

First Unitarian Church of Hamilton Service and Sermon

Date: Sunday, December 6, 2009

Title: The Light of Buddhism

OPENING WORDS

By Lyla Miklos

We start each service with the ritual of lighting our chalice. It marks our entry into sacred space. What meaning do the words sacred space have for you?

For me, I think back to a very special spot in Northern Ontario along the shores of Lake Huron where I spent many summers in my youth. I often would enjoy sitting alone in a secluded wooded area on a large rock at the edge of the water overlooking the lake.

I'd turn the busy-ness in my mind off and close my eyes and feel the breeze against my face and stretch out my arms and then my fingers. I'd hear the wind blowing through the trees and the water lapping against the rocks. I'd smell the pine, the earth, and the water. Then I would open my eyes and see the sunset reflecting from the sky on to the lake.

In this perfect moment I would feel at peace and connected to the infinite beauty of the universe. An amazing sense of both insignificance and importance would envelope me all at once. It is that perfect moment that I hope to experience and recreate every Sunday morning as we worship together in THIS sacred space.

CHALICE LIGHTING WORDS

By Leonard Cohen

Lean back and be loved by all that is already loving you. It is your effort at love that is preventing you from experiencing it. It is like if you ever taught kids how to swim. The most difficult thing is to understand that they will float, if they relax, if they hold their breath and relax, they will actually float.

READING

From The Cure For Crazy by Sharon Salzberg

When my teaching colleague Joseph Goldstein was a child, he had a garden in which he grew carrots. He was so excited when the first green fluffy shoots came out of the soil that he pulled them up to look at the carrots that were growing and to help them along. We needn't be in a hurry to reap the results of our efforts faster than the world can bestow them. Being alive means doing the best we can and then letting nature take its course. We plant a seed, nurture it, water it, and let it be. Knowing there's a bigger picture than what we see in front of us, even if

it isn't perfectly clear, allows us to be more peaceful, to learn as things develop. True patience gives us a courageous dedication to the long haul, along with the willingness to connect with the multilayered truth of what is right here.

OFFERTORY WORDS

From The Buddha

Teach this triple truth to all: A generous heart, kind speech, and a life of service and compassion are the things, which renew humanity.

MEDITATION IN WORDS

Meditation on Loving Kindness by Jack Kornfield

*May I be filled with loving kindness.
May I be safe from inner and outer dangers.
May I be well in body and mind.
May I be at ease and happy.
(Bell)*

*May you be filled with loving kindness.
May you be safe from inner and outer dangers.
May you be well in body and mind.
May you be at ease and happy.
(Bell)*

*May we be filled with loving kindness.
May we be safe from inner and outer dangers.
May we be well in body and mind.
May we be at ease and happy.
(Two Bells)*

(One minute of silence.)

(Three Bells)

UNISON WORDS OF SUPPORT

From The Buddha

It is better to conquer yourself than to win a thousand battles. Then the victory is yours. It cannot be taken from you, not by angels or by demons, heaven or hell.

SERMON: The Light of Buddhism **By Rev. Ed Brock**

The mission of a Unitarian church is the promotion of its principles and their application to life; that is evident in the fact that Unitarian Universalism, to much of the public, is represented by a list of seven principles. An extension of this fact is the importance of the teaching of spiritual practices, which are the ways principles are applied to, and integrated into, our lives.

The sources and inspiration of our principles, however, lie in the vast resources of the world's religions. This is expressed in the statement of our principles and purposes that Unitarian Universalism draws from many sources including "Wisdom from the world's religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life."

So it is fitting that this month, a time when so many religious holidays are celebrated, that we will be exploring some aspects of this foundation of our principles by looking at three religions: Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism. All these traditions, despite their differences, seek to cure the self's inner divisions, explain the world and cosmos in a manner which gives meaning, purpose and direction to human life, and inspire the creation of a social order of peace, harmony and justice.

The Unitarian tradition has taken the unique position that it will try to use the world's religions as resources to develop principles attuned to the needs and challenges of the modern world.

Given this background and context, let me turn to Buddhism.

Buddhism is, like all religions, very complex, with many variations and types and forms of belief. It is impossible to cover all the territory in 20 minutes, or an hour, or a life time. But there are several characteristics, which seem to be central to Buddhism's basic message.

The central aim of Buddhism is the liberation of all human beings. Buddhists conceive this liberation as the achievement of a continuous state of non-attachment, or letting things be as they are and relinquishing the attempt to try to impose one's will on others or the world; a state of presence, or living fully in the moment; compassion, or living with an intention for the well being of all persons; and ethical living, or living a life of non-harming, and in ways which enrich, support and benefit all persons within the orbits of our relationships.

This process of liberation is central to an important Buddhist holiday called Rohatsu, which culminates on December 8.

Rohatsu marks the morning Buddha achieved the state of liberation, which could be described as a combination of freedom from fear, clarity, compassion for all

things, living completely in the moment, and knowing that one is part of everything that exists. This experience came to Buddha as the culmination of years of effort, as he was looking up at the morning star, the planet we call Venus, after one week of concentrated meditation. Buddha is said at this moment, as he looked at the morning star, to have cried out: *That's it! That's it! That's it. That's me! That's me that's shining so brilliantly!*

How wondrous, how wondrous! All beings are endowed with this pure nature! What a wondrous, astonishing thing has been realized! All the ten thousand things, all the flowers, all the trees, all the rocks, all things everywhere are shining brilliantly! What an amazing thing! It's the same landscape, but how brilliantly it is illuminated! What freshness is everything!

Each year, as the time of Rohatsu approaches, people in the Buddhist community vow to experience this very same experience of the Buddha as they approach their meditation retreat. So every year when December approaches, Buddhists experience considerable anticipation of the arrival of the Rohatsu, intensifying their training in preparation for this intensive meditation retreat held from the first to the eighth of December.

The Rohatsu meditation retreat is a time when everyone faces the final reckoning of a year of meditation practice.

One of the gifts of Buddhism is the way in which it gives dignity, purpose, meaning, and value to human life; from a Buddhist perspective, what Buddha experienced can be experienced by everyone.

A useful way to illustrate the meaning of Buddhism is by seeing how it addresses a very widespread problem of modern life, namely, the way human life, and life itself, as represented by nature, is devalued.

In my experiences as a counselor and minister, and through my attempts to pay attention to patterns in modern society, I find that the devaluing of the worth and dignity of persons, in particular, is a very powerful force at work in modern society.

There are a number of powerful forces at work in modern society, which diminishes human dignity and worth, but I will limit myself to mentioning only one: the commoditization of human beings through the influence of corporations. Individuals are seen increasingly as cogs in a very big machine called the corporation.

Within this framework, the value of individual is reduced to their ability to add to the profitability of corporations. The signs of this trend are found everywhere in modern society but I will point out one way this pattern shows itself.

This week it was reported that in the United States, the Health insurance giant Aetna is planning to force up to 650,000 clients to drop their coverage next year. Officials at Aetna announced this week that in an effort to improve on a less-than-anticipated profit margin in 2009, they would be raising prices on their "consumers" in 2010, which would lead to the loss of around 650,000 "clients." Aetna chairman and CEO Ron Williams said "The pricing we put in place for 2009 turned out to not really be what we needed to achieve the results and margins that we had historically been delivering." Williams added that "We view 2010 as a repositioning year, a year that does not fully reflect the earnings potential of our business. Our pricing actions should have a noticeable effect beginning in the first quarter of 2010, with additional financial impact realized during the remaining three quarters of the year."

Aetna actually made a profit in 2009 but not at levels that it anticipated. Aetna is one of the largest insurers in the private market, covering roughly 17.7 million people. As a major player in the current health care debate, Aetna has spent more than \$2 million on lobbying just in 2009 alone.

Rather than being embarrassed that he was about to add 650,000 people to the already 40 million uninsured, Mr. Williams was eager to let people know he was doing his job.

This is a clear example of what is in fact a way of thinking that is immoral in its devaluing of persons which runs through every industry in which corporations are influential. This pattern may effect American society more than Canadian society, and certainly in the area of Health Care specifically, Canada is the more advanced nation, but both of our cultures are effected by the formal and informal, direct and indirect, power of the corporations, in numerous ways.

On the level of the individual, there are many messages which say "You are not valuable" perhaps or unless you become more and more a conformist to the image of what "valuable" means as defined by corporate culture.

And yet, all good in the world, in my experience, ultimately depends on individuals seeing, feeling, and believing in, the truth of their own valuableness.

Against this back drop, Buddhism is one of the resources of our times which makes a contribution to a deeper understanding of the valuableness of the individual. It makes this contribution by encouraging us to see the sacredness of life, not by reference to another world or another dimension of life, but by more

simply and directly experiencing this world. Lyla captured the spirit of this in her opening words when she wrote about her experiences on the shores of Lake Huron:

I'd turn the busy-ness in my mind off and close my eyes and feel the breeze against my face and stretch out my arms and then my fingers. I'd hear the wind blowing through the trees and the water lapping against the rocks. I'd smell the pine, the earth, and the water. Then I would open my eyes and see the sunset reflecting from the sky on to the lake. In this perfect moment I would feel at peace and connected to the infinite beauty of the universe. An amazing sense of both insignificance and importance would envelope me all at once.

This is what Buddhism draws us to: a more direct experience of our daily lives, which transforms us. Buddhism is not about supernatural experiences, but more simple and direct experiences of the contours of our daily lives.

Buddhism encourages us to this deeper, simpler, and more direct experience of our lives, not by becoming something special, or doing something special, but by, as Leonard Cohen put it, "Lean(ing) back and be(ing) loved by all that is already loving you."

From a Buddhist perspective, the problem is not doing enough; the problem is letting go of all the things that prevent us from living life now; from a Buddhist perspective, the deeper our acceptance becomes, the greater our relaxation with things as they are, the more we discover that life will hold us up and support us, just like a baby bird, by jumping off the limb of a tree for the first time, discovers that it can fly.

Buddhism is remarkably harmonious with a modern sensibility; it has, in comparison to other major religions traditions, a decidedly empirical, practical, democratic, this-worldly, even scientific, orientation and character. It has had a powerful effect on people in both Canada and America, and the future of Buddhism in the West should be interesting to watch unfold.

I will end with words of Buddha, which reflect the simplicity and directness of this path:

Teach this triple truth to all: A generous heart, kind speech, and a life of service and compassion are the things, which renew humanity.

May it be so.
Amen.

CLOSING WORDS
From Joseph Goldstein

As we ask ourselves how we can find appropriate responses to the uncertainty and confusion of these times, I find inspiration in understanding that peace in the world begins with peace in our own minds. Wise and compassionate action in the world arises from wisdom and compassion within ourselves.