



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Buddha’s Great Awakening”

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Centering Thoughts

The non-doing of any evil, the performance of what's skillful, the cleansing of one's own mind: this is the teaching of the Awakened. Buddha, ‘Dhammapada’

Be ye islands unto yourselves, refuges unto yourselves, seeking no external refuge; with the Dhamma [teaching] as your island, the Dhamma as your refuge, seeking no other refuge. Buddha, ‘Mahaparinibbana Sutta’

Don't use what you learn from Buddhism to be a Buddhist; use it to be a better whatever-you-already-are. Dalai Lama

Sermon

Let me tell you a story from the Buddhist tradition about a monk named Asanga who left his monastery to go live in a cave to meditate on Maitreya Buddha in the hope that this buddha would answer the monk’s many questions about life and reality. Maitreya was an enlightened disciple of the Supreme Buddha. Maitreya’s name comes from a word for compassion.

After three unsuccessful years of solitary meditation, Asanga left the cave in frustration. As he entered a nearby village Asanga saw a man making his living by filing iron into needles that he would then sell. Asanga realized some things take time and if this man could painstakingly file iron into needles, then he could continue the hard work of reaching enlightenment. He returned to the cave.

Three more years of meditation passed with no visit from Maitreya nor answers to his questions. Again, he left the cave. This time Asanga saw a bird using its feathers to slowly rub away stone to improve its nest. Encouraged not to give up, Asanga returned to the cave.

Again, three more years passed with no success. This time when he left the cave he saw water dripping onto stone, slowly making a bowl. Asanga returned to the cave.

Finally, after twelve total years in the cave, Asanga gave up. On his way back to the monastery he saw a dog lying in his path. The dog was covered with maggots, though the dog was

not yet dead. Feeling compassion for the dog but not wanting to hurt the maggots, either, Asanga bent down to gently begin removing the maggots with his tongue. (I doubt I will ever be that compassionate!) But in that moment when he began to lick, the dog and maggots disappeared. In their place was the one Asanga had sought for years, Maitreya Buddha.

Angrily, Asanga cried, “Where have you been all these years?”

Maitreya replied, “I am love and I have been here with you the whole time. But you were too blind to see me.”

This story reveals everything the great Buddha taught his disciples after reaching enlightenment. Today in our worship we acknowledge Buddha’s great awakening and his teachings. Today, December 8th, in Buddhist tradition is known as Bodhi Day, the day to celebrate Buddha’s enlightenment and the possibility of our own. Last night, the universe saw fit to give me this ‘Buddha Buddha Light’ at our Happy Holly Day Auction. (*After turning the light switch on*) Now, we have our very own *enlightened* Buddha with us this morning!

We celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and other rites of passage to note the passing of time and to remember moments of significant change in our lives. Getting a driver’s license, going to college, joining a congregation, having a child, losing a partner, these are all examples of life events that change us deeply. Becoming enlightened in the Buddhist sense means we have transformed ourselves into someone with new commitment to begin living a compassionate life.

When Maitreya told Asanga that he had been present the entire time Asanga was in the cave, he spoke a basic idea of Buddhism: that all beings have Buddha-nature within. We are all capable of reaching our own buddhahood, or enlightenment. But we will only do so when we remove the obstacles that prevent us from realizing it.

Asanga’s overwhelming desire to seek answers and enlightenment blinded him from his own Buddha-nature. Only when his inner love and compassion motivated him to end the dog’s suffering without harming the maggots did Maitreya Buddha become visible to Asanga. In that moment Asanga set aside personal desire to meet another’s need, and he began a new spiritual walk towards enlightenment.

Siddhartha Gautama, the historic man we call the Buddha, was born in Nepal sometime around 563 BCE and died about 486 BCE. It is said that during Siddhartha’s life after enlightenment, a Brahmin, an educated upper caste priest, asked him whether he was a god, a saint, or even a magician. Each time Siddhartha responded, “No.” Then the man asked, “What are you then?” Siddhartha’s reply gives us the title by which we most frequently call him. He said, “I am awake.” The title ‘Buddha’ comes from that word for ‘awake’ in Pali, a language Buddha likely spoke and which many early Buddhist texts use. Since the Supreme Buddha’s awakening there have been many others, including Maitreya Buddha. Buddha’s humanity offers all of us hope that we can reach enlightenment, too.

What exactly does enlightenment or awakening mean? What was it Buddha achieved as he sat beneath the pipul tree in Bodh Gaya, India, nearly 25 hundred years ago?

Enlightenment encompasses almost as many facets as the word God, but it does not mean a mystical encounter with God or becoming divine. Basically, to become enlightened means attaining liberation from the suffering and confusion of life.

American-born Tibetan Buddhist Lama Surya Das says in his book, *Awakening the Buddha Within*, that enlightenment is about becoming more fully human. He writes that Buddha's enlightenment "represents a direct realization of the nature of reality—how things are and how things work. Enlightenment is the end of ignorance." 'How things are' and 'how things work' refer to the nature of reality. If we know what life is all about, and walk a path that reflects that knowledge, then we walk an enlightened path.

Westerners often refer to the Age of Reason as a period of Enlightenment when the scientific method and its discoveries taught us the truth about such things as evolution, the age of the earth, the motion of the planets, and more. It was a time of intellectual flowering in the arts, culture, and philosophy releasing humanity from ignorance, superstition, and dogmatic tradition. These advancements are not Buddhist enlightenment.

Instead, the ignorance we must shed are the many illusions we hold about the nature of reality. Like the gibbon reaching for the moon's reflection, we must awaken to what is real and what is not. That's the nature of reality Buddhists refer to. Whether the earth orbits the sun or vice versa is not a Buddhist concern.

Also in *Awakening*, Surya Das writes, "When we talk about walking the path to enlightenment, we are talking about walking a compassionate path of enlightened living." Asanga moved beyond his own desire for answers and enlightenment when he made real the compassion he held within himself. Compassion is key because it answers one of Buddha's truths about what it means to be human and how to reach peace and happiness.

Buddha identified four truths about the nature of reality:

- Everyone suffers (regardless of socio-economic or other status, because life is not perfect for anyone)
- The cause of suffering is known (Buddha identified Ignorance of what's real, like the gibbon reaching for the moon's reflection; Attachments, like ego-needs and greed; and Aversions, like hatred, anger, or jealousy as the causes of suffering.)
- Suffering can end (if we free ourselves of these causes)
- The path to end suffering is known (Buddha described an Eightfold Path to liberation from suffering: right understanding, right intention or thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. More succinctly, he named three categories—wisdom, ethics, and practices.)

Because enlightenment requires profound inner transformation and self-realization, it is not enough to simply know in your mind what is required. One's thoughts, words, and deeds must all be in alignment and reveal our enlightened walk. All our experiences must be integrated. Only by

paying close attention to who we are and what we do can we choose whether to live in a way that reduces suffering or not.

I imagine each one of you can identify something in your life that has or continues to cause you suffering, hardship, sadness, or grief. I certainly can name some things, but you and I are not enlightened like Buddha. However, if your life is filled with excessive disappointment, failed relationships, fear, frustration, or a feeling that life just isn't meaningful, recognize these as signs that you might want to look more deeply at yourself to discover what illusions and desires you're holding onto that you might be better off letting go of. Self-reflection may be key to finding your own peace, freedom, love, and even enlightenment.

Buddha lived in a time and place where he could leave his family and know they would be cared for, something most of us can't or won't do. He gave up everything to seek the truth about suffering, a truth hidden by his palace walls and princely privilege. Buddha lived in a culture that respected ascetics as holy men and willingly filled their alms bowls. We can't say the same now. Those who live in the streets and by begging sadly are frequently ignored, abused, and despised. Many suffer from mental health and addiction challenges and we often fear them. Given this, I don't advise you entirely walk away from your friends, homes, or jobs. Nor would the Buddha. He chose a middle path, not one of poverty and self-denial and not one of wealth and self-indulgence. He chose the path of compassion.

How can citizens of the modern, western world awaken? Endless hours or years of meditation likely aren't available. For us, our everyday experience in our everyday lives must serve to inform who we are. In each moment, whether it's walking to the grocery store or fixing dinner, we can be mindful of what we're doing. We can reflect on what is motivating our thoughts, words, and deeds. If so, we might learn what's making us unhappy, angry or frustrated. We might learn what makes us joyful. We might learn how to be more loving and compassionate.

Mindful meditation in every moment, even deep introspection, will allow us to meet who we really are without spending years in a cave. We don't need to lick the maggots off a mangy dog, thank God, but we can consider how we might open our hearts and souls more as we walk through life.

We don't need to become Buddhists to learn from Buddhist wisdom. Unitarian Universalists are not limited to one source of wisdom. And all the world's great religious traditions offer contemplative practices for seeking understanding and finding the divine light or Buddha-nature within—this is not a coincidence. There is value in reflective practices.

May you continue to seek truth here and in your everyday experiences. And may your spiritual walk return you to this Fellowship once more, so that you can share your understandings, your revelations, and your enlightening thoughts with this loving community. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Do you have an intentional practice of reflecting or meditating on your thoughts and

actions? If so, how has this helped you achieve peace or reduce suffering? If not, might you begin or work to overcome perceived obstacles that prevent you from this?

2. What expectations of yourself do you hold on to?
3. If you agree with the Buddha's four truths (life is suffering, attachment causes suffering, we can alleviate suffering, and there is a path we can take towards peace and happiness) how does this affect your everyday thoughts and actions? If not, what are your truths?