

## I'M NOT A BUDDHIST, BUT...

— a sermon by Jaco B. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church — January 7, 2007 —

[Follows SONG #1003: *Where Do We Come From?*; TOGETHER TIME: the story of Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddha (c. 563-483 BCE) presented by Carla Miller, *director of Religious Exploration*; and SPECIAL MUSIC: *It All Comes Back* by Paul Butterfield, new verses by JBtH.]

This READING is from a 2002 book called *FAITH: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience* by Sharon Salzberg, “a renowned (American) meditation instructor who has been practicing and studying Buddhism for more than 30 years” [p.48-57].

---

It is a common assumption that faith deepens as we are taught more about what to believe; in Buddhism, on the contrary, faith grows only as we *question* what we are told, as we try teachings out by putting them into practice to see if they really make a difference in our own lives. The Buddha himself insisted,

*“Don't believe anything just because I have said it. Don't believe anything just because an elder or someone you respect has said it. Put it into practice. See for yourself if it is true.”*

...Although [my own instructor] was encouraging me to explore and examine the teachings, I see now that what I really wanted was for him to give me the definitive word on what was good and what wasn't, what I could trust and what I couldn't. I wanted to find in Buddhism a system I could belong to. I wanted to be able to say,

*“I am a Buddhist, and therefore I am compelled to believe the following fifteen things. That's who I am.”*

I was trying desperately to reduce the range of choices life was presenting every single day by making one controlling choice. A belief system might keep all uncertainty and fear away, keep the complexities and ambiguities of the world away.

...[But w]hen faith means complying with someone else's dictates, one either has blind faith or is considered by the authorities to have no faith at all. ... Separating faith from intelligent inquiry casts it as a practice of the gullible.

...In order to deepen our faith, we have to be able to try things out, to wonder, to

doubt. In fact, faith is strengthened by doubt when doubt is a sincere, critical questioning combined with deep trust in our own right and ability to discern the truth. In Buddhism this kind of questioning is known as skillful doubt.

---

SERMON:    **I’M NOT A BUDDHIST, BUT...**    by Jaco B. ten Hove

Does the statement (from the reading) “Faith is strengthened by doubt” cause you to frown in confusion, as it did me? I suspect that 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian Universalism has largely grounded itself on an assumption that faith is the *opposite* of doubt and therefore generally suspect.

And, in fact, my Webster’s uses the phrase “unquestioning belief” twice in its definitions of the word “faith.” Another dictionary says faith is “strong belief in the doctrines of a religion based on spiritual apprehension rather than proof.”

So it may be no wonder that we rational types tend to discount faith, per se, preferring to trust what we can apprehend with our physical senses and logical reasoning abilities. Thus, we often jettison anything smacking of “unquestioning belief,” assuming that that includes “faith.”

Enter the American Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg, who instead suggests that faith *without* intelligent inquiry is “a practice of the gullible.” And the sub-title of her latest book on FAITH declares that faith actually means “Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience.”

This may be yet another way that Buddhism refuses to fit neatly into American culture, even as it quietly strengthens its presence among us. I’m not a Buddhist, but I *am* intrigued, and this morning I’ll endeavor to note a few ways I find Buddhism, at least as taught by the engaging New York City native Sharon Salzberg, to be so enticingly coherent with my largely rational UUism. There are some very helpful, very accessible, if still challenging lessons here.

For instance, take the attractive notion of “skillful doubt,” a capacity encouraged by Buddhism. Well, what good, skeptical UU can resist leaning in that direction, too? Salzberg explains how this works: “For doubt to be skillful we have to be close enough to an issue to care about it, yet open enough to let questioning come alive,...which brings us closer to exploring the truth” [*Faith*, p. 57].

This does, however, immediately raise the specter of “unskillful doubt,” which instead pulls us farther away from exploring the truth. She tells this story from the Buddha’s life to illustrate unskillful doubt:

*After his enlightenment, the Buddha arose from his place under the bodhi tree and set out walking along the road. The first person he encountered was struck by the radiance of his face and the power of his presence. Dazzled, the man asked, “Who are you?” The Buddha replied, “I am an awakened one.”*

*The man just said, “Well, maybe,” and then walked away. Had he shown curiosity, then taken the time to follow up on his doubt by asking questions, he might have discovered something profoundly transforming.*

*This kind of “walk away” doubt manifests as cynicism. [Ibid.]*

I recognize the posture of “walk-away,” unskillful doubt, in myself and in other UUs. We can get downright cynical at times, especially when skepticism becomes our dominant mode. Actually, says Salzberg, the true opposite state of mind from faith is not doubt, but despair, whose core is filled with isolation and disconnection, neither of which tend to inspire an openness “to let questioning come alive.”

She suggests that there is a real art to doubting, which should be less about abstraction or obstruction and more about illumination and interconnection. At least that’s the goal in Buddhism, where skillful doubt strengthens one’s faith. Folks who have bad associations with the concept of faith are sometimes people who don’t necessarily lack faith, they’ve lacked the opportunities to verify their faith by examining, even doubting their beliefs.

In Pali, the liturgical language in which the scriptures of Buddhism were first written down (in Sri Lanka in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE), the word we translate as “faith” is “saddha,” a verb form meaning “to place the heart upon.” For Buddhists, faith is a verb, something you do. Faith is an “animation of the heart that says, ‘I choose life, I align myself with the potential inherent in life, I give myself over to that potential’” [Ibid., pg. 16]. And skillful doubt helps verify that faith, helps confirm what we place our heart upon.

But notice how non-specific this kind of faith is. Skillful does not mean narrow. What animates my heart may be different than what animates yours, and there’s room for such variety in Buddhism.

An ongoing example of my own “skillful doubt” is the way any Buddhist inclinations of mine always bump right up against the notion of reincarnation, which seems to be one of the “fifteen things” Buddhists teach and believe. I’ve been rather animated by this idea over the years.

Reincarnation is the belief that we embody, in multiple lifetimes, the karma we collect through our actions, both skillful and unskillful. Almost 15 years ago, I spent much of my first sabbatical studying the Tibetan Book of the Dead, to learn more about how that style of Buddhism understands the reincarnation process. The Tibetans have spent centuries intensely practicing and noticing the intricacies of death and rebirth.

I came away from my encounter with this very foreign culture feeling quite respectful, but still unable to adopt a belief in reincarnation. And I continue to doubt, hopefully with some degree of skill. Yes, “someday it’ll all come back” to me, but I have to believe that *that* day is in *this* life, one way or another, mysteriously and perhaps in unseen ways, but nonetheless.

I just can’t let go of my firm footing in the Universalist camp, believing that it’s all balanced well enough in this realm, with no future life punishments or rewards. Yes, “there’s a much larger balance in which we all live,” but I am not convinced that such greater equilibrium needs to include continuation of the human life force beyond this one relatively short time period on this one relatively small planet.

However, Sharon Salzberg does as good a job as anyone I’ve ever read at explaining karma and reincarnation in a rationally understandable, if still metaphorical way. (It’s like planting seeds, she says. You tend to get growth according to the kind of seed you plant.) But my point here is that I’m trying to utilize “skillful doubt” in approaching what is often a controversial, faith-related topic.

She tells how she did the same, early in her journey into Buddhism, when learning the practice of breathing to calm the mind, so essential in meditation. She resisted and doubted the truth of this teaching, because her efforts at mindful breathing only seemed to achieve inner turbulence. Her teacher instructed that whenever the attention wandered, she should just gently return to the breath and start again, and again, and again. So she kept at it.

*“Then one day,” she relates, “my attention stabilized, and my mind settled into an extraordinary peace. Though that faded away in the natural course of events,*

*because everything does change, I felt I could have faith in this aspect of the practice because I had verified it myself” [Ibid., pg. 56].*

This exemplifies a middle stage on the Buddhist path, called “Verified Faith,” when one is actively pursuing and questioning just how Buddhism will unfold in one’s life, making it personal. And skillful doubt is a primary tool to help verify the truth of any particular teaching. After all, the Buddha himself said, “Put it into practice. See for yourself if it is true.”

This period of Verified Faith follows the first, more excitable phase, called “Bright Faith,” when one first becomes alive to the possibilities of following a Buddhist path.

I first became aware of Sharon Salzberg when she came to speak to some hundreds of UU ministers this past June, just before our annual national convention of UUs, called General Assembly. She opened her talk with an explanation of the impact possible in the Bright Faith stage. She likened it to what rock musician Bruce Springsteen felt when, as a teenager, he first heard the music of folksinger Bob Dylan.

Evidently young Bruce was riding in a car with his mother when a Dylan song came on the radio. Springsteen has described the moment thusly: “It was like a giant boot came down and kicked open the door of my mind.” (That’s what Bright Faith is like.) Bruce’s insides were drawn right into the radio, as his musical world was transformed, while, on another plane altogether, his mother commented from behind the steering wheel, “That man can’t sing!”

**Bright** Faith is when the doors of your mind and heart are first opened to this path and you’re enthralled with what you’ve discovered. Then, **Verified** Faith is a longer period when you work hard to integrate the teachings, testing and customizing them.

A later phase, called **Abiding** Faith, is when you’re able to mindfully, steadily live out of the verified teachings. These Buddhist teachings generally affirm life’s interconnectedness and the impermanence of all things, plus the “buddha nature” inherent in all sentient beings. “Buddha nature” is a quality deep within everyone that enables anyone to become a buddha, an awakened one. It is not a restricted quality, only available to some; it is in everyone, always, awaiting the cultivation of deeper awareness.

Maybe some of this sounds familiar! Between that “buddha nature,” which quite resembles our First UU Principle (“the inherent worth and dignity of every person”), and the emphasis on interconnectedness, which clearly echoes our Seventh Principle (“the interdependent web of all existence”), the Buddhist path resonates quite well with UUism, I think. (And there is a UU Buddhist Fellowship, by the way.)

I’ve often wondered what it might look like if UUs were able to live fully out of an deep awareness of our interdependence, and this glimpse into the Buddhist sense of Abiding Faith has given me a notion or two, a la Sharon Salzberg.

Evidently, after reaching the stage of an Abiding Faith, one’s trust in the interconnectedness of all things is so enlarged that one can absorb all manner of events without being shaken.

It is a spacious posture, like the sky, which facilitates clouds and weather coming and going constantly without ever changing its basic nature.

It is like the air in a room when paint has been sprayed wildly all over; the air doesn’t hold any paint, but allows it all to pass through.

With the expansiveness of Abiding Faith, one can absorb moments of fear and suffering as if they were a handful of salt thrown into a pond, versus the impact of the same amount of salt put into just a bowl of liquid, which would greatly upset its condition.

With this expanded state of mind comes what I have long thought of as “spiritual spaciousness”—a large enough interior chamber to hold great diversity of experience, to accept and stay present to the changes and suffering life inevitably brings without losing one’s balance. This capacity, then, inspires great compassion and equanimity, actions that improve one’s karmic balance *and* increase love and joy, personally and in the world.

Sharon Salzberg tells of a pair of photographs that vividly depict one of her Tibetan Buddhist mentors’ abiding faith stance, grounding in a deep awareness of the impermanence of things. The first shot captures this fellow visiting in an American home just after a pet dove has flown into and landed on his lap. He cradles the bird and smiles softly. The next picture is just after the bird has flown away, and he is laughing happily, suddenly empty-handed. He accepted the unexpected gift of this bird’s presence and then also accepted its inevitable departure—*both* with equanimity and joy.

Salzberg also warns about being seduced by what Buddhist teachings call “fixated hope,” which resembles faith and also sparkles with possibility, but it is actually desire for a conditional future. Fixated hope yearns for a specific outcome, that we might get what we

want. It wishes for a gratifying response, to satisfy our desire to control things. For instance, she writes,

*We may have faith in our children's ability to have a meaningful life, but if to us that means they will grow up to be doctors and lawyers rather than custodians or waiters, what we are really doing is trying to manage life... It's natural to want things to work out in ways that we believe will be for the good... But when our hope...is based only on getting what we want, in the precise way we want it, we bind hope to fear rather than to faith [Ibid., p. 81].*

She contrasts this with another story of observing a father sitting next to his wheelchair-bound son as they listened to a lecture by a woman who had had a miraculous healing.

*I watched the love in the father's eyes as he stole glances at his son. I could see the thin sliver of emotion on which the father was balanced, not wanting his son to get his hopes up too high, yet not wanting him to sink lower into resignation. While the man must have wished fervently that his son would walk again, I felt that his love for his son was completely independent of any particular outcome, so that he could be guided by faith instead of fear [Ibid., pg. 89].*

On the Buddhist path of Abiding Faith, when fear arises “in an open vast space of heart” [Ibid., pg. 94], the practitioner will not close down. It may still grab hold, as fear certainly can, but it will not break the spirit or compromise compassion.

Can you see how this would be qualitatively different from so-called “blind faith,” or a set system of beliefs, that might be rigid and conditional? Beliefs—skillfully derived—can indeed remind us of what we value most, but they can also trap us into an inflexible posture, narrowing our perspective and our options for responding to life's vicissitudes.

It is said in Buddhism that when we let fixed beliefs shape our reality, it is like looking at the sky through a drinking straw. So, for a moment, forget that there's a roof above us here and imagine looking up, through a narrow tube, at the sky. Close one eye, curl your fingers, and look through the circle it makes.

Without this roof, you'd be able to see the sky through the tube, yes, but only a small portion of what's really out there. Your context is tight, limited—dizzying, perhaps. How much more interesting and useful to not be stuck in a straw—open your hand!—but able to gaze unconditionally across the vast expanse of sky.

Unfortunately, we are often too busy comparing our straws to truly appreciate the boundless sky. To have expansive faith without rigid beliefs is the challenge. This kind of deep and wide versatility is what Buddhists practice. I daresay many UUs could benefit from such practice as well, myself included. Despite my hopefully skillful doubt, I expect to further pursue my interest in this direction. (There's at least another sermon or two in all this.) I'm beginning to see how my "faith is strengthened by doubt."

Happily, Sharon Salzberg is clear that one needn't be a Buddhist to learn from the teachings of the Buddha, who was avowedly human and remains seen as such, even though through his meditations and expanded awareness he achieved Nirvana and got off the wheel of life, death and rebirth. He is a model and a revered teacher, but not a deity.

And all his teachings are supposed to be doubted, tested, until one can make them mesh with actual life experience, which always includes suffering. In fact, suffering—or more accurately, the relief of suffering—is a most meaningful measuring stick for Buddhists, who are taught to always seek answers that might relieve suffering somehow, either your own or someone else's.

Sharon Salzberg's earlier book is something of a philosophical manual for how to approach this practice. It, too, has a significant one-word title that announces another Buddhist goal and technique: *Lovingkindness*. In fact, she says, "If you really want to be radical, be kind." Another worthy challenge.

So let us now sing #1031 in your green hymnal supplement, *Filled with Loving Kindness*, the words for which were adapted from a traditional Buddhist meditation by former Paint Brancher Mark Hayes, now minister for the UUs in State College, PA...

#### CLOSING WORDS

Amid the mystery, mystery, we sense that what goes around comes around; you get what you give. Skillfully, we muster our inner resources toward a spiritually spacious faith that will sustain us well as we endeavor to verify whatever path we are on, alone and together.

Go forth on this day in peace. May you be filled with lovingkindness, radically so, and may all the stirrings of compassion sing in your heart...