

With a Buddhist Heart

A sermon by Rev. John Morehouse

Feb. 4, 2007

I have been a student of Buddhism for over 25 years. In that time I have sat in meditation, walked silently for days, and studied over 200 texts relating to the teachings and practice of Buddhism. While I have a great love for the practice of Buddhism, I do not accept all the teaching of this faith, as you shall see.

One of the most fascinating facets of classical Buddhism is the lack of a God. The Buddha never taught that there was a God. What moves the universe are a series of causal events which happen from one life to the next. No deity is implied or needed to make this causality run. Just good and bad actions. At one time I used to host a local cable television show called *Faith in the Community*. I loved the phrase because it was about different faiths, and A faith IN the Community. Anyway I used to use this point about Buddhism to show why a separation of church and state is so important. To use the phrase “one nation under God” as a pledge of allegiance violates the separation clause of religion and state in the First Amendment precisely because it implies that we all believe in a God. Buddhists as religious people and atheists, as religious humanists, do not.

Just what is this religion that teaches spiritual practice and morality but has no God? To understand Buddhism we have to begin with the telling of the story of the Buddha himself. Siddhartha Gautama was born as a prince in the 6th century BCE in Northeast India. Reared in his father’s palace, Siddhartha knew nothing of life and death. He was never allowed to leave his father’s vast palace. His father had received a vision on his son’s birth that he would either become a great healer or a great king. Wishing the latter he kept his

son away from the sources of suffering. Siddhartha was married at the age of 16 and reveled with his wife in parties that lasted through the night. When his own young son was born and he witnessed his wife's pain and the fragility of this new life, the young prince became aware (as perhaps all of us do when we become parents) of his own mortality. So, despite his father's orders, Siddhartha left the palace secretly to see the rest of the world with his most trusted servant. Outside the palace walls, he saw leper and learned of disease. He enjoyed the smells of the market but saw old people and learned of age. Finally he saw a corpse being taken to the funeral pyre and learned that we must all die.

That night the prince could not enjoy the party, racked as he was by his new found knowledge. He knew he had to leave to discover why the world suffers. So with sorrow in his heart he said good-bye to his wife and his son (they would later reunite with him) and went off in search of meaning. After leaving his father's palace he became a sidhu, a Hindu yogi, practicing total abstinence from most food and all sex. Fasting for almost three weeks he almost died. A fellow monk finally force fed the young Siddhartha back to life. He realized that total abstinence was not the way to understanding. He left his fellow monks and started to wander, resting one day in a park near the holy city of Benares. There he resolved to meditate until enlightenment came.

For days he sat under the bodhi tree trying to clear his mind of all thought, save the question of why humanity suffers and how we can be free of it. Legend has it that as he neared revelation, he was tempted by the dark God Mara who urged him to give up his search in favor of wealth and beauty and he was presented with three beautiful women. The young Siddhartha told them to be gone. Next the dark god rained down thunder and fire all around him, demanding he give up his quest under the agony of eternal suffering. The prince replied, "That would be no different than what there is now. Life itself

is suffering.” And with that he reached out to touch the ground and calm it from fear. Even the earth obeyed this powerful saint. Finally, Mara offered Siddhartha the entire world. To which he smiled and said nothing. These temptations, like the three temptations of Christ are classic mythology. What is different is what happened next. Suddenly with that smile, Siddhartha saw all that was. He became the Buddha, the enlightened one. Rising from his place he resolved to teach this to the world. Leaving the park he came upon another holy man who sensed the power of the Buddha. “Tell me sir,” asked the holy man “are you a god?” “No” replied the Buddha. “Then are you a saint?” asked the holy man. “No” replied the Buddha. “Then what are you?” “Awake” said the Buddha, which is what his name means. The Buddha would go on to teach his message of compassion and hope for 40 years.

“The Buddha is not a god. He was a human being just like you and I, and he suffered just as we do. If we go to the Buddha with our hearts open, he will look at us and say ‘there is suffering in your heart but it is possible to enter my heart’” these words by Thich Naht Hahn the Vietnamese monk represents the essence of the Buddhist teaching. “As Buddhists we learn to take refuge in the teaching of the Buddha as the means to relieving suffering. The Buddha taught the four noble truths from his revelation.”

The first is that all life is suffering. Not in the sense of pain always but in its impermanence and the frustration of our expectations. Even when life is going well we seem to worry about what will happen next. Or we want more than what we have. We rarely live in the present but seem to dwell in the past or worry about the future. The second truth was that it is possible to be free from this suffering – which in turn leads to attachment and continual rebirth. The third truth is that that release of suffering is known as Nirvana, or the extinguishment of the flame of being, for only by not being are we free.

Finally the Buddha taught that the way to release yourself from this cycle of life is to practice the eightfold path.

The ocean of suffering is immense but if we turn around we can see the land. The heart of the Buddha's message was not to ignore life as if it were not worth living, but rather to accept the suffering of life as part of living and let go of your expectations that life owes you only joy. "Don't wait until you have no more suffering before allowing yourself to be happy. Make joy your little island in the sea."

Some of us are in chronic pain. Some of us are facing emotional loss. For still others of us there is the low throb of anxiety that life is too much. But ultimately we are free from this when we realize that all this is impermanent. This too shall pass. The question for the Buddhist is not what is the meaning of life, but what can I do to make life meaningful now.

That path to meaning, and the freedom from suffering it moves us towards, is the eightfold path: Right knowledge, Right aspiration, Right thinking, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right mindfulness, Right diligence.

Faith for the Buddhist is not in praying to a God to take it all away but to believe that when we suffer we are only doing so as temporary beings. Ultimately our lives speak with the compassion we show towards others. And in not being attached to outcomes, we are freed from suffering in this life and ultimately any lives that follow. Being freed from life is not as hard as it sounds. Think about the last time you were really hurting. What felt better, worrying about your pain or helping someone else with theirs? This is the Buddhist understanding of no-self. You really don't have a self. Your body suffers, your heart aches, but when you reach out to another with help you are really helping yourself, because we are all the stuff of stars. Think about the expectations you place on others. What is it that frustrates you about another's actions? Often it is that they didn't do what we thought they should do. They

didn't thank us, they treated us poorly, they were angry. But what if you lived with the right mind? Then another person is only acting out of his or her own pain. You can excuse a great deal this way. When someone is angry with me, I often try to imagine what is going on in their lives that make them so angry. This is right thinking.

Ultimately, we are only drops in the great ocean of life. And when we die, the Buddha teaches, we become the drop in the ocean, no longer cognizant of us as being, but only one with the ocean. Compassion is the fastest way to realize in this life that you are already that ocean. Several years ago there was a terrible incident in Belgium of a man who kidnapped and tortured six young girls. Three of them died before he was captured. A Buddhist monk by the name of Claude Thomas went to visit the mother of one of the dead girls. For hours she spoke with anger and vengeance. Finally Claude asked her "how can you best acknowledge the meaning of your child's life? By killing her killer or working to change the world in which such crimes happen?" What a challenge! Claude was connecting the mother's suffering to the suffering of all people. Those who take refuge in the heart of the Buddha must not ignore the suffering, but accept it and seek to change it.

Living with a Buddhist heart lies not in a monastery, but in life. We seek release from life's trials in immersion in life. "To be awake is to be in service to the world." To make peace is to make whole what is broken. Let me add a bit of personal history here. While I am not a Buddhist because I am not able to give up the struggle for a better world, I have learned the power of humility. This too is to live with a Buddhist heart. About the time I was seriously involved in a Buddhist practice, I was going through a very difficult time emotionally. One day, after I had finished a counseling session with my teacher at the time, I was feeling pretty sorry for myself. Walking out of his building, I tripped on an old root sticking out of the sidewalk. Landing on my

hands, I cursed and proceeded to denounce the root and the tree as unworthy of existence, although those were not my exact words. It was then that I had some kind of an awakening, a Buddhist heart shining through. All beings suffer, me, that tree, my wife, my kids, all of you...it was then that I softened my heart. A little more humble, in a deeply appreciative way. It was something of a tremendous revelation. Living with a Buddhist heart.

The Buddha did not speak of God as the source of goodness, but of our actions as goodness. The secret lies not in what we profess, but in what we do. I am hoping that we here will explore with a Buddhist heart more fully in the years to come; this spring, and then again in the fall, I will be offering a course in Buddhism. We already offer daylong silent meditation retreats here several times a year. This August I will be the theme speaker at the Pacific Southwest Institute for Religious Learning up at de Benneville Pines, where I will be speaking about creating peace in the wisdom of both Buddhism and Taoism. I invite those who are interested to see me about forming a Buddhist Fellowship, a group to learn and practice this path, with a Buddhist Heart. This is the heart of the Buddha. "I am of life, therefore I grow old. I am of the body, therefore I grow sick. I am of time, therefore I will die. All that is dear to me will not last. My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences -- everything I do matters to someone or some being somewhere. My actions are the only ground on which I can stand." These are the words of Thich Naht Hahn, who suffered terribly in Vietnam. Our lives speak. They are already holy. We need no other God but the acceptance that we are all the same and all in need of love. This is living with a Buddhist heart.

May it be so.