

**"Buddhism II- Spreading The Lotus" a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely
Sunday, January 23, 2011 Unitarian Church of Edmonton**

In the first sermon in this series I described how Buddhism began with a man, Gautama Siddhartha, a wealthy Indian prince. After a protected childhood, he became aware of the decay of living things and became a monk seeking enlightenment and understanding.

After a six year period of self-discipline and meditation, he achieved enlightenment. When asked who he was, he replied "I am awake." He became known as the Buddha which means 'awake' in Sanskrit.

The Buddha then set out to share his path with followers who gathered quickly. He spent 50 years running a sangha or group of monks, although he was careful to always leave time for his own spiritual practices.

In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha diagnosed the condition of the world and then offered a prescription for its ailments. The truths were: All life is suffering, Suffering arises from our attachments to the illusions we call reality. Suffering ceases with letting go of these attachments and finally the Eightfold Path was his prescription for achieving enlightenment. The Eightfold Path included two intellectual steps, right understanding and right intention. There were three ethical steps, right speech, right action and right livelihood. The last three steps spoke to mental discipline: right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

The Buddha died around 478 BCE, 500 years before Jesus. By the time of his death, this new way of religion had swept across India. In his life, Siddhartha Gautama claimed to be nothing more than a man who had awoken. He founded a path- one might argue a non-religious path - that was simple, devoid of ritual or hierarchy and open to all. And yet Buddhism became one of the world's major religions.

It is interesting to look at what the roots of any of the world's great faith traditions after the founder dies. And when we do, there is a consistent occurrence: they split. In Early Christianity there was the split between the Hebrew and Gentile Christians within decades of the death of Jesus. In Islam the inheritors fought over Muhammed's legacy forming into what is today Sh'ia and Sunni factions, two groups wrapped in often violent clashes with each other. So it was in Buddhism. Within a century, there was a schism, but it did not seem to have the same vitriol as the other splits I described.... it was more a growing apart into different schools of thought and different approaches as the phenomenally successful religion spread through India, but then eastwards into Nepal, China, Japan and the rest of southeast Asia. Today there are some 250 million Buddhists around the world, practicing the tradition in as many varied forms as you can imagine.

Big Raft, Little Raft

While much of the Buddha's teachings and truths and paths survive intact, like many faiths, the texts supporting Buddhism did not appear for a long time after his death...nearly a century. Most of the stories I have told about his birth and such come from those later texts. But because his teachings were so carefully organized, scholars feel safe with many of the direct quotations.

Huston Smith, the great recorder of world religious diversity argues that all religions change after the death of the founder, because there is no such thing as a one size fits all faith. People come asking different questions, and the answers to those questions tend to create factions:

A first kind of question concerns: Are people independent or interdependent? How much control do I have over my life? What was the impact of upbringing? Do gods rule my fate? Can they even intervene in my life?

A second approach concerns the relation of humans to the universe. Is it friendly? Hostile? Indifferent? Different life experiences will suggest different answers and that will inform faith choices.

A third series questions concern human nature: what is the best part of the human? The head? Or the Heart? Classicists rank thoughts above feelings. Romantics do the opposite. The first seek wisdom, the romantics seek compassion. This is another dividing line in faith. When a question like that is critical to your worldview, how then do you respond to Buddha's parting words: "Work out your own salvation with diligence."

Early Buddhism divided on two major lines. One group sought progress through wisdom not cosmic grace. The others placed compassion above wisdom, sought help from compassionate Buddhas (nearly deifying him) and sought to enlighten others. In western terms, these two schools followed the head/heart split that is familiar to us all.

Both groups became known as yanas or rafts carrying people across life's river. The compassionate group appealed to lay people as well as monks and so was far more numerous. They took the name Mahayana or 'big raft'. The more elitist wisdom seekers were fewer in number and so were called Hinayana or 'little raft'. Not loving that second class name they soon began calling it Theravada or "The Way of the Elders". They claimed to represent the original Buddhism, that of Gautama himself. If we look at the earliest text the Pali Canon which contains Buddha's wisdom teachings, we certainly find support for their claim.

But the Mahayanists argue that the life story of the Buddha teaches more eloquently than his words. And for them, the most important fact is that having achieved enlightenment (nirvana) while sitting under the Bo tree, the Buddha returned to help others along the path, a supreme act of compassion (bodhisattva).

Again to return to the more familiar story of Christianity, we can see a parallel between

its two major approaches. There are those who are more intrigued with the Divine Jesus and all of the complicated theology that develops from believing in the idea of a God made man and being raised from the dead. The other school includes the people who are more interested in Jesus the man, what he taught and what messages his life gives to those who came after. The first tends to be a wisdom tradition, the second a compassionate tradition.

Now about this point in the first draft of the discourse came a parsing of the Buddhist tradition that showed where the different schools flourished, which subschools grew out in later time and so on. You can thank me later for deleting all of that. I will happily point you to a very good article should you wish to pursue that interesting, but dry way.

Instead, here are just a couple of generalities, some broad strokes of colour.

The Theravadan or Wisdom tradition holds that once the Buddha reached nirvana, he was gone for good. All that was left of him were his ideas and his wisdom. It is up to us to 'Work out your own salvation.' This is accomplished by following the Buddha's path: meditation, increasing retreat from the world, pursuit of simplicity as one realizes that all that we call 'real' is simply an emotion. The challenge is to renounce desire and attachment to this so-called reality. The Theravadan path emphasizes the sanghas, the orders of monks who run the temples and give themselves to meditation, chanting etc.

The Mahayanists have a different take, starting with the Buddha. They believe he is still available to us as a bodhisattva or saint. A story illustrates the difference. Four men are crossing the desert and come to a compound surrounded by high walls. One of the four scales the wall and gazing over the side gives a whoop of delight as he sees a beautiful garden, fruit streams, streams, birds and wildlife. He jumps down and disappears. The second and third do likewise, but the fourth, climbs the wall, looks over the miraculous bounty and does not leap down. Instead he turns back into the desert choosing to show other wayfarers the way to the oasis. This is a bodhisattva, once who delays entry into nirvana until all can find the way.

The Mahayanists believe that the compassionate Buddha did the same, and is available through prayer to share this grace with us. In the ages that followed the acts of meditation and self-improvement added prayers of supplication to the Buddha, the development of rituals and religious rites designed to keep followers close. In addition to the ancient Pali Canon, the Mahayanists added other texts as authoritative, and developed as liberal anything goes approach that included women and lay people as full partners. Buddhism became a religion more than a philosophical practice.

More importantly, the Mahayanist tradition is more of the world. One does not have to retreat permanently into the monastic setting. It is all right to work and raise a family and care about family and the world in which we live. Like many of us, followers of this Buddhist path try to keep one foot in the spiritual and one foot in the physical and historical world.

Huston Smith sums up the development of Mahayana Buddhism this way, “This in the end the wheel comes full circle. The religion that began as a revolt against rites, speculation, grace, and the supernatural, ends with all of them back in force as its founder (who was an atheist as far as a personal God was concerned) transformed into such a God himself.”

Here I also wish to note the rise of Vajrayana Buddhism “The Diamond Path”. It is an esoteric form of Buddhism dominant in Nepal and Tibet and familiar to us through the life and work of the Dalai Lama. In one sense it is a bridge between the two great traditions, for it emphasize the priesthood, chanting and meditation, but it is also of this world. It contains a set of practices such as sand paintings and hand gestures called mudras and more ritual than Theravadan traditions. But in this setting I can do little more than note this third way.

As with all religion, there is no way to prove which way is right. As a Unitarian I suggest that the development of an austere wisdom tradition and the redevelopment of a supernatural kind of spiritual tradition merely reflect the differing needs of human nature. Religion inevitable follows the needs and wants of the followers who unconsciously reshape the message to fit the needs of their culture, their time and their place.

And I will further suggest, as a set up to the third sermon in this series, that the Buddhism that came to North American awareness – thanks to Unitarians in the 1840’s - ends up being a blending of the two traditions. It begins with the Theravadan wisdom path and meditation, but in the end the purity of that path has to adapt to a western world populated by those unwilling to give up their attachments to life, love, and the things of this world.