

LIVING THE BUDDHIST LIFE
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
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More than 500 years older than Christianity, Buddhism is today finding new sources of strength and vitality. Increasingly, men and women in search of meaningful lives are being attracted to Buddhism, often motivated at first by intellectual curiosity and then finding a deeply gratifying spiritual nourishment.

Basically, there are two types of religion: the one is god-centered: it concerns man and God. It is based on the belief that God controls: "God wants me to suffer." "It's God's will." The second religion is actually a way of life; this is Buddhism. One learns Buddhism by living and practicing the Buddha's teachings, not by study or discussion.

Buddhism does not worship a God and concerns itself with more human or immediate, practical matters than whether or not there is a God. It is worth noting that an acceptance of Buddhism does not necessarily require a rejection of one's parental or earlier-life religion. Western practitioners can say, "I am Christian, but a Buddhist" or "I am Jewish, but Buddhist." It certainly can be said, "I am atheist, but Buddhist." Buddhists are respectful of all religions.

In fact, Buddhism does not **require** anything of those who would practice it. Buddhism is not dogmatic. It does not preach sin. It does not say there is only one right way. It offers merely a path to wisdom, to enlightenment. The very word Buddha derives from "to be awake" or "to be enlightened". The Buddha was a human being, not a divinity, a fully enlightened human being who was, above all, a teacher.

What the Buddha taught was how to live the good life. The individual with a sense of morality accepts that doing good is better than doing evil—better for one's conscience, better for one's peace of mind, better for one's spiritual serenity.

The similarities between Buddhism and other religions lie in their approach to morality. The Christian-Judaic commandments. The Islamic code. The Buddhist precepts.

This is also a difference—the difference between commandments being handed down from on high and precepts, or directions, for asserting individual responsibility. Quite a difference.

How does one become a Buddhist? There are no formal inductions, no initiations, no baptisms. If someone is asked how he had become a Buddhist, he is most likely to say, "I didn't become a Buddhist. I realized that I am a Buddhist." The Westerner who regards himself or herself as a Buddhist is making a profound personal and social statement. That person is saying, on setting out to follow the Path: "I believe", as the Buddha taught, "that I should conduct myself with benevolence, compassion, joyous sympathy and equanimity. I believe that these qualities are the bases of ethical conduct and that ethical conduct should be the basis of society."

The Buddha's prescriptions for the cultivation of ethical conduct—namely, Right Action, Right Speech, and Right Livelihood—derive from his conception of society based on universal love and compassion.

Today I'd like to share with you some aspects of Buddhism that I learned in Thailand and what I discovered about how Buddhist laypersons' lives are affected—or not affected—by the Buddha's teachings.

The moral code of life is the eightfold path. One of these paths is Right Action with the five precepts for living the Buddhist life. Right Action promotes honorable and peaceful conduct, and is based on the five precepts: (1) abstention from destroying life, (2) not taking that which is not given (3) not misusing the senses, (4) not misusing intoxicants, (5) not lying.

- (1) In abstaining from destroying life, some Buddhists will not kill insects or eat the flesh of animals; there are some monks who will not even destroy plant life, will not cut down a tree or bush, will not pull out a blade of grass.

My favorite story is about the snake—I know I have told it to some of you. We were riding down a very narrow, very curving, very steep hill—like the old road up Afton Mountain (before they built I-64). My daughter-in-law's father was driving. Suddenly he saw a snake in the road. Being a Buddhist and afraid that he had killed the snake, he slammed on his brakes, then backed up the curving hill till he could see that the snake had slithered off. The snake was alive, but it's lucky we all were!

As a practical matter, Buddhists cannot slaughter or witness the slaughter of animals, but they can eat animal flesh as long as they are not responsible for the termination of the animal's life. Some Buddhists worry a great deal about complying with the ban on killing animals, but they can always get someone else to do the dirty work.

I have read that in Thailand and Burma, to be truly virtuous, one should never crack an egg. Shopkeepers routinely evade this restraint by keeping a supply of eggs that have been “accidentally” cracked. Wealthy Buddhists ask their servants to break their eggs; the master escapes blame because he didn't do the killing, and the servant escapes blame because he was ordered to do it. Personally, I have never heard of a lay person refusing to break an egg, but it is a good story.

Of course, Buddhists are opposed to harming or killing humans. Buddhists are opposed to war except when it is necessary for survival. They tend to appease rather than fight. Thailand does have an army in order to combat drug traffickers and there is a military dictatorship in Myanmar, but the Myanmar regime makes no pretence of practicing Buddhism.

Abstention from taking life also includes suicide and even if someone feels desperate this precious human life should not be thrown away lightly.

Because Buddhists will not hurt anyone, I feel that Thailand is the world's safest place to live or travel. There is no danger of being mugged or assaulted, at least by a Thai. If anyone, it's the "farangs"—the foreigners—you have to watch out for.

- (2) Not taking that which is not offered; this includes theft, fraud and deception. The explicit admonition is "not to take that which is not offered". If you heard my talk on the monks, you learned that they do not beg for alms, but accept whatever is placed in their bowls.
- (3) Not misusing the senses is difficult in our modern world which encourages sensual over-indulgence. This includes inappropriate sexual behavior which means not harming others by infidelity or practicing promiscuous behavior, which usually causes harm to others. (This precept, by the way, does not condemn any particular sexual practices as Catholicism or Islam does, as long as they do not harm anyone.) Not misusing the senses also includes not overeating, not listening to too much music, not watching too much TV or too many movies.
- (4) In abstaining from intoxicants, the precept literally states, "distilled and fermented intoxicants producing heedlessness". The dangers of heedless intoxication, the Buddha said, are "squandering of wealth, argumentativeness, risk of illness, risk of scandal, rejection by society, dulling of the mind". Moderate social use for relaxation is approved. Many Thai people, presumably good Buddhists, consume large quantities of alcohol. This is condoned as long as they do not become "heedless"—a most liberal interpretation of the precept!
- (5) In abstaining from false speech, the precept includes more improprieties than just lying. False speech also includes harsh language, slander, gossip and bearing false witness. You must abstain from any language that is harsh, rude, impolite, malicious or abusive, or that may cause hatred, disunity and disharmony. Speech and its development—the written work—can have a big impact, leading to either good or bad influences.

Abstain from idle, foolish gossip or chatter. (Think of TV news, talk-radio and tabloid newspapers.) Cultivate speech that promotes friendship and harmony. Avoid shouting, insulting or sarcastic speech. This takes patience and practice. If you cannot say anything friendly, benevolent, meaningful and useful, then keep a noble silence.

How well do Buddhists do with this precept? They never shout, they are never rude, impolite or abusive. However, they are evasive, so that they don't lie and, at the same time, don't hurt your feelings. They do NOT abstain from gossip or idle chatter. If there weren't a language problem, they would fit right in with the Lancaster County locals. Also, like many people in our community, they are practically addicted to TV soap operas and to tabloid newspapers.

The Buddha taught that impermanence is a characteristic of all existence. Buddhism teaches that everything is subject to the law of cause and effect, is the creation of preceding causes and is, in turn, a cause of after-effects. There is in existence, therefore, no unchanging condition of being, by only an ever-becoming flux.

Anything that is born doesn't stay permanently in one state—it grows up, gets old, and then dies. All things in nature, even the universe itself, have their spans of existence, birth and death, beginning and ending. All that we perceive and conceive of is change—it is impermanent.

Although impermanence—constant flux—is an absolute characteristic of all existence, there are those who are unable or unwilling to accept its reality, and these are the people who, in their delusion, create for themselves a false belief in a permanent “self”. Most people can accept the idea of impermanence, but they have great difficulty with the notion of “no-self”. The Buddha taught that when we can see that what we call the “self” is temporary, then we destroy our selfish desires and self-interests, and, instead of suffering from anxieties and disappointments, we will enjoy peace of mind and tranquility. By being aware of impermanence, we are less distracted by people, objects and events.

Usually our thoughts are ego-centered and reflect on how best to serve “me”. This selfish attitude can be quite subtle and can also apply to why we are practicing Buddhism. Why do we want to practice Buddhism? Do we want to save only ourselves, or do we want to be viewed by others as a great spiritual person? We must change this self-centered way of thinking. Then we can start to consider others and think more altruistically. We want to practice Buddhism in order to be of benefit to other beings and to our environment, not just to make ourselves happy or powerful. At the start, of course, naturally we will tend to think somewhat selfishly, but we can practice changing our motivation.

One should not think, “I am in pain, but rather that there is pain. Not that I am angry, but rather that there is anger. Not that I am joyful, but rather that there is joy.” In short, not I am, but rather “there is”. And one should realize that whatever arises i.e., whatever there is—pain, feelings, thoughts, emotions—passes away. Thus, one should realize that “I”, although a useful and necessary social-communicative term, cannot be regarded as a permanent “self”. It should not, cannot, be clung to.

Most Western Buddhists are intellectually oriented. For the, there is this paradox—although they can accept, with their minds, what the Buddha said about “no-self”, it is difficult for them to accept that they have no “self” which gives them control of their intellect and of their emotions. The Westerner, especially the intellectual, is inclined to believe that he or she is “in control” and “in charge” or his or her life. I don't know about you, but it's surely about me!

Another of the eightfold paths is Right Thought. In order to cultivate Right Thought, we must also free ourselves of the three defilements: greed, anger and delusion.

The Buddha felt that greed or craving—for eternal existence, for perpetual youth, for constant good health, for temporal happiness, and so on—is the source of man's dis-ease, anguish, suffering and unhappiness. Craving may lead to doing harm to others. It may lead to inner anxieties and tensions brought on by the struggle to attain what is craved, the fear of not succeeding in the attainment, or the fear of losing what has been attained. Craving ensnares us. The pleasures derived from sensual craving, craving for eternal existence, and craving for temporal happiness cannot, Buddhism holds, satisfy our inmost longings. We crave, Buddhism teaches, because we are attached to the notion of “self” from which we can release ourselves

only by conscious and strenuous effort at detachment. The Buddha teaches that we have cravings because we are attached to the notion of “Self”.

We think, “If I could just have everything I want and do everything I want to do, I would be so happy.” But that kind of happiness boomerangs quickly because it does not give the deeper contentment that is the real goal.

Pra William,--if you remember my last talk on Buddhism, I said that “Pra” is a title given monks that means “holy” or “exalted” and is a term of respect. Anyway, Pra William, the British monk who leads discussions at Wat Umong, stressed eliminating cravings or desires. We should look at life as it is and not be deluded by ideas of a beautiful life that we might see in pictures or read about in poetry.

Some desires that should be eliminated are:

1. Material things, of course. We must simplify our lives.
2. Time-consuming things. How can we find peace and happiness if we spend all our time being busy? (Don’t look at me! Do as I say, not as I do! Why are we frittering away our lives? Life is precious; we have the ability to think and reason. We must teach ourselves to be calm and reflective; only then can we gain insight and know ourselves. Pra William says, “Don’t wait for the ambulance to come!”)
3. The desire to find love. (Many of the attendees at Pra William’s discussions were young singles, so this was probably aimed at them.) Thinking about it, we generally desire love because we feel “an empty spot in our hearts”. We want someone to love in order to satisfy our own needs. Instead, we must learn to be kind to ourselves and learn to love ourselves. It is very selfish to look for love to meet our own needs and this searching is time-consuming and distracts us from finding peace.
4. The desire to look young. Pra William claims that this is a “Western” failing, but he doesn’t look around and see that Asians are just as much consumed with this desire as we are. He says that we must realize that aging is natural and trying to look young only makes us feel bad. We must realize that our body image is not who we are. We must look inward and know that “This is who I am”.

How can we eliminate cravings? Simplify our lives:

- A. Rid our lives of material things
- B. Rid our lives of time-consuming things
- C. Avoid relationships
- D. Choose friends who are simplifying

Suffering is caused by desires and attachments. Truth can be found in a state of non-suffering, or, in other words, in a purified mind, without cravings, desires, or greed.

However, Pra William claims that Westerners want the results of Buddhism, but they don’t want to give anything up.

In order to cultivate Right Thoughts and Right Action, we must also free ourselves from anger and hatred. How can we do this? The Buddha said that whatever subject we reflect on frequently becomes the natural inclination of the mind. So, by substituting Right Thought when negative thoughts arise, we can train our mind. He said, “Let a man overcome anger by love”. We must not harbor feelings of resentment, hatred or anger.

The Buddha said that if you are attacked violently, either with abusive language or with sticks and stones, you are not to fight back or dwell on resentful thoughts. You must preserve a loving mind with no secret spite.

Somewhat contradictory to this, Pra William told us that we must acknowledge our anger, our problems and our dislikes. “Do not try to push them from your mind. Fasten your thoughts on your anger, or on the problem or person causing you anger. If you concentrate, the bad thoughts will disappear and you will no longer have feelings about them. Allow you feeling ‘to be’. Allow negative feelings into your consciousness. Face the problem—this will free you of your anger.”

Good luck with this. I just cannot make it happen. I’ve tried and tried, but so far, whenever I fasten my thoughts on my anger or my problem, it does not disappear. So I’ll stick with the Buddha’s teachings instead of the monk’s. Substitute good thoughts when bad thoughts arise. Maybe it’s easier to forgive than to forget.

Learn to be flexible. There are no easy answers. Some problems are insoluble; if you are flexible, you will recognize this.

If an enemy is causing your anger, remember that you do not have to love everyone. You should be kind to everyone, including your enemies, but you don’t have to like, or love them .

Speaking of forgiving—why can’t we forgive?

Why is it so hard to forgive? Some excuses our class came up with are: we bear a grudge, our pride is hurt, we’re afraid of what might happen if we forgive, what will the other person do?, what will others think of us?, we feel guilty. Can you think of any other reasons?

Be mindful. Realize that not forgiving is harmful to yourself. See the folly (stupidity) of holding a grudge. Cultivate kind thoughts.

At another session we discussed Giving and Receiving. Which would you rather do? How many of you would sooner give? How many would sooner receive?

Think about it. Both are hard to do.

Giving—it must be by your free will. Some people find it hard not to be stingy. Some people give in order to receive (reciprocity). We must not expect something in return, not even a “thank you”. Giving should make you feel good and should make you avoid feeling bad.

Go back to the monks. When someone puts food in their bowls, they do not thank them. Why? You must not try to give something in return, even a “thank you”. Receiving is awkward. You must learn to be glad to receive.

Let me close with thoughts from the Dalai Lama.