

2U Worship 9 May 2010 Sermon
 Buddha's Birthday
 © Rev. Rudra Dundzila, Second Unitarian Church

The Full Moon in May is known as Boddhi Poornima, or Enlightenment Moon, or Vesak. The Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death are celebrated this day. This year, it falls on Thursday, May 27.

My own Buddhist adventure began over a decade ago. I had been practicing meditation. I had attended various meditation classes, and retreats.

My friends invited me to a Buddhist retreat with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Madison, WI. I immediately agreed, not knowing what to expect. There, I met other people I knew.

Some of you have also attended programs by the Dalai Lama here in Chicago or elsewhere.

Each day would begin with an opening ritual, silent meditation, and the monks chanting Tibetan sutras or scriptures. Then the Dalai Lama would give a Dharma talk. He would teach about meditation, Buddhism, and living a good and happy life.

On the last day, we were given the opportunity to profess Buddhism, and to participate in the Avalokiteshwara initiation.

Professing Buddhism means taking refuge in the three Jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. That is, accepting the enlightened teachers, the teachings, and the community of followers. It is how one formally converts to Buddhism, without renouncing any previous religious allegiance.

I know some of you have also taken refuge in three Jewels at one point or another in your lives.

There were a few hundred of us, out of a crowd of thousands, who decided to profess Buddhism and accept the Avalokiteshwara initiation. We were brought into a special area directly in front of His Holiness. That Friday morning, I took refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha before the Dalai Lama himself. He initiated me into Buddhism. It became part of my Unitarian Universalist path.

The Avalokiteshwara initiation was a fascinating ritual. It was a visualization of a heavenly temple in your heart, where you met great Buddhist saints and sages, the Buddha, and Avalokiteshwara. You united your heart with theirs, to awaken your compassion for all, and your own inner Buddha nature.

Avalokiteshwara is the Tibetan protector spirit. He's an enlightened person who has risen from the human realm to the divine one.

His name means "The Lord who Hears the Cries of Suffering." Tibetans call him Chenrezig. His features are very androgynous. In China and Japan, she is called Kwan Yin.

Here's his story. Avalokiteshwara was about to attain total enlightenment, Nirvana. At that moment, he hears the cries of suffering from the world. He stops, and says to himself, "what good is it for me to achieve enlightenment, if the world still suffers? That is a hollow victory."

So he postpones his own Nirvana until he could help everyone to enlightenment. In other words, his goal becomes ending the suffering of the world.

In the Avalokiteshwara initiation, you vow to end suffering for all beings in the world. His vows are reading 595 in our hymnals.

Now the story of Avalokiteshwara is great and inspiring, but it is just a story. It not the essence of Buddhism. You do not have to believe in it. But it is part of the three Buddhas. That's my term for it.

1

The first Buddha is the miraculous Buddha.

The miraculous Buddha is the Buddha whose mother Queen Maya dreams of dancing with a baby white elephant. The baby elephant gives her a lotus flower, and touches her side with his trunk. She conceives a son, the future Buddha, that night.

The miraculous Buddha is the Buddha whose mother gives birth, painlessly. She's taking a walk in Lumbini Park, in present-day Nepal. Her contractions start. A sal tree bends down its branches to hold her up comfortably. She sings as she gives birth. It is an easy, quick birth.

The miraculous Buddha is the Buddha who is born radiant like the sun. As soon as he is born, he stands up and says, "I have been born to reach enlightenment and free all creatures from suffering."

The miraculous Buddha is the Buddha who takes seven steps as soon as he is born, and lotus flowers blossom in his footprints.

The miraculous Buddha is the Buddha whose destiny is foretold by prophecies. Sages, astrologers and even a reclusive unkempt mountain hermit Asita come to see the child. All announce, independently, that the child will become either the greatest king or the greatest saint of the world. His father King Suddhodana does everything he can to make his son the world conqueror.

The miraculous Buddha is the Buddha who is protected by the great serpent Mucalinda during his search for enlightenment. This enormous cobra wraps himself around the Buddha and spreads his hood over his head to protect him from an incredible tempest, a monsoon.

The miraculous Buddha is the Buddha who is tempted by the evil demon Mara. Mara tells the Buddha he can become the conqueror of the world. He offers him irresistibly beautiful women and their sexual pleasures. The Buddha defeats Mara and his temptations, by saying, "Oh Lord of my own ego, you are pure illusion. You do not exist."

The miraculous Buddha is the Buddha whom the Hindu creator God Brahma visits. He tells the Buddha to teach his Dharma to the world, so that all may be freed from suffering and attain enlightenment.

And Avalokiteshwara is in this tradition of miracle stories about the Buddha.

That is the miraculous Buddha.

We all love stories. We are inspired by such stories. We find comfort in stories of the Buddha's life. Our faith is strengthened by these stories. The Buddha's stories have an archetypal quality to them that resonate with us. They have many parallels to the stories about the Christ.

But the miracles and the stories are not the essence of Buddhism.

Our Unitarian Universalist religious ancestors rejected the Christian miracle stories. Likewise, Buddhists know that the miracle stories are just that – stories. They do not give enlightenment.

2

The second Buddha is the ritual Buddha. There are many cultural and religious rites to follow in Buddhist temples and before images of the Buddha.

The ritual Buddha is found in every Buddhist temple and shrine. At a minimum, you make a full prostration before the image of the Buddha. And before senior monks, like the Dalai Lama. You do this barefoot, as a sign of respect.

The ritual Buddha is found in the practice of prostrations. You might prostrate yourself 108 times, slowly adding up to 1008, 108 thousand, and 108 million prostrations over the course of your life.

The ritual Buddha is found in the practice of prayer beads. You use prayer beads, chanting sacred Buddhist mantras 108 times daily. Followed by 1008 times, 108 thousand times, 108 million times, and so forth.

OM MANI PADME HUM Is the basic Tibetan mantra. It means “Jewel in the Lotus.”

Japanese Buddhists prefer the Daimoku mantra, NAM MYŌHŌ RENGE KYŌ. Praises to the Dharma of the Lotus Flower Sutra.

Many East Asian Buddhist schools simply chant the Buddha’s name, as NEMBUTSU, Praises to the Buddha.

The ritual Buddha is found in the practice of chanting Buddhist sutras, or scriptures. You memorize the ones you love, and chant them as a form of prayer-meditation.

Tibetans chant the “Heart Sutra” daily. Many Japanese chant excerpts from the “Lotus Sutra.”

With repeated practice, these mantras and sutras help still and focus the mind. They put you into a meditative trance. Sure, your mind might wander as your lips repeat the words mechanically, but the chanting brings you back to focus.

The ritual Buddha is found in Buddhist worship.

In Japanese temples, you light and hang lanterns outdoors and indoors during the celebrations of the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and death. These symbolize your prayers for the new year.

Many Buddhists bathe small images of the Baby Buddha with water to celebrate his Birth.

And Tibetans have complex and intricate rituals. You hold a rosary and other ritual objects in your hands. Or you hold your hands in sacred gestures, called mudras. You use your mind’s eye to visualize a fascinating temple in your heart. There, in its many rooms, you meet Buddhist saints and sages of all ages, as you approach the inner sanctum. The inner most room is empty. You do not encounter the Buddha there. Almost a disappointment. But you seat yourself in that room. And you meditate. And you visualize yourself being or becoming the Buddha. Because the goal of Buddhism is to awaken one’s own Buddha nature. For all of us to become Buddhas ourselves.

The ritual Buddha is found in the practice of meditation. Meditation has many rituals associated with it.

In Zen temples, you arrange your meditation cushion perfectly, then you bow to your cushion before sitting cross-legged on it, with a straight spine. An attendant will whack you with a cane if you slouch.

Meditation is a ritual itself. You meditate in a seated, standing, lying down, or walking position. The goal of meditation is to slow down the tumultuous mind. You fix your mind, your thoughts on a solitary thought or image. And then ignore everything else. Silence the mind.

But these rituals are not the essence of Buddhism. They are religious practices. They are tools. They are aids. They might work for you, or they might not work for you.

3

The third Buddha is the teaching, the Dharma.

In the end, it is the Buddhist teaching that matters.

You might think of Buddhism as a religion of meditation. You may be surprised to learn that meditation is **not** the essence of Buddhism. All Asian religions practice mediation. Mediation is considered an advanced spiritual practice, reserved for senior monks. Even junior monks do not learn it, because of its difficulty. But it has wide-spread popularity among Western laity.

The Buddha taught that the world is filled with pain and sorrow. We all share in this suffering. It is something we all know. We will lose everything we love: our relatives, our friends, our homes, our jobs. We will grow old. Our bodies will wear out. We will get sick. And we will eventually die.

We have all experienced some sort of suffering in our lives. And we have more of it to face.

The Buddha also taught that the world is filled with joy and bliss. Life is blissful. There is joy everywhere. We have experienced happiness. We all want happiness. And we will experience it again.

But this bliss is transitory. We find it elusive. We grasp at it. We yearn for it. In our longing for it, we are disappointed. In seeking it, we encounter sorrow.

Life can seem to be a cycle of suffering, avoiding suffering, happiness, and seeking happiness.

In response to this dilemma, the Buddha found a serenity that you can also find.

The Buddha merely shows the path.

It is up to us to try out the path with our own lives. It is up to us to experience it. To see if it is true. To see if it works for us.

The Buddha invites us to conduct a scientific experiment with our lives. He invites us to test if the path he found works for us.

The Buddha's dying words were, after all, don't imitate me. "Seek out your own enlightenment for yourselves."

The essence of the Buddhist teaching, the Dharma, can be summed up in three very simple lines:

Cause no harm.

Practice Metta loving-kindness.

and

Tame the mind.

Rituals, chanting, mantras and sutras, and meditation all tame the mind. Serenity of mind is the individual, inward goal. Causing no harm and Metta, loving-kindness, are the public, outward goals. Remember Avalokiteshwara? Enlightenment for one is hollow, when the world still suffers. Metta, loving-kindness is the answer.

Our Western word for Metta, loving-kindness, is compassion. Buddhists seek loving-kindness. They try to live their lives from a stance of loving-kindness. Developing loving-kindness for everyone, including yourselves and your adversaries, is the core of Buddhism.

This is also a very Unitarian Universalist goal.

Unitarian Universalists have had a growing fascination with Buddhism since the Transcendentalists, and especially for the last few decades. Many congregations have Buddhist inspired meditation groups, including our own. And there is a national Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship.

Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism both seek universal salvation for all through loving-kindness or compassion.

“By the work of hands, and the work of our hearts, our love is made real.” That had been a motto and a prayer of our congregation.

The Dalai Lama has a cute way of explaining this very basic Buddhist teaching. He says, Loving-Kindness is his religion, and Humanity is his denomination.

Cultivating loving-kindness lies at the heart of a daily Buddhist prayer. It is not so much a prayer, as a spiritual exercise. The practice cultivates loving-kindness on several levels: for yourself, for your loved ones, for enemies, and finally for all sentient beings.

Would you join me in a prayerful meditative practice of loving-kindness?

Follow your breath.

First, focus on yourself.

May I be free from suffering.

May I be happy.

May I be filled with loving-kindness.

Next, visualize your friends and loved ones. Imagine them with your mind's eye.

May you be free from suffering.

May you be happy.

May you be filled with loving-kindness.

Now visualize someone you dislike or do not get along with. Focus on them.

May you be free from suffering.

May you be happy.

May you be filled with loving-kindness.

Finally, visualize the whole world.

May all sentient beings be free from suffering.

May all sentient beings be happy.

May all sentient beings be filled with loving-kindness.

Metta!