

**Why Buddhism?**  
Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
May 30, 2010

**Meditation**

On this beautiful morning...  
We pause in this beautiful ancient house...  
Present to one another's beautiful presence...  
    Perhaps remembering a loved one from many years past  
    on this day of memory...  
    Perhaps holding a more immediate sorrow or joy in our hearts...  
    Perhaps contemplating a deeply felt concern...  
  
Yet may each of us feel the embrace of love and kindness  
    Feel held by one another...  
    Feel held by the eternal spirit of life and love...  
  
And be renewed, healed,  
within these moments of quiet meditation and prayer,  
within this hour, on this beautiful day.

**Readings**

Let us cultivate boundless goodwill. Let none deceive another, or despise any being in any state. Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm. Even as a mother watches over her child, so with boundless mind should one cherish all living beings, radiating friendliness over the whole world, above, below, and all around, without limit.  
--Metta Sutta (Buddhist text)

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era, received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!"  
"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"  
--from *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, editors

## Sermon

Young Noah Levine sat in his padded cell. End of the road. Drugs. Stealing. Violence. Suicidal thoughts.

Okay, he said to himself: Might as well try that meditation stuff my father (noted Buddhist writer and teacher Stephen Levine) is always talking about. What did he say on the phone? Just watch your breath. In. Out.

So he did.

And at least for the few moments Noah was actually able to pay attention *only* to his breath, he wasn't thinking about anything else, wasn't thinking about how worthless he was (or felt that he was), wasn't thinking about how messed up his life was, wasn't thinking about how messed up the world seemed to be.

That was the beginning of Noah's long, hard, and not without setbacks road back. Which is the story that he tells in his book *Dharma Punx*, near the end of which he writes:

Everything I'd been searching for that kept getting me locked up I'd found through this simple practice of mindfulness meditation.

Among other things, Noah discovered – perhaps to his surprise – that the same kinds of personal dissatisfactions with life and general dissatisfactions with the state of the world that fueled the punk movement in which he had been so involved had also motivated the young prince Siddhartha Gautama 2500 years ago, the young prince who became the Buddha, the Awakened One. Some movement of the soul? Of a life?

Now, my story is nowhere near as dramatic as Noah Levine's, not to mention Siddhartha Gautama's.

But though my journey neither led to my leading a world-transforming religious movement nor landed me in a padded cell, when I was Noah Levine's age I was seeking too – perhaps some of you were too at that age, might be symptomatic of that age, this seeking out of a vague sense of dissatisfaction.

I don't think I knew exactly *what* I was seeking – but the idea of “enlightenment” sounded pretty good. This meant that my interest in philosophy and religion in college was actually not particularly academic – you might say it was existential, a matter of spiritual quest.

So when during my freshman year one of my religion professors invited a monk from Thailand to come and offer instruction in meditation, I was there for his session in the basement art gallery of one of the new dormitories.

The room was cleared of chairs. We sat on the blue carpet.

Our instruction? “We are now going to sit for thirty minutes.” The monk rang the chime. And we sat.

Now, the first Noble Truth of the Buddha's “Four Noble Truths” is often translated “All life is suffering.” Well, whatever we might say about “all life,” that thirty minutes was no picnic! Youthful nineteen-year-old knees were no protection whatsoever against the burning pain that began after just a few minutes in a cross-legged position I hadn't spent much time in since, oh, kindergarten.

Well, in between our *two* thirty-minute sessions of sitting, a brave soul asked our visiting monk what to do about the pain.

“Just watch the pain,” he said.

Oh.

But... here’s the thing: If you really just watched the pain, it actually wasn’t quite as painful as you had thought. Some of the pain anyway, maybe even much of it, had to do with our reaction to the pain – what is sometimes called “the suffering of suffering.”

Just watch the pain.

Just watch.

But why would sitting on the floor experiencing the pain in your knees have any appeal whatsoever?

Well, at the time I was as I said simply (!) looking for enlightenment, and if you had to sit on the floor with sore knees to get enlightened, well so be it.

But where did this interest in something called “enlightenment” come from?

Did my attraction to Buddhism as a young American of the 60s generation have anything whatsoever in common with generation X Noah Levine’s?

Or for that matter with the various Old Ship folks in our Buddhist meditation group, who when asked the question “Why Buddhism?” had varieties of related answers: to quiet a too-busy or fretful or anxious mind; to find greater contentment, satisfaction, happiness; to counter the American intoxication with consumption, with ever more and more and more.

And did my (and our) attraction to Buddhism have anything in common with the attraction of the writers and poets Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsburg, and others in the “beat generation” of the 1950s?

Or with the appeal of Buddhist ideas to Emerson and Thoreau and others in the transcendentalist generation of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century New England, as they read for the first time new English translations of Hindu and Buddhist scriptures?

Or for that matter did my attraction to Buddhism have anything in common with the attraction to these ideas felt by the generations of teachers and students and followers in Asia in the centuries following the life of the Buddha, as his teaching spread from India and Nepal to Tibet and China and Japan and throughout Southeast Asia?

And did the appeal of this path for me have anything in common with whatever it was that drew Siddhartha Gautama himself away from his life as a prince and toward a life in quest for enlightenment?

Why Buddhism? Why these teachings? Why this path?

Might be as simple as this: Buddhism is reality based – and deep down we crave the real thing – not reality TV, but reality *reality* – real answers to our real questions, real responses to our real suffering or dissatisfactions

One way of expressing Buddhist teaching, or dharma, says:

First - Look, this is how things are. (Whether you are watching your breath or watching the pain in your crossed legs while meditating or paying attention to the living and dying and suffering as well as the pleasure and happiness of other human beings and all life around us.) Look, *this* is how things are! Don’t pretend things are otherwise. *This* is how it is: everything changes, people get ill, get old, and die; people and things we love give us joy and happiness, and the joy and happiness don’t last. Everything comes and goes, from each breath to... well... everything.

And your pretending or hoping or imagining the world is other than it is won’t change anything – in fact might only increase your suffering.

*Then, second – this is how you could live with greater peace, even happiness. This is how you could live in a way that will relieve not only your suffering or dissatisfaction but that of others as well.*

*And don't take Buddha's word for it – try it yourself this teaching says: Live more mindfully, pay more attention – to your breath, to your thoughts, to the rising of anger in your breast or the presence of destructive attachments in your heart, to the coming and going of sorrows and joys. Pay attention to how your own grasping of what cannot be grasped leads to increased suffering or dissatisfaction.*

*And in the midst of it all, seek to speak and act and live not only mindfully, but kindly. We are all in this together.,*

*Practice all of this daily. Then just see if it makes a difference, see if it leads to some greater measure of peace and happiness (a taste, you might say, of enlightenment... of nirvana...)*

*This morning's two readings taken together teach these lessons.*

*The "Cup of Tea" story tells us to empty our minds, minds perhaps too full of assumptions or preconceptions about how things are, of abstract ideas or theories about the nature of the world... empty our minds of all of this so that we might actually notice what is right in front of us, might actually experience how things really are, and then might be better able to learn to live in greater harmony with how things *are* rather than with how we vainly wish they could be, which means among other things with a natural compassion for all beings, not separate one from another, but all of us part of one interdependent web of life... for this, too, is how things actually are.*

*So that the brief reading from the Metta Sutta becomes not a "should" or an exhortation to behave better, but an expression of our heart's natural longing to be of use, to help, to heal.*

*Now recently someone contacted me because they were interested in learning more about Buddhism and opportunities to deepen their meditation. This person had been told I was a practicing Buddhist.*

*Well, I told him what I knew about our own programs and other programs in the area; then, afterwards I found myself reflecting on this idea of my being a "practicing Buddhist."*

*And I thought, yes, I've learned a lot about myself and about life from Buddhist teachings and from Buddhist meditation. But I wouldn't consider myself a practicing Buddhist.*

*Maybe a "practicing human being."*

*Maybe a human being practicing to be the best human being I can be in this mysterious universe, this troubled world filled with joy and beauty as well as with too much suffering. And not incidentally a human being grateful for our Unitarian Universalist tradition which offers us the freedom *and encouragement* to draw from the wells of many traditions and teachings – to nourish our souls and inspire our spirits: head, heart, and hands. For me, Buddhist tradition is one of those traditions, but not the only one. Whomever or whatever can help me understand who I am, what this world is, and how I can be a kinder and maybe even a little wiser human being... I will draw from that well.*

*There is of course much more that could be said about the Buddhist wellspring of wisdom and compassion – after all, Buddhist scriptures run into the thousands of volumes!*

Instead I'll just end with this story of the Zen devotee Tetsugen from centuries ago in Japan.

Tetsugen was determined to raise the funds necessary to print the Buddhist sutras in Japanese, up until then only available in Chinese. He spent ten years wandering and begging for the funds. Just when he had the necessary amount to begin, a devastating flood followed by a famine came to his region. He used the money he'd raised to save his people from starvation. After another several years an epidemic swept the country and again he used the money he had raised to heal the people.

Finally, after twenty years he had raised the necessary funds and the project was completed – and the printed Japanese sutras now rest in a temple in Kyoto.

And the Japanese tell their children that Tetsugen actually made *three* sets of sutras, and that the first two invisible sets surpass the last.

(adapted from a telling in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*)

Well, the message in this story is hardly only a “Buddhist” message; rather in the form of a Buddhist teaching story, this is of course a universal message of wisdom and compassion, of remembering what matters more and what matters less. For as Thai Buddhist teacher Ajahn Chah once wrote: “It is the business of genuine religion... to bring people to the happiness that comes from clearly and honestly seeing how things are.” (*from “A Still Forest Pool”*)

Let us notice how things are – and live accordingly.

So may it be.

### **Benediction**

May we go forth with love in our hearts,  
that we might be more loving.  
May we go forth with peace in our hearts,  
that we might be among the peacemakers.

May we go forth remembering the ways in which our lives have been blessed,  
that we might make of our lives a blessing.

So may it be.