

**“UU’s and the Buddha - Buddhism III” third of a sermon series
Rev. Brian J. Kiely Unitarian Church of Edmonton, January 29, 2011**

It would not be too grand an overstatement to say that Buddhism came to North America because of Unitarians. .. a bit of an overstatement, of course, but not too much of one. The first Buddhists on this continent were no doubt the Asian fishermen and imported railway labourers who brought their religious traditions to the west coast. By and large those traditions remained within their community, something deeply mysterious and perplexing to the western Christians that employed them and exploited them, but who seldom sought to learn much about them.

It wasn't until 1844, in fact, that the first English translation of a Buddhist text was published. American writer Elizabeth Palmer Peabody had it printed in Dial magazine, the publication of well placed group of Boston Unitarians called the Transcendentalists. This group was challenging the highly intellectualized approach to religion being taught at Harvard. They believed that true spirituality was available through intuition and appreciation of nature. They were creedless, distanced from old notions of the Biblical God and willing to celebrate the beauty of life.

I am sure many of you realized that these ideas paralleled some of the concepts at the core of Buddhism. Peabody's translation of a chapter of the Saddharamapundarika-sutra was a first in Western literature and welcomed by the Transcendentalists.

Rev. James Ishmael Ford writes, “Since that time Unitarians and now Unitarian Universalists have continued to find Buddhism intriguing. At the beginning, this interest was romantic and generally ill-informed. But over the years both interest and knowledge have deepened and broadened.”

Mainstream Unitarianism in the 19th century was still very Christian in form. People generally believed in a God, but only with a fully human Jesus. Sermons might extol the wondrous value of human reason and human ability. People did not expect God to reward or punish them or even to be a ‘being’ in the traditional sense, but God was still there. Worship still featured prayers and hymns such as Longfellow's, “God of the Earth, the Sky, the Sea” (#25). It is an interesting hymn, for it speaks of the Creator God, but not as some distant external being. Instead, God is seen as the uniting force of nature, “...Creation lives and moves in you; your present life through all does flow.” Still, that's a lot of God talk by today's UU standards, and probably the reason why we have never sung that hymn before, but to put it into context, that idea of God in all things was a very progressive concept in the 1840's. So Unitarianism was opening itself to a much broader idea of the divine. Into that climate Elizabeth Peabody introduced the first Buddhist text.

It quickly caught the eyes of the liberal theologians and scholars. First, it was a non-Christian faith and so outside the bounds of Scripture that was feeling claustrophobic. Buddhism's essential god-lessness also made exploration easier because there was nothing for a liberal Christian to reject. Instead they could simply

explore this tantalizing new form of spiritual practice. 19th century Unitarians could maintain their relationship with the God they understood and still draw support from a Buddhist practice which doesn't much care one way or another about the divine. There was no tension, no disconnect. Ford called early interest, 'romantic and ill-informed'. He noted, for example, how the 19th century Unitarian writer Lydia Maria Child described the Buddha incorrectly as a "heavenly spirit". Says Ford drily, "Most Buddhists would not choose this term." The Buddha was a man who achieved enlightenment, but was still entirely a man.

Secondly, Buddhism became attractive because it was so self-contained. Although the Buddha believed in the importance of a monkish community called the Sangha, the priests did not have the same moral authority as western clergy. The idea of a single minister tending a lay flock is foreign to Buddhism. Priests might be teachers, but they were not moral judges of right and wrong. At the end of the day, each person's quest for Enlightenment remained deeply personal.

Unitarians found that attractive and in line with their own goals. Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke of the 'oversoul', a kind of river of energy through which we could all connect with the divine. The Buddhist concept of meditation as a path to enlightened consciousness is similar enough that Unitarians found, if not a common answer, at least a fellow traveller.

We still like that idea. We don't much like people telling us what or how to believe. We would rather find out for ourselves. The lack of dogma is attractive...as the bumper sticker says, "My karma ran over my dogma."

At the same time Buddhism describes an inward journey. There is no ritual in early Buddhism, though as we saw last week ritual and magic crept back into some forms over the centuries. The Transcendentalists loved this inward journey aspect. Their sense of connection to the divine most often came with the natural world. As example I offer our second hymn, Emerson's "We Sing of Golden Mornings". That aspect still dominates in our church. When I ask people today, both Unitarian and not, to describe their peak spiritual moments, they most often describe intense feelings of connection with the nature and the wild.

According to James Ford there was one other earlier connection as well. In the 1930s and beyond, Humanism –a strictly rational and mostly atheistic philosophy - became an important force in Unitarianism. It remains a significant influence. Humanists found an attractive connection in Buddhism.

They were drawn by an ancient faith that did not depend on God. Unitarian humanist Richard Romig wrote in Reasonable Religion, "Even though the Buddha believed life's highest goal is to break the cycle of birth and rebirth and end one's existence (that may sound bewildering and pessimistic to a westerner), many of his teachings and proverbs hold a rich meaning for us. For example, Buddha said, 'All that we are is a result of what we have thought. It is founded on our thoughts and made up of our thoughts.'"

Humanists tend to hold that we can only rely on ourselves and our fellow beings. Our development, the fulfilment of our potential rests with us alone. "We are the result of what we have thought," matches well with Humanist views on the intellect.

By the 1950's Unitarians were developing a more realistic and grounded understanding of Buddhism. In fact one of my teachers, George Marshall, wrote one of the most prominent western biographies called, Buddha: The Quest for Serenity.

Today, about 2 per cent of UU's in North America list Buddhism as their primary spiritual influence. However a visit to UU Buddhist website leads me to conclude that a great many more of us consider Buddhism indirectly as an influence in our spiritual lives. I suspect that's because our faith has no definable spiritual practice of its own. We have, over the years, borrowed from various traditions, often adapting them to our own uses. We need look no farther than our hymnbook. There we can find music from Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Christian and Buddhist traditions. We can find words celebrating First Nation, Hispanic and African American traditions.

How does Buddhism touch us today? Many UU churches make use of Buddhist chimes or the singing bowl as a means of introducing a period of silent meditation in worship. In fact our North American worship more often features silence than we do prayer. Although not explicit about it, our Principles reflect much of the Eightfold path of the Buddha, for we too lift up the values of Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Livelihood etc. – indeed the whole concept of living holistically parallels Buddhism very closely. Like the Buddha, we value rational thought and moral living, we spend little time worrying about God or magical ritual and in the end we follow his final words, "Work out your own salvation with diligence."

But here's an interesting note: James Ford also points out that Unitarian Universalism has become attractive for western Buddhists who need something more than the Sangha has to offer.

Number one on that list is religious education for children. "Many Buddhist centres do not have religious education programs – lack of resources, lack of priority, lack of parents in leadership." Ford recounts how one prominent Buddhist leader in the US recommends UU churches to parents seeking religious education for their children.

The second is our humanist tradition. The west is a rational place, sometimes too much so. But let us be careful not to throw out the good with the bad. Humanism has taught us to attend to science, to accept the physical realities of our world and the Laws of Nature. It is not, in fact, all an illusion. There are ways of developing and maintaining physical well being and reducing human suffering that are based on science, on research and on technology. We have the ability to grow the soul with art and music. All of these are gifts Humanism has helped us recognize. Western Buddhists grew up with an appreciation of reason and science. UUism is a place where they can acknowledge that, and yet be free to pursue their Buddhist spiritual practices.

Third is our social justice tradition. Economic, environmental and racial justice are often concerns for Buddhists. The violently suppressed protests of monks seeking democracy in Myanmar is one example. Continuing concern for exile of the Dalai Llama is another. Unitarian Universalists have a long tradition of pursuing social justice. It is enshrined in four of our Principles where we first affirm justice, equity and compassion, secondly lift up the pursuit of the democratic process thirdly advocate for a global community and finally note our participation in the interdependent web of all existence. In a religion often seen as passive and distanced from the world, our justice-seeking history is attractive for westerners unwilling to sit completely on the sidelines.

All this suggests that western Buddhists are attracted to UUism because it allows them to remain connected to their western roots. North Americans are the products of a system of thought and values that is part Christian and part humanist, that is capitalistic and yet still tinged with the optimism of the Enlightenment . These forces and ideas shape our social structures and realities. Buddhism brings into that a deeply powerful spiritual practice, but one that comes from another culture foreign to us. For many, Unitarian Universalism provides a comfortable balance of eastern spirituality and western idealism. I believe the friendly relations begun 150 years ago will continue for some time to come.