

**“Buddhism I: The Man Who Became a God” A sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely  
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Buddhism begins with a man. In his later years, when India was afire with his message, people came to him asking what he was. Not, “Who are you?” but, “What are you?”

“Are you a god?” they asked. “No.” “An angel?” “No.” “A saint?” “No.” “Then what are you?” The Buddha answered, “I am awake.”

His answer became his title, for this is what Buddha means. The Sanskrit root *budh* means to awake and to know. While the rest of humanity is dreaming the dream we call the waking human state, one of our number roused himself. Buddhism begins with a man who woke up.

The man was Siddhartha Gautama. He was born around the year 563 bce in a northwest corner of India near present day Nepal. His Father was a minor king. Siddhartha grew up in an atmosphere of wealth and privilege.

As with any religious figure of import, a legend sprang up around his life. Whether it is factual or not, we cannot say. But like all such mythic legends, the story reveals the truths of the faith.

Fortune tellers promised at his birth that Siddhartha would be a great figure, but there was some ambiguity in their prediction. If he stayed engaged with the world, he would become a great king and world conqueror. If he ‘dropped out’ or became disillusioned, he would become a great teacher.

Now his father, who wanted kingship for the prince, interpreted this fortune as meaning he had to keep his son happy with the world at all costs. For fear that the boy would see something unpleasant, he kept the child in splendid isolation, the world’s original gilded cage. There were palaces and dancing girls and every pleasure at his disposal. When he left the palace, runners were sent ahead to clear the road of any unpleasant sight.

As you might expect, there came a day when the runners failed to do their jobs. On one journey, Prince Siddhartha saw not one, but four distressing sights. First, he encountered an old man, gaunt with broken teeth leaning on a stick. He had never seen such a thing. When he asked what it was he was told “age, my lord.” Next he came across a body lying by the side of the road racked with disease. “What is that?” he asked, “Sickness”, was the reply. Third he encountered a corpse. “And that?” “Death,” he was told. Finally he encountered a monk with shaved head and saffron robe and begging bowl. “Who is that?” “Someone renouncing the world and seeking inner peace, sire.”

The Four Passing Sights transformed the young prince. They forced him to come to terms with age and the disintegration of the body made him despair of finding fulfillment

on the physical plane. Really, this was his first awakening – that what we see and experience in our sheltered lives is not the full scope of reality.

At age 29 he shaved his head and went off to become an ascetic monk and to search for enlightenment, but he was more ascetic than most. He nearly starved himself to death and found no enlightenment. He learned the futility of asceticism – a second illusion shattered - and so chose the Middle Way, between the extremes of asceticism and indulgence.

He took up a Hindu meditative form called raja yoga . Remember, India was a Hindu sub-continent. After 6 years of disciplined meditation, and sensing a breakthrough was near he went at nightfall and sat under a Bo tree vowing not to arise until he had gained his goal. He was tempted by visions of voluptuous women and tormented by fireballs thrown by the god Mara, but he outlasted the god. By dawn his consciousness, 'pierced the world's bubble collapsing it to nothing only to find it restored with true being. This is called the Great Awakening.

Siddhartha Gautama was gone replaced by the Buddha. For 50 years Buddha remained on the earth seeking to help others find enlightenment. He founded an order of monks (sangha) and renounced the Brahminsim (his caste order) of Hindu society.

He was very active. He ran the order, taught, preached and counseled, but each year he would retire for three months of meditation. And three times every day we would retire to meditate. We might all take a lesson on the importance of relaxation and tending one's own spiritual life.

He died somewhat ignominiously, from eating poison mushrooms. His last words were, "All compounds grow old. Work out your own salvation with diligence."

Many stories survive about the Buddha. He was a cool rationalist, but one with a warm and sympathetic heart. Every problem was analyzed rationally, but then warmed by compassion. Buddhism is sometimes labeled a religion of 'infinite compassion'.

The strength of his character, his noble manner, the fact that he gave up wealth and privilege combined with the intensity of his mission won him converts in heavy numbers. Unlike the founders of most faiths, the Buddha knew from the get go what he was doing, that he was attracting followers to a new path.

### Buddhism and Hinduism

No religion pops out of thin air. Buddhism arose out of Hinduism, but it developed very quickly. The Buddha, a reformer as much as anything else seeking to strip away the layers of ritual and caste structure and reach for the truth and broad equality. In so doing, Buddha created a non-religion if you will... a path without the traditional elements of religion:

1. His religion was devoid of authority. He challenged the monopoly of the Brahmins and encouraged people to take responsibility for their own lives. "Do not accept what

you hear by report. Be ye lamps unto yourselves.”

2. Buddha preached a religion devoid of ritual. In fact he ridiculed Hindu ritual.
3. Religion is usually used to explain the way things came to be and why things happen. Buddha skipped all of that and preached a religion of speculation. About the nature of the world, life and death and all those good questions? Buddha maintained “a noble silence”.
4. He bypassed tradition. “Do not go by what is handed down, nor by the authority of your traditional teaching. When you know of yourselves, ‘these teachings are good or not good’ only then accept or reject them.”
5. Buddha preached a religion of intense self-effort. Grace would not intervene. There was no benevolent presence there to comfort us. It was all your own work.
6. Finally he preached a religion without the supernatural. He condemned divination, soothsaying and magic.

#### Four Noble Truths

In its evolution, Buddhism has developed a simple set of easily remembered touchstones. We have already heard of the Four Passing Sights. The foundation of the tradition are the Four Noble Truths.

1. Dukkha. Ordinary existence is a state of suffering. There are the usual physical sufferings. Then there is the suffering of Impermanence, the sure knowledge that nothing in life lasts. The third form is mental suffering caused by conditioning of the mind. It is the worst of the sufferings because it leads to negative attitudes which leads to wrong actions and eventually to rebirth in one of the lower realms.
2. The Arising of Dukkha or the causes of suffering. Suffering is caused by an ignorant state of mind. We are fooled into thinking the things around us are real. Status, power, wealth are not real things, but illusions like the temptations that beset the Buddha sitting under the Bo tree. We develop attachments to these false things. We believe and crave false realities and that gives rise to our mental suffering.
3. The cessation of dukkha. Suffering is ended by renouncing the negative mind and the false attachments. Suffering is ended by developing real compassion for all human beings. This brings liberation and peace of mind. It allows the creation of harmony between oneself and one's environment.
4. The only method one can attain this liberation is by following the teachings of the Buddha in the Eightfold Path. But be warned... that takes many lifetimes of effort.

#### The Eightfold Path

The Buddha approached life like a physician in the four noble truths. First he lists symptoms, then he diagnoses the cause, and finally he prescribes a remedy, the Eightfold Path. It is a course of treatment in the form of self training with a moral aim.

But before starting on these eight steps, there is a preparatory step that goes

unmentioned: it is right association. Any physician will tell you that the first step in healing is removing the source causing symptoms. In a moral world where our own desires for private fulfillment are the cause of distress, we must try to associate with those renouncing such desires. To put it another way, you don't send a drug addict to a crack house for rehabilitation.

The first two steps are wisdom or intellectual steps. Right Understanding is the first. One has to grasp the problem before one can seek to cure it. Studying the Truths opens the self to change.

Right Intention is the second. Once we understand the problem we have to decide what we are going to do about it. Are we ready to direct ourselves onto the path of enlightenment and put aside the distractions of desire? Until we are single minded we will not get too far.

The next three steps are ethical disciplines: Right Speech calls us to look at what we say, to notice what it reveals about our character. Instead of promising to tell the truth, we start by noticing how many times a day we feel the need to deviate from it. When we do that we will probably discover that we are lying to cover something soft and weak in ourselves. As well, our speech should proceed towards compassion. Once we begin to notice what we say, false witness, crude or uncharitable gossip and the like will begin to drop away. By monitoring and then changing speech, we begin to change ourselves.

The fourth step is Right Action. The Buddha detailed this in the Five Precepts that constitute the Buddhist version of the 10 Commandments of Judaism and Christianity. Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not be unchaste. Do not drink or take drugs.

Fifth comes Right livelihood. Buddha believed one's occupation could become too distracting and keep you from the path "The hand of the dyer is subdued by the dye in which it works." When one gets far enough along the path, participation in a monastic sangha is in order. But for the layperson this item suggests work that promotes life instead of destroying it. The Buddha even outlined professions that were incompatible with the path: drug peddler, slave trader, prostitute, butcher, brewer, arms maker and tax collector (in his day a corrupt line of work).

The last three steps involve mental discipline: Sixth is Right Effort. The Buddha placed tremendous stress on moral exertion. While the goal was ultimately to free the mind, one did not achieve this simply by emptying it. It took hard work. It takes an effort of will and a great deal of discipline to begin the path. One has to stop those things which are harmful or distracting, but oh so attractive or habitual for us. We are addicted to the illusions of this life. To turn away from them takes a great deal of mental effort. We have to force ourselves into a different way of thinking.

Seventh is Right Mindfulness. The Buddha was one of the most rational of all religious founders. He respected human mind. The best loved Buddhist text, the Dhammapada opens with the words, "All we are is the result of what we have thought." Ignorance, not

sin is life's prime adversary in Buddhism.

To gradually overcome ignorance, the Buddha counsels continuous self-examination until self awareness liberates us. The more we know why we do what we do, the more likely we are to be able to free ourselves from that behaviour. But this is full time work! Every action, every movement is scrutinized. Moods and emotions are to be noticed non-reactively. The mind must control the senses and impulses, not be controlled by them.

Finally there is number eight Right Concentration. Known to most of us in its Japanese Zen form, this involves long periods of sitting in meditation, learning to let go of distraction and to focus the mind. It becomes absorbed with enlightenment and remains focused on the task until, like Buddha under the Bo tree, it breaks through to enlightenment.

Well, that's the core of Buddhism as it began. And you can see how it was so attractive to early Unitarians like Emerson. It was logical and rational. It involved deep self-examination of one's action and more importantly of one's motives. It provided the tools for self-perfection and produced good and healthy living. In a less disciplined way, our current Unitarian Universalist Principles call us to the same goals.

Next week we will look at the later divisions within Buddhism and consider some of the practices.