

Are UUs Buddhists Too?

Adele Failmezger

May 18, 2003

For those of you unfamiliar with Buddhism, a little background. For you others, please bear with me a few moments. Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, lived and taught in northern India about 2500 years ago. By that time, orthodox religion—Hinduism—was in the hands of the Brahmins, who were also powerful advisors and government officials. The caste system was an essential support for the Brahmins' hereditary power. The common people had become disillusioned with religion and with life.

Gautama was the only son of a rich prince, but he was also disillusioned and perturbed about the suffering of his fellow human beings; he asked, "Why are people unhappy and how could they find happiness?" After he attained insight and became enlightened, he wandered from place to place preaching his doctrine for the moral uplifting of mankind. The Buddha welcomed people from all castes and all religions. He never called himself a god; he always referred to himself as a teacher. His teachings lie in simple, ordinary guidelines that help us live our lives in harmony with ourselves, others, and our environment. The Dalai Lama says, "All the Buddha's teachings can be expressed in two sentences: 'You must help others' and 'If not, you should not harm others'". By that yardstick, members of most religions can also become Buddhists.

Unlike leaders or founders of most religions, the Buddha never handed down commandments; he presented precepts on how to live and left it up to his listeners whether or not to heed them. These doctrines and teachings are a set of general guidelines which help individuals, as well as society, travel the path to happiness. In this sense, the virtue of Buddhism is rooted in its ethics – of self-responsibility, self-determination, and moral judgment.

In other words, everyone is responsible for one's own good and bad deeds; there is no other power, whether human or divine, which can determine one's destiny. Buddhist ethics calls this "self-responsibility".

WOW! Isn't this Unitarian! It suddenly hit me—if I could show other ways that Buddhism and Unitarianism have the same values, ethics, and goals, then maybe I could convince you that we should all be Buddhists.

The Buddha stressed that improvement or degeneration, happiness or misery, are all the results of our own deeds. He emphasized the freedom of will; autonomy is the prominent characteristic of this religion.

Once, in the course of his teaching, the Buddha made reference to three erroneous ideas about happiness and misery of life. He said, "Some people believe that the pleasures or pain that a person feels are results of his previous life. Some people believe that happiness or pain are results of the creation of the lord of the universe. And some think that happiness or pain have neither reason nor cause."

The Buddha refuted these beliefs, saying that they did not recognize the freedom of will. In other words, the first group believed that their actions had been decided by their previous lives, so no moral improvements were possible. The second group believed everything in their present lives was the outcome of divine interference, and so, they could not be blamed for their offenses. Finally, the third group believed that there was no cause or reason for their present condition, as everything happened by chance and they could not change it.

The freedom of thought allowed by the Buddha is unheard of elsewhere in the history of religions. This freedom is necessary because, according to the Buddha, man's emancipation depends on his own

realization of Truth, and not on the benevolent grace of a god or any external power as a reward for his obedient good behavior.

On his travels, the Buddha came to a district called Kesaputta in the domain of the Kalamas. These Kalamas seem to have suffered from an excess of gurus and philosophers. After greeting the Buddha, they described to him the preachers who proclaimed their own doctrines and reviled those of their rivals. It had gotten to the point where they doubted them all. The Buddha told them, "Yes, it is proper that you have doubts and are perplexed. Do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, nor by inference, nor by appearances, nor by speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities. But, you Kalamas, when you know for yourselves that certain ideas are unwholesome or wrong, then give them up. When you know for yourselves that ideas are wholesome and good, then accept them and follow them."

Doubt, however, is not a "sin" because there are no articles of faith in Buddhism. In fact, there is no "sin" in Buddhism, as sin is understood in some religions. The root of all evil is ignorance and false views. It is an undeniable fact that, as long as there is doubt, perplexity, or wavering, no progress is possible. It is also equally undeniable that there must be doubt as long as one does not understand or see clearly. But to progress further, it is necessary to get rid of doubt. To get rid of doubt, one has to see clearly.

There is no point in saying that one should not doubt or one should believe. Just to say, "I believe" does not mean that you understand and see. When a student works on a math problem, he comes to a stage beyond which he does not know how to proceed; where he is in doubt and perplexed. If he wants to proceed, he must resolve this doubt. Just to say, "I believe" or "I do not doubt" will not solve the problem. To force oneself to believe and to accept a thing without understanding is not spiritual or intellectual.

Most other religions - not UU - are built on faith, rather "blind faith", it sometimes seems to us. In Buddhism the emphasis is laid on "seeing, knowing, understanding" --not on faith. Buddhism is rather confidence born out of conviction.

Unitarians also stress freedom of belief. It is a question of knowing and seeing—not blindly believing. The Buddha invited man to "come and see"—not to come and blindly believe.

The question of belief arises when there is no seeing. The moment you see, the question of belief disappears. If I tell you that I have a gem hidden in the palm of my hand, the question of belief arises because you do not see it yourself. But if I unclench my fist and show you the gem, then you see it yourself and the question of belief does not arise. It is always seeing through knowledge and wisdom—not believing merely through faith.

One of the redeeming features of Buddhist ethics is the freedom to accept—or not—the Buddhist principles. There is no compulsion or threat that men must follow the disciplines, precepts, or doctrines given by the Buddha. He merely pointed out the consequences of actions and their results, both good and bad, which everyone would be able to consider, analyze, and investigate by his own experience. Whether or not to follow these teachings is an individual decision.

Not only the freedom of thought, but also tolerance and understanding of others' religions were taught by the Buddha. One should not honor one's own religion and condemn the religions of others; in so doing, one hinders one's own religion and does not render service to other religions. So, listen and be willing to listen to the doctrines professed by others, then make up your own minds.

Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy? No matter what you call it, the label is immaterial. In the same way, truth needs no label; it is neither Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, or Moslem; it is not the monopoly of anybody of any group or religion.

This is true not only in intellectual and spiritual matters, but also in human relations. When, for instance, we meet a man, we do not look on him as a human being, but we label him as a Brit, a Frenchie, an Arab, a Jew, or Black and regard him with all the prejudices associated with that label in our mind.

Buddhists consider labels a hindrance to the independent understanding of Truth and feel that they produce harmful prejudices in men's minds. Don't we want to eliminate prejudice too?

The heart of a compassionate person is soft; he will rest satisfied only after he can relieve the problems and suffering of other beings. Thus, the acts of compassion may be seen in several forms such as giving charity to needy persons, helping others when they are in trouble, suffering, or ill, and protecting ones who are in danger.

These compassionate acts also could be extended without limit towards all suffering and helpless beings, including dumb animals and tiny insects.

Buddhist monks set a good example for compassion. They maintain orphanages, homes for the elderly, and rest houses for pilgrims. Their work includes famine relief, refugee camps, rural development, and drug rehab centers.

In fact, the concept of compassion is truly an ennobling virtue that Man has to radiate, but based on intelligent discrimination of its manifestation. The person who practices compassion has to be aware and cautious by remembering that his act of compassion will enable, in the case of human beings, others to maintain their lives on their own. This act will lead to real benefit for the doer himself and others as well.

According to the Buddhist view of life, no living being is considered unworthy of loving kindness and compassion. Here one has to bear in mind that all living beings have the same feelings of pain and suffering. Therefore, compassion should be followed and extended to all, either man or animal, without discrimination.

Never before in the history of the world has human society been in such great need of peace. We think in terms of world peace, but the Buddha first considered individual peace of mind, which would then spread through the community and then through the world.

Buddhism uses the term "Freedom" as a synonym for real peace and happiness: Freedom from being a slave to materialism, tension, anxiety, conflicts, strife, and wars. People are in need of peace not only in the world, but for their own personal life as well. But as long as Man is dominated by ignorance, greed, selfishness, hatred, injustice, and vengeance, there will not be any hope of peace and freedom at all.

Today, Buddhists feel that people need to return to practicing tolerance, mutual understanding, righteous conduct, and truthfulness. They need to distinguish right from wrong, good from bad, to see the evils of fighting and to choose to follow what is good and beneficial for themselves and others. The world would then be a better place to live, and people would live in a state of peace and happiness.

Buddhist principles originate from the individual and return to the individual. In this sense, the Buddha's message has universal relevance, bringing into its fold every human being on earth, irrespective of caste, creed, race, religion, or nationality.

Unless the spiritual principles of religion can be translated in terms of social values, ideals and interests, or can influence world affairs, they will not survive when society as a whole is considered. In other words, a society will prosper and be peaceful if it is based on moral law in one form or another. In this sense, moral law stands for social welfare, social justice and social happiness.

Many people think that Buddhism is only concerned with personal salvation. This misconception results from improperly understanding the Buddha's teachings. He said that, "We are all dependent on others and so responsible for others."

Buddhist ethics are the gospel of the people and apply to one and all. They are not concerned with the "other" world, but are concerned with this world and the suffering of human beings. Therefore, the Buddha's teachings are deeply concerned with improving the conditions of human life, supporting its material welfare, spiritual development, and inner freedom. Isn't that our goal of world community?

Buddhist ethics stress individual conduct. If individuals are good, society will be good. The development of the individual and the betterment of society are the objects of Buddhism. Aren't they our object, too?

Buddhism believes that man is free to choose to believe and practice as he prefers. However, for a peaceful and happy life, he should choose to do or practice only what is going to bring him good and benefit himself and others.

Buddhism believes that there is no distinction between ethical theory and moral practice. Buddhist ethics teaches men how to behave towards others. Buddhism teaches men how to live harmoniously, happily, and peacefully in society.

Human beings live together not merely out of instinct and impulse, but also because of certain elements of moral and spiritual values, what has been called "the human conscience of social bond". Each member of society has the responsibility to establish, maintain, and develop social well-being. Hence, the progress of society is based on every social member. "Good men make a good social system." According to Buddhist ideas, a well-developed society is a society of peace, harmony, and welfare. More of our goals!

Such virtues must begin from "individual conduct". Buddhists believe that "society is but an agglomeration of individuals whose characters, good or bad, determine the character of society." Buddhism favors infiltration and evolution of a good society through good people.

Buddhism is a religion founded for the development of human beings, by a human being, and for human beings. If society is to survive and grow strong in our present world, it is imperative for us to work at reinforcing the social structure with the desirable qualities preached by the Buddha. This will be possible only through developing our moral and spiritual qualities.

Individuals have to be trained to have good thoughts, speech, and action. They have to be guided on how to earn a living in relation to others. The Buddha has given guidelines for bringing about the fundamental development of human society through ethical practice. Such a development will foster social welfare, social harmony, and social happiness as well.