined to force himself to this highest state of being through self-denial. But over time he only became extremely weak.

One day, Siddhartha realized that his years of denial had weakened his body to the point where he could not think clearly about the world or religion. So he started to eat normally again. Refreshed by food, he sat down under a fig tree (known to Buddhists as the Bo Tree, the Tree of Enlightenment) and entered a state of very deep meditation. Buddhist scriptures say that during this meditation an evil spirit, Mara, tempted Siddhartha with all sorts of pleasures to distract him. But he was not swayed. His deep meditation continued until he had recalled all of his previous rebirths (550 previous states of existence). He gained knowledge of his cycles of births and deaths, and was able to cast off the things that bound him to the world. He had attained enlightenment, "Nirvana," the end of suffering.

From that day on Siddhartha was known as the Buddha, "the enlightened one," or "the one who has found the light." The light that Buddha found was not the kind that you see with your eyes. It was an inward light that makes you feel peaceful and helps you to think more clearly. Tradition says that when Buddha reached Nirvana, he could have cast off his body and his existence. Instead he turned back to the world, determined to share his enlightenment with others so that all living things could end the cycles of their own rebirth and suffering.

During his lifetime Buddha institutionalized his teachings by forming Sangha, a community of monks and nuns who practiced the religion and taught it to others. Buddha's wife and son joined him in the Sangha, as well as other relatives.

Buddha taught that both good things and hard things come to every person. Both are part of life. But if you choose to follow Buddhist law (called Dharma, or the Middle Way) you will live a good life and find peace, perhaps even reach Nirvana. You don't need priests to pray for you, you don't need to make sacrifices to the Gods, and you don't have to be of a certain caste in society. Buddha taught that all people can avoid the extremes of behavior (selfish pleasure or self-denial) which lead to suffering, and follow the Middle Way to a good life. The Buddhist law is comprised of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

The actual historical Siddhartha Gautama was born around 560 BC in northern India into a royal family. He left his palatial home to become a monk of a hermit-like order. Realizing the futility of absolute asceticism, Gautama then pursued a combination of rigorous thought and meditation. Buddha taught kings and warriors, farmers and beggars and criminals, all according to their own special need. He died at the age of 80.

Buddha always said he was just a human teacher not a savior or guru. By naming no successor but his teachings, Buddha never even set himself up as the head of a religious order.

Buddha focused on ethical, not metaphysical, matters; he focused on life problems. Buddha preached a spirituality devoid of speculation. He wasn't enamored of discussions, but deeds; not cogitation, but compassion. Questions such as whether the world is eternal or not, whether life exists after death or not, whether there is a god or not simply did not occupy his mind. Gautama boldly declared that fourteen such questions "tended not to learning." Hence, the Buddha simply offered no answer to the riddles of creation, deity, or death. Much of his appeal to millions around the world for 2500 years, and certainly to practical Unitarian Universalist theologians, has come from his common sense refusal to try to answer unanswerable questions.

Buddha considered rituals and theology to be interesting, but ultimately inconsequential, sideshows. The only thing that really counted was the good life. And what constituted the good life? In his famous first sermon to a few disciples Buddha taught one thing: suffering and the end of suffering. His central message—simply stated yet enduringly profound—consisted of Four Noble Truths:

1. Existence includes unhappiness. It's our human condition to suffer in one form or another. Yet this reality of suffering is not depressing, negative, or life-denying news. Rather, it's the expectation that there should be no suffering that's life-denying.

2. Our unhappiness is aggravated by selfish desire, the craving, or, literally, "the unquenchable thirst," for our own satisfaction at the expense of all other forms of life.

3. Release from unhappiness comes through release from cravings—the state of Nirvana.

4. Such liberation from cravings arrives by following the training known as the Noble Eightfold path whose steps are right *understanding* of how the world works (including the law of karma and the impermanence of everything in life); resolve to live according to the highest *morals* in speech, conduct, livelihood; *mindfulness* of all that is happening in one's consciousness, and proper concentration during meditation. These are frequently collected together as the three aspects of enlightenment: wisdom, morality, and meditation. This cultivation of ethics and meditative awareness moves us ever toward greater freedom from unhappiness.

Many have called these eight challenges of "right relations" the Middle Path, because there are two extremes to be avoided throughout. Siddhartha Gautama discovered that extremes bring unhappiness. Over-indulgence has the same effect on a person as has the release of all tension on the strings of a violin. Conversely, extreme self-denial has the effect of tightening the strings on a violin until they are at the breaking point. In neither case is there right attunement. It is this lack of attunement that aggravates human suffering. The Middle Path assists us in finding harmony within ourselves and with the universe. Following the Middle Path produces understanding that leads to peace, insight, to Nirvana, which is the highest destiny of the human spirit. Nirvana literally means extinction, that is, the extinction of all craving, resentment, arrogance, and covetousness. Buddha called Nirvana "incomprehensible and unutterable." When pressed he would venture only one affirmative description: "Bliss, yes bliss, my friends is Nirvana," and it can be had here and now.

In short, Buddha says that unhappiness or suffering comes from greedy desires and uncontrollable passions. When we are greedy, we come to grief! Therefore, some Westerners have felt that the devoted Buddhist must unequivocally let go of every desire. But that's clearly foolish, because to let go of every desire would be to die, and to die is not to solve the problems of living. That's not what Buddha meant at all. There are clearly some desires that he deliberately advocated—for example, the desire for liberation from suffering and the desire for the welfare of other beings. His philosophy of the Middle Way strongly encourages us to enjoy life and its many pleasures and possibilities while not growing overly dependent upon or attached to any of them. The Buddha would remind us that most of the suffering we experience in life is the result of our clinging too ferociously to precisely "my" possessions, however precious, all of which are fleeting. Buddha teaches us that possession can become obsession. We yearn for permanence, but we cannot get it. Permanence is not attainable. The heart of Buddha's wisdom says:

"Desire for what will not be attained ends in frustration, therefore to avoid frustration, avoid desiring what will not be attained."

Life is characterized by constant becoming. Therefore, let things, people, experiences, relationships and life come, be, and go. Learn the art of both sensitive engagement and healthy detachment. Gentle holding and timely letting go. Desperately attaching ourselves to certain parts of existence, we grow alienated from the whole of life. We are summoned by Buddha to travel through life with a caring yet light touch. Buddha is promoting moderation, the Middle Path, which is sensitive to self and respectful of the world. *Balance* is the key to happy, fulfilled, healthy living.

There's a fundamental paradox here. The less we're attached to *things* in life—whether material things or interpersonal things like status—the more *alive* we can become. The less we have fixed preferences and obsessions, the more deeply we can experience the flow of life. Of all the religions of the world Buddhism alone makes unnecessary suffering central and explains the

cause of it – neither some supernatural god nor fate nor the devil but the grasping greed of human beings ourselves. Buddhism demands no blind faith from us, pushes no dogmatic creeds, demands no rites or rituals, sacraments or secrets. The Middle Way is available and open to every person.

Just like the message of Jesus got misinterpreted by the early Christian church, so after Buddha's death all the paraphernalia of religion that Buddha labored so carefully to exclude came tumbling into his religion with a vengeance – it rituals and mysteries. As someone plaintively wrote: "The retribution that history visits upon its great leaders is to give them followers." Within 200 years after Buddha's death historians noted eighteen different varieties of Buddhism.

Today there are approximately 376 million practicing Buddhists in the world; about 6% of the world's population. Flourishing abroad, Buddhism languished in its birthplace, as the Indian monks grew rich and corrupt under state patronage. Today, Buddhists constitute less than 1% of India's population, and the faith is kept alive largely by *untouchable* converts fleeing the caste system. But in Tibet, for example, Buddhism evolved into a theocracy that lasted 400 years, until the Chinese drove the current Dalai Lama into exile in 1959. In China, Japan, and southeast Asia Buddhism prospers.

*Zen* Buddhism developed in China about 500 CE and later spread to Japan. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century it became well-known in the Western world, and it is currently the most influential form of Buddhism in the US.

The defining characteristic of Zen is the lack of emphasis on studying the many teachings, scriptures, of Buddhism. Instead, Zen simply emphasizes the practice of meditation. Through meditation alone the person becomes awakened: that is, through meditation the person comes to experience the essence of herself as self-conscious intelligence and emotion. Through meditation the person's self-awareness "backs out of" the endless to and fro of mental chatter and reactive emotions, and "rests" in a position of "witnessing" all that is going on in consciousness. In this *Witness* state, the person sees his reactive thoughts and feelings as belonging to him, to his consciousness, but he has some observational distance from them. His reactive, defensive feelings become less powerful and less controlling, and he is freed from excessive attachment to instincts and is freed from excessive needs to boost self-esteem with power, prestige, and mirroring from others.

In this state of *witnessing* a different feeling or emotion arises; it is often called *bliss*. This is the emotion that accompanies consciousness when instinctual and defensive feelings are not in control. Bliss is the polar opposite of angry defensiveness. Bliss is a state of *loving-kindness* toward all existence; *loving-compassion* for all feeling beings—including oneself. Bliss is the core of the urge to procreate, to create, to love, to care. Loving-kindness is the source of what Erik Erikson called *generativity*; the urge to create in ways that benefit others.

In Buddhism, as in Unitarian Universalism, no one proselytizes. Buddhism doesn't say you should meditate, or only superior people meditate, or you're going to hell if you don't meditate. Rather people end up practicing Buddhist disciplines because they enable us to live more free of day-to-day emotional buffeting. Buddhism isn't a belief system, it's a practice. As with Unitarian Universalism: deeds not creeds.

In a time when the multitudes were passively relying on the Brahmins to tell them what to do, Buddha radically challenged each individual to do his or her own religious seeking. Buddha eschewed fatalism and advocated self-reliance. Each person has inherent worth, and needs to be encouraged on a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. On this score, the kinship between Buddha and Unitarian Universalism is unmistakable.

In the Buddha's own words: "Do not accept what you hear by report, do not accept tradition, do not accept a statement because it is found in our books, nor because it is the saying of your teacher. Be lamps unto yourselves..." No god or goddess could be counted on, not even the Buddha himself. "When I am gone," he told his followers, "don't bother to pray to me. For when I am gone, I am gone."

Related is Buddha's insistence that real wisdom can not be taught. It's only arrived at through experience. Never has a religion set out its case with so complete an appeal to empirical judgment. On every question, personal experience was the final test for truth. A true Buddhist disciple must "know" for himself and herself. In his later years, when India had become electric with his message, people came to Buddha even as they were to come to Jesus asking what he was. When people carried their puzzlement to the Buddha, the answer he gave provided a handle for his entire message. "Are you a god?" they asked. "No." "An angel?" "No." "A saint?" "No." "Then what are you?" Buddha answered, "I am awake."

That's what the name Buddha means—"an awakened one." Buddhism begins with a person who shook off the daze of ordinary awareness and convention and the status quo. It tells the story of a person who dared to wake up from the trance of daily material existence, and who taught others to wake others up as well. Indeed, the radical reality is that we can each become a Buddha; so the quest is not to become a Buddhist but a Buddha—an awakened one—in your own fashion. That's the challenge of our Unitarian Universalist tradition as well: to be awake, to stay awake—awake to new truth and ancient wisdom, awake to self-fulfillment and universal compassion; to be awake, to be Buddha-like during our earthly journey. Amen.