

First Unitarian Church of Baltimore

Wearing the Buddha's Sandals

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Life is weird and it's difficult to interpret coincidences. Things happen at odd moments. Friday when I was working on this sermon, I heard some Indian music. I looked up at a television screen I'd been ignoring and there was PBS program about India, the life of the Buddha, pictures of places I'd traveled. Speaking to me from the screen was the teacher who led the two Buddhist journeys I've taken. There was my teacher, on PBS!, showing us a tiny cave near a hilltop where the Buddha had meditated, and where I bought the prayer flags hanging right there. While I was working on this sermon! Kind of a spooky coincidence!

Odd coincidences and questions of how to interpret events remind us that consciously or unconsciously, we search for meaning.

Is there an unexplained energy, or a divine process at work when we think about someone, and get a call from him right then, or hear some news about her right at the moment when she was in our thoughts?

Is there some intervening supernatural force that causes us to feel uncomfortable when something fearful or tragic is happening?

Or is a butterfly flapping its wings in Mexico, causing a tornado in Texas?

These phenomena are different, the first searching for an explanation of coincidental feelings of discomfort and tragedy; the second, a mathematical explanation of the effects of motion on the weather system, and an illustration of our interdependence.

As we search for meaning in our lives, questions arise about a loving God who allows bad things to happen to good people. To make sense of life, to derive meaning from experience, we struggle to understand the source of our existence.

Sometimes, when tragedy strikes, and we lose someone, we don't understand why, and so we think to ourselves, "Well, everything happens for a reason." That thought comforts us, even if we doubt it intellectually. Besides, who is to say that the flight of a beautiful butterfly in one country didn't change wind patterns and cause a helicopter to crash in another?

We suffer, we need relief, comfort, and to understand why and what for.

We all suffer physical and emotional pain, we suffer sadness, we suffer longings that are so strong we keep them deep inside us.

Several hundred years before Jesus, back when the Old Testament was being written, an Indian prince left the grandeur of his father's palace to learn more about the world. He put on a simple pair of

sandals, and wandered around northern India. He was searching for meaning in a topsy turvy world of great privilege, great poverty, great joy, and great sorrow. Not unlike the world we live in today. The prince was grieved by the unhappiness, illnesses, poverty, and certain death that made so many people unhappy. He wanted to help, but didn't know how.

After wandering and worrying, then contemplating beneath a shade tree for nearly two months, he finally received some insight, an intuitive message, a transformation called "enlightenment". It was a huge "aha" moment, that came after sitting for many days under a tree out in the middle of nowhere, in a place now called Bodhgaya.

The prince decided we suffer because we want too much...we become too attached to people, to things, to money, to pleasure. We suffer because we want so much, and that same wanting, that sense of attachment to someone, some thing, some idea, becomes a driving force in our lives. When things don't turn out the way we want them to, when our love of things becomes obsessive, when we lose something or someone, when we are motivated to have what we don't have, we become unhappy and we suffer.

In his realization, the Prince transformed himself and his thinking. He created a new framework of meaning in his life. The prince became the Buddha. He organized his new way of thinking like this.

There are Four Noble Truths:

1. Life is suffering
2. Suffering is caused by desire and attachment,
3. The good news is that there is a way to overcome desire and attachment, and
4. That way is by following the Eight-Fold Path:

Here is where it gets a bit more complex. But the governing foundation is a state of mind.

The Eight-fold Path: The first two have to do with wisdom.

1. Right View. Having the right view means that we should overcome ignorance, develop an open mind, and not cling to our own viewpoint as a dogmatic position. We must work to become more clear-headed, and less confused. We must learn. We do that with purpose, by practicing mindfulness.

2. The second aspect of wisdom is **Right Intention, Right Aspiration, and Right Thought. This** means that we constantly exert our own will **to change**. That is, we aspire to eliminate the parts of us that are wrong and immoral. Right Intention involves renunciation of worldly things, living more simply. Right Intention means that we focus on good will, commitment to the spiritual path, and a commitment to nonviolence and respect toward other living things. In other words if we don't think about how we want to become, we won't.

That's a lot, and it's only two out of eight.

Ethical Behavior is next! Thinking about it is not enough. We have **do** something.

3. Right Speech—to tell the truth, not to lie. To abandon divisive speech, that is, to refrain from using what

we hear to break others apart, to encourage bad feelings between others. Rather than speaking in ways that turn people against each other, Right Speech is to speak in such a way as to reconcile, and to bring people together. Right speech is to speak gently, politely, and affectionately.

4. Right Behavior, Right Action, and Right Conduct. Don't do bad things to other people!

Refrain from lying and stealing or sexual misconduct, especially with children and family members, or the partner of another person. As in, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife."

5. Right Livelihood refers to the **kinds of businesses** that the Buddha says we should not engage in: trading in weapons, trading in human beings, such as prostitution or buying and selling of children or adults. The selling of meat or breeding of animals for slaughter, manufacturing intoxicants or addictive drugs, or producing or trading in any kind of poisonous substance, designed to kill.

The last three aspects of the Eight-fold path are all related to mental discipline, concentration and meditation.

6. Right Endeavor. We should make every effort to working at what would be good, or helpful to others. Working to eliminate evil, and harmful behaviors. We should promote wholesomeness and clean living.

7. Right Mindfulness means that we should stay focused on self awareness, focusing on our bodies, staying focused on our mental qualities themselves. **Right Mindfulness is disciplined introspection.** All day, every day.

8. Right Absorption and Concentration means to **meditate** in a focused manner through mindful breathing, visualization, and repetition of phrases, or chanting. Right concentration, number 8, is dependent on the first seven.... The Buddha said: "Now what, monks, is noble right concentration with its supports and requisite conditions? Any singleness of mind equipped with these seven factors — right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness — is called noble right concentration with its supports and requisite conditions."

Now I don't know about you, but this puts the Ten Commandments in a different light.

When we walk along the Eight-fold Path, we are not asked to behave and think these ways to avoid punishment from some judgmental god. Instead, we are given a way of thinking and behaving to rid ourselves of the suffering around us and inside us. The essence of that way is to act thoughtfully, intentionally and respectfully to each other -- and to all we encounter every day.

Buddhism is not an easy path. It is a philosophy with no god to worship. The Buddhist life requires constant, continuous discipline of mind and body --- and we, not a mysterious god, are our own judges.

I'm a Unitarian Universalist, but perhaps adding more Buddhist thinking and practice is worth considering. Certainly many elements of the path are consistent with Unitarian Universalism. Not all, but

most are compatible with Unitarian Universalism.

Maybe it is too scary, too daunting to try to follow such a path. Nobody likes to fail, and some of us – especially those of us who are hard on ourselves, try not to bite off more than we can chew.

On the other hand, around home, I put on those sandals and think about becoming a serious Buddhist. I recall all the smiling Buddhist faces I've seen in my life. I remember how gentle and kind and gracious my experiences with Buddhists have been, here and in the land of the Buddha. I recall the composure, the calmness, the patience, the serenity of the true Buddhists I have known.

One thing for sure, I'm **not** sure about the meaning of life, or what life is all about or why. Just like you, I'm working on it. I **do** know that when I slop around the house in my Indian sandals, I'm more relaxed, mindful, peaceful, gentler. I become less cranky, and kinder hearted about the world. Wearing those sandals reminds me. For one thing, they aren't all that comfortable for someone with a high instep who is accustomed to marching around in loafers or tennis shoes. You literally have to adjust your walk...so that you slide, rather than stride. Everything feels different, sense of balance, speed, length of step. My downstairs neighbors are bound to like it better than when I walk around like my daddy did, heel first. I keep thinking how wonderful it might be to wear those sandals outside, and learn to slide and glide.

Softly, gently, gracefully, unhurried, like I'm sure the Buddha must have walked in his sandals. Softly, gently, gracefully, unhurried, smiling more, and probably suffering a lot less. It's worth a try! (Take off shoes and socks and put on Indian sandals).

Amen

*Extinguishing the chalice flame

We extinguish this flame today, but it continues to burn in our hearts.

*Benediction

May you move forth humbly and compassionately, focusing your thoughts and actions as you see fit to grow yourselves, honor your parents, and love all children. May your feet slip smoothly into your sandals, and may you walk softly, in grace. Amen

*Choral benediction 679 "Be Ye Lamps"

Note: The Buddhist teachings in this sermon were selected, aggregated and adapted from a variety of sources.