

The Next Incarnation of the Buddha may be the Sangha

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

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Your sangha — family, friends, and copractitioners — is the soil, and you are the seed. No matter how vigorous the seed is, if the soil does not provide nourishment, your seed will die. A good sangha is crucial for the practice. Please find a good sangha or help create one. —Thich Nhat Hanh

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Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are three precious jewels in Buddhism, and the most important of these is Sangha. The Sangha contains the Buddha and the Dharma. A good teacher is important, but sisters and brothers in the practice are the main ingredient for success. —Thich Nhat Hanh

WELCOME

Two thousand five hundred years ago, Siddhartha Guatama, also known as the Buddha, began teaching a path of wisdom and practice that can take us beyond desire, ignorance, and hatred, toward the blissful awareness that there is no separation. One piece of wisdom he shared was that the next Buddha would be “the Buddha of love.”

His followers over the millennia have interpreted this in a variety of ways. The idea that the next Buddha may be a Sangha — a community rather than an individual — this interpretation has been attributed to a variety of sources, from a Hindu in the 19th century to our contemporary, Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

The immediate institutional roots of our own Unitarian Universalist tradition are about 250 years old. About one tenth of Buddhism. One thing we’ve learned, then, and one thing I believe the global community has learned, over time, is that we need one another. We draw on sources human and supra-human: the collective wisdom of the ancestors, and the synergy we can create right here and now — as we share a meal or a prayer.

A fairly concrete way in which we have pulled together the power of different worldviews is that in the 1960s, about 200 years after the American incarnations of Unitarianism and Universalism, we merged into an association of independent and interdependent congregations that has become the Unitarian Universalist Association.

That mingling of spirit, and compounding of aspiration, had been going on through shared resources and theologies since the inception of the two movements. To recognize and celebrate the growing closeness of these two liberal religious movements, the text of today’s opening song was written about 30 years before merger.

Communities are gatherings of individuals, ideas, resources, and something intangible, which — joined by the alchemy of love — rise in beauty and strength beyond the sum of their parts.

So while this particular manifestation of community (here, today) may not become THE Buddha, let us devote ourselves today to the ideal that we may be a part of the larger Sangha of enlightenment, through love.

In this spirit we share our covenant: *Love is the spirit of this fellowship, and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.*

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

GATHERING SONG #145 *As Tranquil Streams*

CHILDREN'S FOCUS "Give the Ball to Peetie," by Gary Smith

RESPONSIVE READING #437

Let us worship with our eyes and ears and fingertips;
let us love the world through heart and mind and body.

We feed our eyes upon the mystery and revelation
in the faces of our brothers and sisters.

We seek to know the wistfulness of the very young
and the very old, the wistfulness of people in all times of life.

We seek to understand the shyness behind arrogance,
the fear behind pride, the tenderness behind clumsy strength,
the anguish behind cruelty.

All life flows into a great common life,
if we will only open our eyes to our companions.

Let us worship, not in bowing down,
not with closed eyes and stopped ears.

Let us worship with the opening of all the windows of our beings,
with the full outstretching of our spirits.

Life comes with singing and laughter, with tears and confiding,
with a rising wave too great to be held in the mind and heart and body,
to those who have fallen in love with life.

Let us worship, and let us learn to love.

— Kenneth L. Patton

SILENCE (3:00)

MESSAGE

Utopian visions of community are nothing new. Cults and communes, extended families and monasteries, congregations and theocracies. Sharing economic resources, declaring certain places as public and to be held in common, sharing husbands and wives and children, collective ownership of a

business or a place to live.... Relatively successful, and horribly destructive experiments in community come and go. The same mistakes are made again and again. Positive lessons accumulate, and are passed along.

Utopian philosophies offer visions of human interdependence, the earth as a single organism, transportation and communications technologies to unite us, architecture and economic systems designed to ensure that no matter how many of us there are on this planet, we will not get in each other's way. Legal systems guaranteeing liberty, equality, and justice for all.

We laugh, we cry, we dream, and we invest our lives in these visions. We battle to destroy those versions of community that we deem oppressive, impractical, or ungodly.

Then we give up. And begin again. The unending karmic cycle. But, what if we just gave up, for good?

So far in my life I have not been able to give up my modern Western materialist worldview. I don't know that I want to give it up: the point of view, to oversimplify a bit, that there is something, and that I can, at least to some degree, understand and manipulate that something, for better and for worse. That I matter.

I honor the Buddhists in this room and around the world who strive to see things differently. Since I am not a Buddhist I'm likely to mis-state what I understand to be that different worldview: that instead of something, there is nothing. At least when we perceive what is most real, we understand that there is nothing outside of me, because there is no me. Ego is extinguished in the awareness that there are no divisions, no labels, and no desire, not even for enlightenment.

Buddhists seek this state of awareness, this Buddha nature, through the Dharma — that is the teachings and the practice — and in the context of the Sangha — the community of practice.

Given our experience thus far, it may seem preposterous to imagine that a group of imperfect human beings could collectively attain Buddha nature. And yet we live in revolutionary times. I'm not going to speculate that in our lifetimes this Buddha will come into existence, nor the second coming of Christ, nor the apocalypse. I am going to speculate, however, that whatever is on the other side of the breakthrough, it will be profoundly influenced by the co-mingling, the inter-being of Western and Eastern worldviews.

East and West have mingled dramatically over the past century through the movement of people and ideas, technology and culture... and even religion (tho people tend to erect pretty stiff barriers against invasion by foreign religion). And within Unitarian Universalism — once the bastion of Western analytical humanism — we see a significant infiltration of Buddhist teachings and practices. It's interesting that as much as we say that our UU congregations draw on wisdom from all of the great world religions... in truth, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, animism, even Christianity don't have a lot of self-identified adherents within our congregations. Buddhism, however, is here to stay. It's come beyond the stage of being cool, and is increasingly present in our congregations, and in Western culture at large, perhaps because there is a natural compatibility.

These days Westerners are eager to embrace Buddhist ideas and practices which are proving effective to increase performance, health, and the quality of life. And it's not just a placebo effect. Studies of brain activity and stress reduction provide ample evidence to bring together those of us

who worship at universities in white lab coats... joining hands with those in ancient temples wearing saffron robes.

When Buddhists say that the next Buddha may take the form of Sangha, they're envisioning not an individual but a community, perhaps a group of individuals, a whole society, maybe even a collection of people who don't know each other or don't live on the same continent... awakening with and through one another in the ultimate paradox of enlightenment, in which ego — or in this case collective ego — disappears.

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Within our lifetimes, revolutionary experiments in governance, economics, science, and spirituality have brought forth destruction, and glorious breakthroughs. Around the world, liberating collective movements are bringing us together across barriers of race and gender, sexual orientation, religion, and even — here and there — even across barriers of social class.

So imagine: the Mexican taxi driver praying for her grandchildren in Chicago. An aboriginal Australian on walkabout. The Swiss ambassador to Mozambique taking off his shoes to enter the local mosque. A Filipino Catholic priest co-officiating a child dedication at a Filipino Universalist church. And “right there in Alabama, little black boys and little black girls joining hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

Not that all of the people I just mentioned are perfectly enlightened. But even drawing up that imaginary ensemble gives me pause. Reminds me of something I never knew. Generates in me hope. And happiness.

The powerful spiritual leaders I've just mentioned live at remote corners of the earth, and yet the net that links each to each encompasses you and me as well. No one is left out. We do not know one another. We will never work together to accomplish some great purpose. Will we achieve, tho, a collective state in which our being and our doing are indistinguishable? Do we even have to be alive at the same time to be an incarnation of Buddha nature? ...to collectively upend the social, economic, and ideological structures that isolate us... and provoke us to see one another as Other?

Who or what or where is your Sangha? Your community of devotion or practice or learning? Simply as a thought experiment, let's imagine for a moment that BUF is not going to be the chosen community through which the Buddha becomes manifest in our lifetimes. Let's not ask, for a moment, why not. So, everybody got that? We're creating this picture in our minds in which BUF is not perfect, and we're not asking “why not?” OK, now here we are all together in that universe where BUF is not perfect and we're not asking why. Let this be a moment of mindfulness. Because that actually can be here, that actually can be now.

So in this moment, can you draw into your awareness something in this room, something within us, among us and between us that holds you... that holds you so close that you can let go... holds you so close that you can let go of your need to be smart, or strong, or special in any way. That's where we are at this very moment. Naked and unashamed. Fully ourselves, and indistinguishable from the whole of eternity which lives in us, and in which we live deeply, love deeply, and embody our covenant.