

Draft

THE DHARMA AND THE CHALICE
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
October 10, 2010

This morning I had planned to give you an introduction to Buddhism for Unitarian Universalists. However, I feel compelled also to speak of the rash of suicides among young people in America who are isolated and the victims of bullying and abuse. Buddhist teachings give us some lessons to help heal and nurture people of all ages and orientations.

Many people who appear at our door are seeking something different in the way of spiritual growth. Many of them are younger and many others are tired of a lifetime of sin and salvation theology.

Buddhist centers have the same people come to their doors. Their responses are based on old wisdom and new American ideas.

There are many seekers of wisdom. I am one of them.

People have asked how I became Buddhist. Here was one turning point in my life.

About fourteen years ago in October of 1996, I was on staff at a small Buddhist retreat center outside Castle Rock in southwest Washington.

We supported retreats each week year round for all the Buddhist traditions and were deep in planning for the most elaborate of them all. It was a Zen retreat led by a Japanese Zen priest named Sodo Harada Roshi who came to the United States annually to train people here. His dedication and intensity were well known. The sesshin had to be carefully thought out and every detail planned. Every minute, meal and task had to be organized.

Harada Roshi's routine each year was to invite the staff to formal Japanese tea ceremony. Those of us on staff gathered together and received elaborate instructions from a woman monk in Roshi's party. They were very intimidating. We had to bow just right, accept the tea in a certain way and to above all else drink it mindfully. Roshi, the monastic reminded us, would be watching our efforts. This did nothing to reduce our nervousness.

Finally the day came for us to go up to the teacher's hut and drink tea. We filed in and sat on hard cushions and waited. Roshi looked intently at each of us and the tea master began making the green tea. He'd ask each person in line from his left if they wanted tea. They'd say "yes" and he'd pass a bowl to them. We were instructed to bow to our right, to the tea master and to our left. And then we were supposed to drink – mindfully.

Eventually the tea came to me. The room was filled with talk and some laughter. Roshi was talking with his translator since he didn't speak English.

Suddenly, as I was trying to drink my tea mindfully, there came a hush in the room. Everyone went silent. With bowl half empty and at my lips, I panicked. Was I drinking wrong? Was I dribbling? Had I somehow set back Japanese-American Zen relations a generation by some awful transgression?

Roshi said something rapidly in Japanese to his translator. I looked up and over to her. She said, "Roshi wanted me to tell you that you drink tea very well." And I saw this slight, robed Japanese Zen master smiling at me.

"You drink tea very well." Those words and that one moment changed my life. I left the teachers hut in a daze. I knew, as I had known at some deeper level before, that it was time to undertake an authentic spiritual path of discipline and clarity.

I moved from a place of isolation and 'do it yourself' spiritual practice to learn from teachers who were part of a 2600 year old tradition.

The essence of what I was taught was The Four Noble Truths.

The Buddha said that life was dukkha. This is usually translated as 'suffering' and has wrongly defined Buddhism as a religion of negation and despair. "Dukkha" really is a metaphor and it means being on a vehicle with a wheel that is badly out of kilter. So we go along in life with an irritating bump-bump-bump ride that makes us very unhappy. That's the First Noble Truth.

The Second Noble Truth was that this unsatisfactory feeling was universal in the human condition. It arises from our own needs and cravings.

The Third Noble Truth said that there was a way out of this mindset that made life difficult and painful.

And the Fourth Noble Truth was called The Eightfold Path, a series of right or wise ways of living that would take us along a path to wisdom and greater compassion. They are: 1. [Right View](#) Wisdom 2. [Right Intention](#) 3. [Right Speech](#) Ethical Conduct 4. [Right Action](#) 5. [Right Livelihood](#) 6. [Right Effort](#) Mental Development 7. [Right Mindfulness](#) 8. [Right Concentration](#)

You can read about these guidelines to ethical and mental development in many books. When I start my meditation group in January, we'll practice them. Each of these principles helps us focus our mind and body to do what that monk in the children's story did this morning: to be fully engaged in the present moment of life and to make it the best it can be.

What does this have to do with contemporary Unitarian Universalism? We have our Seven Principles and our Six Sources that give birth to those statements of principle.

What I believe we seek from our Sources of faith including Buddhism, the teachings of Jesus and many others are ways to be ethical beings and then transmit universal ethical teachings to all who come here. Buddhism is one of those teachings that can help us navigate our lives.

Let's take one of the Eightfold Path: Right or Wise Intention. Right intention can be described best as *commitment* to ethical and mental self-improvement. Buddhist teaching speaks of three types of right intentions: 1. the intention of renunciation, which means resistance to the pull of desire, 2. the intention of good will, meaning resistance to feelings of anger and aversion, and 3. the intention of harmlessness, meaning not to think or act cruelly, violently, or aggressively, and to develop compassion.

We Unitarian Universalists practice wise intention when we try to be compassionate toward others or when we avoid the temptation to lash out in anger. Right intention is also an intention to treat ourselves with compassion and non-violence. This is something I suspect we are still in training to learn and do as Western people.

Elsewhere in his book, *At Hells Gate*, Claude AnShin Thomas writes about Wise Intention as a way to move away from the habits of self-destructive behaviors or feeling that can destroy us. His visit to a retreat by the Vietnamese Buddhist priest Thich Nhat Hahn was a turning point when his intentions could be radically altered: he moved from the habit of violence toward all Vietnamese and himself to a place of greater compassion. He was no longer alone and submerged in his suffering.

You may have seen here a common thread about suffering and isolation moving to the potential of healing and community.

Another of the Buddha's teachings with right intention was called Taking Refuge. We would do this daily at the monastery and Buddhist centers around the world repeat this commit to take refuge in the Buddha, The Dharma and the Sangha. Put another way, we are taking shelter from the storms of life in the potential of awakening (Buddha), the universal laws that will help us awaken (Dharma) and a supportive community to be together in good times and bad (the Sangha). Claude AnShin Thomas' words in the reading today speak to that need to move beyond isolation into community.

Now I'd like to explain all I've said in a practical way. Theory is all very good but is not meaningful unless we can apply it to our lives. Here's one way Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism help one another.

You all no doubt know of the tragic suicide of Tyler Clementi who was a Rutgers University student. He killed himself after being taped by a hidden webcam having sex with another man. That video was then streamed

on the Web by his roommate and a friend who were heedlessly ‘having fun’ and not thinking through the consequences of their actions.

Tyler joined a long and growing list of women and men in the GLBT community who have killed themselves or have been driven to despair and addiction. This is particularly true of teens and young adults who feel isolated and unsafe. They see no way to heal. When I was living at Great Vow Zen Monastery, I saw many young women and men come there to learn who they really could become.

This is where the Buddha’s concept of Sangha comes into play. The Sangha in taking Refuge is above all else a safe place where everyone has a common goal of living the Eightfold Path.

How might a teen or person of any age find safe harbor to wrestle with their questions of sexual, political or religious orientation? One option would be to remain silent as so many have done.

Another would be to speak to their families or friends and risk losing them all.

A third would be to find a community that helps end isolation and welcomes the seeker. That could be us.

This fellowship is a Welcoming Congregation. In 2005 this community voted after years of discernment to truly be welcoming to those in the GLBT community and to nurture deeper intentional relationships between those of all sexual orientations. Our website goes on to say in part: **“The Welcoming Congregation is important to all of us, regardless of sexual orientation...Persons of color, the physically challenged, various ethnic and national minorities, persons of low income or educational status, those recovering from addiction or suffering from mental illness, and other groups may feel excluded...”**

This official status of us as a Welcoming Congregation is yet another reason why we are welcoming of all those who enter our doors and make you welcome before, during and after a service.

Before I conclude my remarks and then open time for a few minutes of conversation, I’d like to suggest another way to create intentional community especially for people in the Clemson area.

I was checking one night for AA meetings in this general area. I am seeking one that will be liberal in language. There was a Meeting Legend list for Open, Closed, Smoking, etc. I didn’t think there’d be an L one for Liberal but then I noted there wasn’t one for GL or Gay-Lesbian friendly. I looked at Greenville and other areas and found nothing there.

I am a Buddhist Unitarian Universalist divorced white liberal straight male. Even with all those labels, I have probably meetings I can find here.

However, I really wonder if someone in the GLBT community here can find a meeting if they are struggling with addiction issues.

I wonder if it's time we here offer up a place for such a meeting in the 12-step tradition to start that does say "Gay Lesbian friendly"

I wonder if someone like Tyler Clementi would find his way to a safe congregation like ours or a safe meeting where he could pour out his confused feelings. Would he even know we exist?

I wonder if we could take the great teachings of the Buddha and Jesus and so many others and hold them out to all those who are broken and need to find their path to healing.

I wonder if we are ready to announce ourselves to the world or at least to Clemson as a sanctuary where all faiths may speak together and where the voices of the oppressed may be heard well.

To paraphrase John Lennon who was born 70 years ago yesterday, 'just imagine if that could be so.'