

TAPROOTS FOR A NEW UNIVERSALISM

Zen Buddhism & Unitarian Universalism, Encounter, Conflict, New Visions

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I never tire of telling this story.

In 1844, a chapter from the Sadharmapundarika-sutra, the seminal Mahayana Buddhist text the Lotus Sutra was published in the Boston Transcendentalist journal, the Dial. Best I can tell, this chapter, published as “The Preaching of Buddha,” was the first Buddhist text to be rendered in the English language.

As a footnote to a footnote, “The Preaching of Buddha” was for many years wrongly credited to Henry David Thoreau. It was a reasonable enough speculation as the chapter was published anonymously while he was editor of the journal, and was well known to be interested in all matters Eastern. Of course, pretty much all of the Transcendentalists were interested in those matters Eastern, to one degree or another. But, in fact, once again anonymous turned out to be a woman. The translator of Eugene Burnouf’s French rendering of the Sanskrit was the astonishing public intellectual Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. At the time she was the proprietor of Boston’s West Street Bookstore, one of the principal gathering places of Boston’s Transcendentalists.

It wasn’t the first Eastern text to fall into Unitarian hands, nor would it be the last. A great jumble of Eastern texts appeared in English in those early mid decades of the nineteenth century. So many that people had trouble sorting what was what. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s oft-cited high praise for the Bhagavad Gita as a wonderful expression of “Buddhist” wisdom was typical of that moment.

As Buddhism began to differentiate out from the other Eastern religions, it quickly proved to be a rich field for projection. For instance, in *The Progress of Religious Ideas Through Successive Ages*, Unitarian writer Lydia Maria Child described the Buddha as a “heavenly spirit.” She went on to blithely count “God,” “soul,” and “creation” as Buddhist concepts. Today all this would likely raise a smile among most, and to a few it could even be considered offensive.

Of all the Transcendentalists, Henry David Thoreau has been consistently described as the most Buddhist, or Buddhist-like among the Transcendentalists. While he read what was available, pretty much as soon as it was available, Thoreau more likely discovered from his own observation that Zen Buddhist perspective of the thing-in-itself than from

reading any spiritual text. And, frankly, I think it more accurate to characterize his nature mysticism more as a kind of Western proto-Daoism than any flavor of Buddhism.

Buddhism, while continuing to interest religious liberals, also continued to be misunderstood throughout the nineteenth century. Even by the end of that century the Unitarian writer James Freeman Clarke, like Lydia Maria Child before him, searched for and “found” arguments for God and for immortality of the soul in the teachings of the Buddha and Buddhism, all incomprehensible from the advantages of today’s understanding.

Slowly, however, people began to find in Buddhism something more than that field of projection through which they were looking for a purified or corrected form of Christianity. Such doctrines as “sunyata,” emptiness or boundlessness, “anatman” no soul or no abiding self, and “karma,” the play of causality began to capture western imaginations, and begin to open new possibilities for those of us in the West engaged in the great spiritual quest.

And something else happened, as well. Profound influences began to flow in both directions, east to west, yes, but also west to east. For example the Unitarian and Buddhist scholar Jeff Wilson outlines the remarkable story of Nakahama Manjiro, a boy who in 1841, along with several other Japanese fishermen was caught up in a storm and swept out to sea.

They were rescued from near certain death by a New Bedford whaling ship. Unable to return to Japan, which by the prevailing sakoku isolation laws would lead to everyone’s execution, the ship continued on. Eventually the crew was dropped off in Hawaii, all except for young Nakahama. Captivated by the boy’s intelligence and curiosity about everything he encountered, Captain William Whitmer took him under his personal care. They returned to Massachusetts, only to find Whitmer’s Methodist church informing the family that no colored people, although they didn’t say colored, were allowed in the church. So, they walked down the street and joined Fairhaven’s Unitarian congregation. With that the boy now known as John Mung grew into adulthood as a Unitarian.

After an adventurous life well worth pursuing in greater detail, including following his mentor as a whaler and later as a successful gold prospector, Nakahama Manjiro accumulated enough wealth to allow him to return to Japan a mere decade after he and his companions had been swept out to sea. Once back in Japan he endured the long established test to prevent Christians from entering the country. A picture of the Virgin Mary was placed on the ground and he was required to step on it. As a Unitarian, Manjiro had no problem doing so.

He would rise to fame and further fortune in Japan, initially through his translation of Bowditch’s *Practical Navigator*. Invited to the imperial court he was eventually raised to the rank of Samurai. There he gathered a circle of admirers and among the younger courtiers, disciples. In 1868 with the revolt that established the Meiji emperor, many of those disciples were recruited into the reforming leadership. Wilson draws a pretty

straight line from Manjiro's Unitarianism not only to many of the era's social reforms, but also to many reforms within the Buddhist sects, particularly Pure Land and Zen.

Then, as if returning the favor, the first Zen master to visit America as part of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions was the Rinzai abbot Soyen Shaku. The abbot had in his youth studied at Keio University, which had been founded by a younger associate of Manjiro's. Wilson argues the Zen Buddhism taught at the university was deeply influenced by a progressive spirit of rational inquiry infused with a broad humanism, derived directly from Manjiro's Unitarian experience.

Two of the abbot's disciples, Nyogen Senzaki and Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki would prove to be central to introducing Zen to the West. Senzaki influencing a generation of early spiritual seekers on the West coast, introducing them to zazen, Zen's seated meditation, and Suzuki most of all as a prolific writer and translator, and through his disciple Alan Watts, a popularized version of this rationalist Zen became the Zen most English speaking people would first encounter. One could say, to this day.

What's important to distinguish here is how within religious dialogue moves from misunderstanding and projection to offering subtle coloring and expanded perspectives in each tradition. And sometimes within such encounters the original traditions find themselves profoundly changed, and sometimes whole new traditions emerge. Right off I find myself thinking of how the terrible clash between Islam and Hinduism created the Sikh tradition. This place of meeting, obviously, is dangerous, and is incredibly rich, run through with a riot of possibilities.

For us as Unitarian Universalists in the mid twentieth century one of the most important of the many dialogues occurring between Buddhism and Western religions and psychology, was the Buddhist meeting with humanism.

At first for many humanists, Buddhism appeared to be an intriguingly ancient faith that like humanism was not directly concerned with questions of God or gods, those grand cosmological speculations that many comparative religion theorists have posited as fundamental to any "authentic religion." Or, did, until they began to understand what Buddhists actually taught. Buddhism's existence as a religion without a concept of a creator challenged the conventions of early comparative religion and comforted many religious liberals and radicals.

Now, humanists, like many before flat out misconstrued some of the teachings of Buddhism. And in recent years have had to deal with the unpleasant realization that as well as a resonant analysis of the human condition and rational approaches to the matter of human hurt, and while there is no creator in the sense of our Western concepts of God, there are deities of various sorts as well as enough magic in Buddhism to discomfort even the most sympathetic of humanists.

And I hope that's okay. Because, I suggest, a real Buddhism offers western humanists much more than confirmation of an authentic non-theistic or atheistic spiritual

perspective and a call for radical self-reliance, as well as sophisticated analysis of what it can mean when we attend to each thing-in-itself. I find humanism and Buddhism are complementary approaches to the great religious questions of life and death, not the only possible compliments, but powerful ones. This has been deeply important in my own spiritual life. And I think one of the reasons Buddhism was so quickly attractive to many UUs in the twentieth century.

Of course the ongoing interest in Buddhism among Unitarian Universalists has not been exclusive to humanists. And, I think this is important to note as we within our liberal tradition advance into our contemporary more spiritually oriented era. Christian Unitarian Universalists have also been attracted to the practical mysticism of Buddhism. And a number of our UU Christians have tried various Buddhist meditation disciplines. As an example the UU Christian writer and minister Eric Wikstrom maintains a regular Zen meditation discipline. He is not alone in this.

In fact Buddhist insights have been in conversation with all the emergent spiritualities of Unitarian Universalism from paganism to Hinduism to Judaism, each of these encounters separately and together offering potentially rich possibilities. The Unitarian Universalist world has become a microcosm of world spiritual dialogue, messy, complicated, internally contradictory, and I find wildly compelling. Some of it will come to nothing, probably most of it. Some will be silly. Some is. And some may open hearts to previously undreamed possibilities. There is something amazing going on.

Over these past decades as I've observed and practiced in this liminal place that is our open Unitarian Universalist spirituality, I believe I've seen some of the contours of those possibilities as they're emerging.

First, this isn't something unique to us. I mentioned the birthing of the Sikh tradition. Well, actually, throughout its history Buddhism has entered other cultures and has engaged the indigenous religions it finds, often with powerful consequences. For me the most important example I can think of was the encounter between Indian Buddhism and Chinese religion in the early and mid ninth centuries. The culture clash birthed Zen. And there is no doubt the conversations between humanists and Christians and Jews and Buddhism is a rich field.

But, as they used to say on television, wait. That's not all. For instance some very interesting things are going on within the many conversations between Buddhism and Western psychology. The growing body of literature on that subject alone is vastly too wide to even begin to list here. But its importance, and I would say its importance to us, here, would be difficult to over estimate.

And, again, there's more. Today the large majority of Unitarian Universalists feel a deep need to be engaged in the hurt of the world. As some have observed justice is what love looks like in action. We hold up that word love as a north star. But, what is it? What is it really?

Well, among the areas of mutual interest for us as Unitarian Universalists and Buddhists are the themes of an emerging theology of radical interdependence. We UUs have embraced the seventh principle as a core theological insight, and justly so. In my opinion when it is joined with the first, we get something dynamic and challenging and absolutely life saving. And it is there that we begin to understand what love actually is. Although it remains something we see through that famous glass, darkly.

And, there are ways to cast more light on it, to understand this sense of love that compels us to action. We can look to Buddhism, and its exploration of interdependence within texts like the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Flower Ornament Sutra, and find what we've devoted the past several decades to, has been ruminated on within Buddhism for a thousand years and more. I find understanding love as an experience of radical interdependence is critical for us as we aspire to be of some use in this world.

In Japan there's a saying. Vision without action is a dream. And, action without vision is a nightmare. Love as radical interdependence is, or should be, our north star. It can guide us through the dark night. And this insight, of course, has direct consequences when we think of specifics such as our ecological concerns, and our viscerally felt need for economic justice. This insight into our true intimacy is both why and, it hints at how we can approach this.

What we're finding are deep investigations of life and death, the fundamental matters of our human hearts. And one of the most important places it is happening is within that liminal space where Buddhism and Unitarianism have met, or, more accurately, is meeting.

So, it is perhaps not surprising to see how many Unitarian Universalists today are deeply involved in Buddhist matters. Allow me to share a partial but illustrative litany. UUs such as former Meadville Lombard dean Gene Reeves and Jeff Wilson at the University of Waterloo are making important contributions to the scholarly study of Buddhism. There are others, as well. Mentioning those names are just a beginning of noticing that we are there in that important, critical area of investigation.

Also, increasing numbers of Unitarian Universalists are becoming spiritual directors within Buddhist disciplines. UU minister Doug Kraft is one of a number of longtime American Buddhist meditation teachers. Birthright UU Tara Brach is one of the most prominent Vipassana meditation teachers in the country. UU minister Robert Schaibly has been designated a Dharmacharya, an associate teacher by Thich Nhat Hanh. David Rynick, Melissa Blacker and I are the first three Unitarian Universalists to receive Dharma transmission, full authorization as Zen teachers. I am the first to be dually ordained a Zen priest and a UU minister, but only the first. This year Florence Caplow, already an ordained Soto Zen Buddhist priest has also been ordained as a UU minister. And I was just speaking with a UU ministerial colleague who is looking at ordaining as a Zen priest.

One survey suggests that ten thousand Unitarian Universalists consider themselves,

ourselves, Buddhist. And if one counts the number of those who consider Buddhism a significant influence, that number swells enormously. Something is happening.

Now, I'm a preacher, by trade and by inclination. As I draw this reflection to a close, here's some good news I want to share.

A door has been thrown wide open.

And people are walking through it and toward something.

Me, I think about the sadnesses of this world, and our human hearts. I think about pervasive suffering among human beings, and the groaning pain of our world, itself. And, as I think about this, I feel the wisdom of interdependence as the new voice of Universalism, of that ancient insight of love over creed, of love beyond belief, and its healing message, and what it can mean for us as we try to engage this world here, and I am filled with hope, hope for this poor hurt world, and hope for all seeking hearts.

What is happening is that ancient wisdom is reappearing in ways appropriate for our time, and our place. This period of encounter, clash, confrontation, integration, and synthesis is birthing new ways for us to see and to act.

Right here. Right now.

Hope for this world. Hope for you and for me.

Thank you.