

Are You a Buddha Without Knowing It?

Rev. Ken Read-Brown

First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalist

May 31, 2015

Readings

The first reading consists of several verses from chapter 26 of the *Dhammapada*, one of the oldest of Buddhist scriptures, as translated by Thomas Cleary. The word “priestly” is Cleary’s translation of “Brahmin” – which is the name of the priestly caste in India; so these verses are suggesting that being a true Brahmin or priest (or superior person, as another translation puts it) is not about caste or position, but about character:

- 17. One who endures reproach and imprisonment even though blameless, whose power is tolerance and whose army is strength, is the one that I call priestly.
- 18. One who does not anger, who is faithful to religious vows and social ethics, who is attentive, controlled... is the one that I call priestly.
- 23. One who neither kills nor causes killing, having renounced violence toward creatures... is one that I call priestly.
- 24. One who is not hostile in the midst of the hostile, who is peaceful in the midst of those up in arms, who is unattached in the midst of the possessive, is one that I call priestly.
- 25. One whose passion, rage, pride, and contempt have fallen away like a mustard seed from the tip of a needle is one that I call priestly.
- 26. One who speaks words that are not harsh, but informative and true, by which no one is offended, is one that I call priestly.

The second reading is taken from an essay in a recent issue of the journal “Shambala Sun”: Basic Goodness and Humanity’s Future, by Sakyong Mipham

The basic goodness of ourselves and others is a very big question – emotionally, ethically, and philosophically. Could it be that humanity is basically good, kind, wise, and strong? In a materialistic society, we know the outer elements of what it means to be successful, but we are becoming less familiar with the inner elements that lead to deep happiness and positive social connectivity. Through meditation, we practice reawakening those qualities by feeling our own worthiness.

Meditation practice is an opportunity for us to contact the inherent openness of our being, known in Buddhism as buddhanature. This universal nature is characterized by kindness and compassion. A successful meditation practice is one in which we intimately connect with this naturally occurring love in our hearts, and then embody it in our life.

Sermon

My first acquaintance with Buddhism was through a book I’ve mentioned to you from time to time, the coffee table book on world religions my parents sometimes had out on their... coffee table. Not surprisingly the book included photos of golden Buddhas.

The serenity, the beauty, the peace.

There was, for me, an attraction even then.

Perhaps it was the same attraction the prince Gautama Siddhartha experienced when, as the story comes to us, he saw a mendicant monk in the marketplace, a monk who had such a look of serenity that the young prince immediately realized he wanted whatever that monk had.

His journey to that serenity was a long one, though: From a life of privilege as a prince who had been shielded from the sufferings of life... to, through brief trips outside the palace walls, his discovery of the realities of illness, old age, and death... to his encounter with that serene monk... to his leaving the safety of princely, protected, privilege... to his years of spiritual disciplines... and finally to his awakening after days of meditation under a tree.

And it is as the “awakened one” that we know him, since that is, as many of you know, the meaning of the word “Buddha”: one who is awake. And awake to what? Awake to the true nature of life, to the causes of suffering, and to the path that removes those causes and relieves suffering.

So, all this said, what could I possibly mean when I suggest in my sermon title that you/we/all of us might be Buddhas without knowing it? Surely we have not all walked the sort of long and hard spiritual path of the Buddha himself.

Well, maybe not. But I am suggesting the possibility that we could, each of us, all of us, wake up at least a little more than we are to our true nature – to who we have been all along. For Buddhism teaches that each of us already has what is sometimes called “buddhanature” within: clear mind and heart, spacious, compassionate, connected rather than separate and alone.

All this, the Buddha taught, is who we already are. (Even though this is sometimes hard to see – in others... or in ourselves.)

What do you think? Do you think this is true? True that this is who we are, and that we simply do not realize it, are not awake to it?

If it is true, the proper question is: how *do* we awaken?

Well, to begin with, we are taught in Buddhism and many other traditions that the path is a path perhaps not so much of addition but rather of subtraction. What do I mean by that?

Well... have you ever picked up a shell at the beach that was covered with sand? Nothing special until you dip the shell into the water, the sand is washed away, and the shell is revealed in all its beauty?

Or have you ever take an old piece of silver out of a cabinet, dull and gray until you polish off the accumulated tarnish, revealing the shining piece that had been there all along?

Or have you cleaned off your glasses, and discovered that the colors of a beautiful morning are actually more vivid than you had realized?

In the same spirit is one of my favorite verses from the Taoist tradition, from the *Tao Te Ching*, which goes something like this: “Do you have the patience to wait while the mud settles and the stream becomes clear?”

These are of course all metaphors to teach us or remind us that the spiritual path may not be about becoming something we aren’t already somewhere deep inside; rather, it may be about subtracting those things that prevent us from experiencing how things are and who we are, who we’ve been all along – and then living more naturally accordingly.

Among other things, this means that much of the spiritual path (again, Buddhist or otherwise) is about paying attention.

In meditation, for example, just noticing the swirling thoughts until they settle a bit, the mind becomes clear, and we experience a spaciousness, an openness... if only for a moment a taste of who we are beneath all the striving and worrying and desiring. Experience, in short, the Buddha that we already are. Just here. (Nothing special by the way, no more special anyway than anyone else – though no less either: Because everyone else is a Buddha too! Deep within, a Buddha too, just waiting to wake up once the outer muddy and tarnished coverings of incessant striving and worrying recede.)

Further, I believe we all – most of us anyway – have these tastes, whether or not we meditate regularly.

Examples:

You are running or walking or just sitting somewhere outside on a beautiful day – on a trail in the woods or on blanket on the beach or on a bench in your backyard – and for a moment you feel yourself simply dissolving into the day, no feeling of a separate self walking or sitting... rather, of a piece with the whole of the day, trees, breeze, sky...

Or... you are serving a meal at Father Bill's Place, and as you offer one plate after another to each guest, thank yous and you're welcomes exchanged over and over: once again, you dissolve, in this case dissolve into that exchange, no longer one self handing a plate of chicken casserole to another self, but part of a wholeness, a circle of giving and receiving... now and then not even clear even who is giver, who is receiver.

Or... you feel your heart breaking as you read the news of migrants in the Mediterranean or on a Middle Eastern desert or the sea somewhere between Burma and Indonesia... or you read the news of another shooting of an unarmed young black man... and on it goes... and your broken heart is an open heart, again the boundaries of your apparently separate self softening, dissolving into the oneness of our human family, family of life.

In all these and other ways, other moments, we taste our buddhanature, which is everyone's buddhanature.

Further, all the wisdom traditions teach that this must not end with an experience only. It often begins there, but it musn't end there. As Huston Smith has aptly put it, *traits* are at least as important, if not more so, than *states*. So, if an ecstatic experience, an experience of oneness, of clear mind, of buddhanature, fails to lead to a change in character and behavior, then the experience is not worth much.

It should be no surprise, then, that the final chapter of the *Dhammapada* from which we heard earlier focuses on traits, not states. For it is through traits of character that you recognize a true Brahmin, recognize someone who has discovered/uncovered his or her buddhanature – and now lives accordingly: peacefully, no harsh words, no clinging to this or that object of desire. And *this* is the source of the serenity we see on the face of a carved Buddha.

Now... if this still seems quite beyond our reach, to achieve if you will this level of character, I want to say that that every time you "heed the generous impulse" (as our own Mary Niles used to put it) you are living from your buddhanature; every time you have offered a helping hand, spoken a word of support, stood up for justice... you are living from your buddhanature, you are awake at least for those moments as you help, support, speak up and speak out. Simple as that. And likewise, as I've said, every time you experience yourself dissolving into the beauty of a summer's morning or the majesty of the night sky, you are also experiencing buddhanature.

And here's a most important point, already implicit in all I've been saying, but I want to emphasize it: *We can learn to live this way more of the time.* We can. You can. I can.

One path to living this way more of the time is meditation, as we heard in the second reading. For, as Sakyong Mipham put it:

Meditation practice is an opportunity for us to contact the inherent openness of our being, known in Buddhism as buddhanature. This universal nature is characterized by kindness and compassion. A successful meditation practice is one in which we intimately connect with this naturally occurring love in our hearts, and then embody it in our life.

Here, you see, is what can happen in meditation: We sit and we keep still for some period of time. Our mind will almost immediately start making thoughts – it is what the mind does. We may indeed find ourselves caught in a long string of associations before we realize what has happened.

But as soon as we notice what has happened, we can gently let go, stop following that string of thoughts – perhaps assisted by simply silently naming what has just gone on: “thinking”.

Then we resume just sitting. “Thinking” will happen again... and again... but each time we can eventually gently let go of the thoughts and return to sitting, to bare attention.

In all this we are, as the verse from the *Tao Te Ching* put it, just waiting for the mud to clear. As it does, often only for a moment, but it does, again... and again.

And the good news is that the more we do this, a little every day or most days, the more frequently does the mud clear, the more often do we experience a taste of that spaciousness, that clarity of buddhanature, that awakening to who are and always have been: as Sakyong Mipham described it, the “inherent openness of our being... this naturally occurring love in our hearts.” Further... experience it not just as we sit in meditation, but as we live our days the rest of the time.

Try it for a few moments... just sit...

What was that like? Did you have even a momentary taste of stillness, of clarity?

Well then, what might it be like to live more often from that openness, from even a taste of that serenity, from that heart's compassion that *is* always there, even if too often obscured by our personal worries and long lists of things to do?

What might it be like, in other words, to live like the Buddha we already are? To embody at least a little more often the serenity on the face of the monk in the marketplace or in the subtle smile of a carved or sculpted Buddha?

And what better way to live than this, in a world that needs us to live more of the time from that buddhanature within, from that of God within, as the Quakers put it, from the Christ within... call it what you will... from our best selves?

To live as if we really understood and even now and then *experienced* the first and seventh principles of our Unitarian Universalist faith, that there *is* inherent worth and dignity within each of us, and that we *are* woven together in one life, the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.

For so it is. So it always will be.