



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Insight from a Flower”

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A sermon delivered on February 1, 2015

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

*A special transmission outside the scriptures, Not dependent upon words or speech,
Directly pointing to the human mind, See into one's own true nature and become a Buddha.*

Bodhidharma, First Patriarch of Zen Buddhism

*If you understand, things are just as they are;
if you do not understand, things are just as they are. Zen Proverb*

Zen is not some kind of excitement but concentration on our usual everyday routine.

Shunryu Suzuki, Sōtō Zen monk

Sermon

I can't tell you how many 'do-overs' I had while writing this sermon. Like being in a maze, I found myself wandering down paths that led nowhere. I searched for just the right path that would lead me to a perfectly worded sermon. But it proved elusive, in fact, impossible because the Zen Buddhist tradition relies on the transmission of knowledge or insight *without words*.

Some of you might like a silent, wordless sermon, but if I did that, I expect most of you might react like all but one of Buddha's disciples did in the following story known as the Flower Sermon.

Buddha gathered his students around him for the morning's dharma or teaching, as he usually did. But this time, instead of talking about the causes of human suffering or how to end the cycle of rebirth, he simply held up a flower and smiled.

His students looked confused and wondered why Buddha said nothing.

But one student, Mahakasyapa understood and smiled back. Noticing this, Buddha handed him the flower and said:

I possess the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana, the true form of the formless, the subtle Dharma Gate that does not rest on words or letters but is a special transmission outside the scriptures. This I entrust to Mahakasyapa.

By possessing ‘the true Dharma eye’ I think Buddha meant that he sees the truth, the world as it is without the cloud of illusions most of us see through, we who are not similarly awakened or enlightened. This insight into ‘what is’ requires no words to convey because we already possess this wisdom within. We only need to remove the illusions from our eyes and see our own Buddha-nature. Everyone possesses Buddha-nature, the ability to see what is and become awake.

What is the biggest illusion that clouds our ability to see clearly? Buddhists say it is that we fool ourselves into believing some things in life can remain unchanged, when in fact *all things change*. Buddha’s wordless transmission with a flower was a direct experience of the dharma. In Zen, wisdom is not obtained by memorizing doctrine or reading scripture. The Flower Sermon reveals the first distinctive aspect of Zen Buddhism—wisdom without words.

I imagine the moment of awakening that Mahakasyapa felt is a bit like an ‘ah-ha!’ moment when something not understood suddenly becomes clear. I’ve had those little awakenings. But I’m far from enlightened. Removing my illusions, attachments, and expectations is difficult because they are so much a part of me that I truly am unaware of all of them. Fortunately, enlightenment is not a ‘one and done’ kind of thing. We can have little or big awakenings throughout our lives. It’s one reason we call meditation and other similar spiritual activities a *practice*. They take practice.

By passing the flower to his newly awakened student, the second biggest distinction between Zen and other forms of Buddhism is made clear: of central importance is the relationship between master and disciple and the master’s certification of a student’s awakening. Only with the approval of the master may a student become a master in their own right and be allowed to teach the dharma. Buddha entrusted Mahakasyapa with the teaching.

When the Flower Sermon took place, in that very moment Zen was born. But it probably didn’t take place. The story first appears in a Chinese text over a thousand years after Buddha lived. And probably because it isn’t historically true, Mahakasyapa is not known as the first patriarch or father of Zen, or Ch’an as it’s called in China. That designation belongs to the monk Bodhidharma who left India about a thousand years after Buddha’s death to spread into China this form of Buddhist good news. From China the dharma was taken to Japan and eventually spread to the rest of the world.

Buddha may have passed the first flower to acknowledge the passing of the dharma to an awakened student, but he was not the last. Beginning with Bodhidharma, Chinese Zen masters began keeping track of subsequent transmissions. Buddhist lineages, like family trees, record over a thousand years of master to newly-made master relationships. A master’s lineage reveals the type of Zen the master practices and teaches.

Yes, Zen has different types. Buddhism, like Unitarian Universalism, is a living tradition. As it has moved geographically and historically it has changed, forming several schools each with a slightly different teaching emphasis.

In other Buddhist traditions, words are welcome. Followers can memorize the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. They can read Buddhist scripture. But knowing something intellectually, only in the head, isn't true enlightenment. Not until it is part of a person's flesh and bones will the person be truly awake. Not until it becomes written on the heart, deep in the soul, and in every breath, are you fully awake. Zen masters encourage us not to read about flowers in books, but to go outdoors and experience the flowers first hand. Toss out the books, pick up a flower, see the world as it really is, and acknowledge what you already know inside. Of course, this hasn't stopped many masters from writing books about Zen practices—or UU ministers from preaching on it.

Zen practices intend to help you see the world clearly. Zen means meditation and that can take many forms. The most familiar may be *zazen*, or sitting meditation. But it can be any practice that quiets the monkey-mind, all that stuff jumping around in our heads.

Chanting or singing a sentence or phrase over and over can chase other random thoughts from our minds. Concentrating deeply on drawing or coloring a mandala can eliminate the 'to do' list in our heads. Getting lost in beautiful music or staring at the clouds or stars can be a meditative practice. Paying attention to your breathing or the steady beat of your heart can focus you. Meditation can take place anywhere, anytime.

Less familiar may be *Zen koans*. These are word puzzles that seem to be inscrutable. You've probably heard: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" We know the sound two hands clapping. It needs no words. What then is the sound of one hand clapping?

Silence, no sound. It is just what it is. The purpose of that particular koan, I believe, is to experience the silence the same way we experience the two hands clapping—we can directly know the silence by meditating with a silent mind, a mind focused on no-thing. Although I have an idea of what this koan may intend, I know I can't completely empty my mind without years of practice. The purpose of any particularly puzzling koan is to exhaust your own rational mind's capacity to obstruct your true self from your awareness. The opposite of emptying, it fills your mind with one all-consuming task. By focusing on the puzzle, you might eliminate the other distracting thoughts. Different practices work best for different people.

The bicyclists' story is also a koan. Each student answered the master's question in a way that showed they did not understand, they were not awake yet. The first showed he was attached to the illusion of permanence because he thought to keep his body fit by not carrying the potatoes. The second and third were multi-tasking, they were not mindful of what they were doing in that moment—riding a bike. The fourth shared his illusion that he was one with the universe while riding. But a Buddhist should know he's always in harmony with all that exists because it's an illusion that we are ever separate. All is one.

Finally, the fifth student said he rides the bike to simply ride the bike. He does nothing else but ride in that moment. When the teacher heard that student's reply, he realized his praise of the earlier students was incorrect. He needed to become the student of the one who knew what is.

I don't know about you, but I know I'm more like the first four students. I'm rarely, if ever, fully mindful of one thing at a time. My monkey-brain keeps me hopping and stressed out. I need meditation practices just to calm my mind and help me focus on what is before me. If I paid more attention to what is, and not everything else, then I would suffer less, be less stressed, and happier. Maybe I can learn to stop stressing over all the things I have to do on my list and just do them. They'll lose power over me that way and I'll suffer less. I need to stop clouding my vision with attachments and illusions that don't serve me well. I need to let go of them and let life just be. If I do it may just unfold with a little less anxiety, fear, greed, and disappointment.

When I stress over mistakes I've made, harm I've caused, things left undone, I cause myself to suffer. Unlike in the "Groundhog Day" movie, I can't go back and redo my past. Regretting the past is pointless. Instead, if I just focus on what I can do now, I'll be healthier. Similarly, you can be, too.

The message I think we can take away from the Buddha holding up a flower before his students is that a flower is just a flower. But in its being just a flower, we can see the seed that becomes a seedling, the stem that develops a bud, the flower that unfolds, and even the flower that withers and dies. The flower is life. But it is still just a flower. The 'to do' list is just a list. A bike is just a bike to ride.

The following Zen saying wraps up everything we need to know about what is. These words probably originated with the Zen poet Basho:

Sitting peacefully doing nothing
Spring comes
and the grass grows all by itself.

Or as Zen Master Robert Aiken writes in *As It Is*:

Everything
just as it is,
as it is,
as is.
Flowers in bloom.
Nothing to add.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Have you experienced your own moment of insight or awakening? How did it change you?
2. What role does intuition or personal experience play in your beliefs or spirituality?
3. How does/might meditation or other mindfulness practice help you de-stress or get focused?