



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Keep Calm & Carry On”

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A reflection delivered on August 26, 2018

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

Chaos is inherent in all compounded things. Strive on with diligence. The Buddha

By all outward appearances, our life is a spark of light between one eternal darkness and another.

Alan Watts

All great changes are preceded by chaos. Deepak Chopra

Sticking with that uncertainty, getting the knack of relaxing in the midst of chaos, learning not to panic—this is the spiritual path. Pema Chödrön

Reflection:

Last spring I asked you to fill out a survey about topics that interest you for Sunday morning reflection. Wisdom from world religions was of great interest. With that in mind, we'll take a deep dive into Buddhism this morning. So please 'keep calm' as we enter deep waters. I promise we will come up for air.

The historical person Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, lived about 2500 years ago. In the course of his spiritual exploration, he came to realize that all people suffer and the cause of suffering is an attachment to things—ideas, people, desires, even what we think we know of as reality. Upon awakening, or realizing this truth, he devoted his life to teaching the Four Noble Truths: 1) the fact of suffering, 2) the reason for suffering, 3) that we can eliminate suffering, and 4) the we can end our suffering by waking up to the true nature of reality. It is this 'true nature of reality' that takes us into deep waters.

You may be familiar with the Buddhist idea that we suffer because of our attachments. We suffer, or grieve, when a loved one dies. We suffer when we face our own deaths. We suffer when we realize we're not as kind as we'd like. We suffer when our idea of priests as models of virtue are proved wrong. We suffer when a friend's words hurt us or their behavior lets us down. If we were less attached to these types of things, we'd suffer less. Even so, I think many of us believe some attachments are worth their potential to cause sorrow.

This morning I want to focus on one aspect of the nature of reality, and in one word, it is this: *impermanence*. Buddha believed reality is never fixed, it is always changing. Everything is in a

constant state of flux, always in a state of becoming something different. Nothing begins; it simply changes from something that was before. Nothing ends, it simply becomes something else. Buddhist's refer to this as no-birth and no-death. All that exists does so in a continuous cycle of change. Physicists call this the Law of Conservation of Energy: matter or energy is neither created nor destroyed. Environmentalists call this the interdependent web of life.

Now take a deep breath, we're diving deeper.

Because nothing is fixed or permanent, everything is empty of form. For example, the pew or chair you're sitting on is changing right now. Its wood is decaying, its bolts rusting, its cloth fraying. Be careful, you might fall through the seat!

Just kidding...maybe. In this moment it supports you, but in fifty years or less, the pew will clearly evidence change. At some future time the pews will be replaced; our brand new building torn down. Nothing lasts forever. Change is inevitable. It can't be stopped. Even the death of our bodies won't stop them from changing, they'll burn or decay, enrich the soil, and be given new life as a tree or flower.

That impermanence makes everything empty or without form means you cannot grasp a thing that's constantly in the process of change. Imagine, the atoms in the pew are constantly bouncing around, giving us the illusion of a solid object. But in reality it's bits and pieces suspended in air. Its temporary form is a mental convention allowing us to trust our experience of it as solid and permanent. You can stub your toe on it. But for Buddha, convention is not reality. He believed upon realizing the impermanent nature of things, we would cling less to our attachments, and thus reduce our suffering.

Hopefully you're still breathing and about to ascend from our deep dive.

The anthem the choir sang earlier uses concepts and text from the *Heart Sutra*, or *The Heart of Wisdom*. It's not about hearts, but about the central idea of Buddhist teaching—impermanence. A mantra lies at the end of the text which many Buddhist monks chant daily or at the start of their meditation period. It reminds them of this essential Buddhist truth.

Here's the mantra in Sanskrit: Gaté gaté, paragaté, parasamgaté, bodhi svaha! In English we'd chant: Gone, gone, gone beyond, totally gone beyond, awakened hallelujah! *Gone* refers to everything being temporary, always changing. Time, for example, is always changing, you can't put your finger on now, because instantly it has become past—now is gone, gone beyond. Other translations use boundless instead of beyond because things without form are boundless.

The last two words of the chant, *bodhi*, means light or enlightenment, and *svaha* is an expression of joy—yeah, we're free! If we understand the teaching of impermanence, then we are enlightened and can joyfully celebrate our liberation from suffering. We are gone beyond convention, gone beyond mistaken understanding, gone with others to the other shore, the other side, away from the illusion of permanence. Gone, gone, gone beyond, totally gone beyond, awakened—hallelujah!

We're almost ready to emerge from the deep. Before then, let's connect this Buddhist teaching to the World War II poster and to our challenges or suffering today.

The British “Keep Calm and Carry On” poster was created in 1939 to raise morale during expected mass air attacks by German forces. They wished to promote citizen resistance and resilience during a time of great stress because the government feared widespread casualties would cause panic and rioting. In fact, the raids stretched over a longer period of time than was expected, and no mass panic occurred. Only a few police stations received the poster, and most were pulped during a wartime recycling campaign.

In 2000, English bookstore owners found one packed away in a box. Since the copyright had expired, they reproduced it for sale. In short order, the simple message went viral. Now, many lampoon it, such as “Now Panic and Freak Out” and “Stay Alive and Avoid Zombies”. Since ‘The Walking Dead’ show is filmed in Georgia, we should probably pay attention to that last one.

The recommendation to stay calm in the face of chaos is worth remembering. I need this reminder as I watch the news and fights over what is true. If I also remember the Buddhist wisdom of impermanence, it helps me calm down. Reciting the mantra, ‘this will change, this will change, this will change’ makes me feel less depressed over the heartbreaking reality of our world and people suffering. I breathe in, this will change; I breathe out, this will change.

Last week I reflected on the fear change can create. Rapid change shakes our foundations, our notions of how things ought to be. When we cling tightly to these notions, we may try to stop the change, or get angry, even violent. People who hold tightly to an idea of how things should always be, suffer more than if they could let go and adapt to change.

This week I’m lifting up that change can be welcome, too. If your world feels rocky, unstable or chaotic right now, keep calm and carry on. Know this will change. World War II ended, the Berlin Wall came down, and America elected its first black President. Much has changed since those moments, but more change will come. Change cannot be stopped; the pendulum will swing again.

When you find yourself getting angry, depressed, or grieving over something happening in your life or in the world, remember to stay calm. And in staying calm, you can more clearly see a path forward. You can begin to change things as you would like to see them changed. But remember, even this will pass. Nothing lasts forever—thank the universe!

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. When you feel helpless or hopeless about what’s going on around you, what helps you move toward a greater hopefulness that things will change?
2. What do you do (or might begin to do) to increase your tolerance of instability, uncertainty, and change? Can you willingly embrace or relax into the impermanence of life?
3. How strongly to your emotions rule you, and are you able to calm yourself when they run high?