

“THE BUDDHA MEETS JESUS”
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Call to Gather: from Jack Kornfield

During the Vietnam War, the American Buddhist Jack Kornfield visited a monastery on an island in the Mekong Delta. He writes:

Then they took us to the end of the island where, on top of a hill, there was an enormous fifty-foot tall statute of a standing Buddha. Next to Buddha stood an equally tall statue of Jesus. They had their arms around each others' shoulders, smiling. While helicopter gunships flew by overhead and the war raged around us, Buddha and Jesus stood there like brothers, expressing compassion and healing for all who would follow their way.¹

Reading: *The Three Questions*, written and illustrated by Jon J. Muth (based on a story by Leo Tolstoy)

Sermon

This year our Religious Education program is focused on the six primary sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith.² I'm going to do occasional sermons exploring each of these sources. The source I'll talk about today is the “words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” Our RE program kicks off its focus on this source this weekend.

Some of you might be wondering: who are the women and men Unitarian Universalists recognize as prophets? Can you go to a website and download the list? Nope! There is no official list of prophets we recognize. Like so much in our faith, we each get to decide. We each get to figure out who's on our list of prophets.

I have a long list. It includes men and women and children. It includes prophets both living and dead. It includes people who lived so long ago that our memory of them is more mythological than historical. It includes not just Unitarian Universalists but folks from a wide variety of religious traditions, because just about every tradition has a prophetic streak in it.

Why is it helpful in the spiritual journey to have prophets who light the way for us? What's the point? For me it's not to venerate or worship them. All of the prophets on my list are human; though they're extraordinary humans, they are nevertheless just

¹ Jack Kornfield, Introduction to *Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings* by Marcus Borg (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 1997), pp. i-ii.

² To see the six primary sources, visit: <http://www.uua.org/visitors/6798.shtml>.

humans. They are not perfect. So while I admire them, I'm not going to worship them. These prophets fulfill a different function in my spiritual journey: they show me how I should try to live my life. In the ways they acted and spoke, they show me how to use my words and my actions to challenge evil with justice, compassion and love. So rather than worship them, I want to emulate them.

Last week I talked about two of the prophets on my list: Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Today I want to focus on two other very prominent prophets on my list: the Buddha and Jesus. Unlike Gandhi and King, our knowledge of these two is more mythological than historical. I'm not going to make any effort today to tease out what might be historical and what might be mythological because I really don't care.

Given the large dose of mythology in our understanding of both the Buddha and Jesus, I should be clear that I'm not interested in emulating the miraculous parts of their stories. It's too late for a virgin birth. I'm not going to go out to the pond after the service and try to walk across it. But there is plenty in their stories that I can realistically emulate in my own life—if I can find the intentionality and courage to do so. This is my focus.

I want to emulate the Buddha's detachment. He understood that everything in life is impermanent. Everything changes. He understood that suffering is a basic and universal aspect of life. And he understood that there are limits to the power each of us human beings has. There is so much that is beyond our ability to control. Given the reality of all this, he concluded that it is crazy to crave, grasp and cling to things and people. We will inevitably be disappointed. Living the good life is all about letting go: letting go of the ends we seek, letting go of other people, letting go of our need to control things, letting go of what we know and are comfortable with as life's constant dance of change continues within and around us. Right now I'm in the midst of letting go of my kids on the one hand as they move into adulthood, and my parents on the other hand as they face the challenges of old age. My kids will leave the nest. My parents will die, as will I—probably after them, but that's not even certain. Change is inevitable. The Buddha's life and teachings help me figure out how to do this work of letting go.

But the Buddha didn't just instruct to let go. He also taught how to do it skillfully: in a fully engaged way. He was not aloof or distant or withdrawn as he let go. Instead, he paid attention to each moment as it happened and lived it to the fullest. He understood the interconnected nature of life and fully connected with everyone he met. He just did all of this without craving, without grasping, without clinging. So his story provides me an example of how to live a fully engaged detachment. I believe it's possible to live this way—no doubt not as consistently or as graciously as the Buddha, but it's possible.

I want to emulate Jesus' commitment to social justice. He didn't just talk the talk about building a better, more just world; he walked it, too. He spoke up for the marginalized. He radically challenged the political and economic system that left so many destitute, powerless, and hopeless. He challenged people to care about the sick and the imprisoned and the poor—and in very concrete ways, he cared about them.

I want to emulate the Buddha's equanimity. He was able to observe what was going on in and around him without getting caught up in it. He was able to find serenity

in the midst of life's chaos.³ As a result, he always exuded a warm, radiant, welcoming spirit.

There's a well-known story illustrating the Buddha's equanimity. In the story, the Buddha meets a notorious, mass-murdering bandit in the woods. The Buddha is aware of the bandit's killing spree and seeks this meeting so that he can turn the bandit from violence to peace. In all of the story's variants, the Buddha remains very calm, centered and serene as he faces this sword-wielding, crazed killer. In one of the variants, just as the bandit lifts his sword to attack the Buddha, the Buddha says to him:

“Then be good enough to fulfill my dying wish: Cut off the branch of the tree.”

One slash of the sword, and it was done! “What now?” asks the bandit.

“Put it back again,” says the Buddha.

The bandit laughs. “You must be crazy to think that anyone can do that.”

“On the contrary, it is you who are crazy to think that you are mighty because you can wound and destroy. That is the task of children. The mighty know how to create and heal.”⁴

And with this, the bandit turns from a violent path to a peaceful one.

Of course, like many myths, this is a rather extreme example. I haven't confronted a mass murderer in the woods. But my life—like yours I would guess—has its share of dangerous and chaotic moments, albeit generally less dramatic than this one. The story reminds me to try to remain calm and grounded even in the face of the chaos.

I want to emulate Jesus' deep commitment to loving everyone without judgment—including even enemies and the outcasts. Time and time again, Jesus' actions flew in the face of his society's values and customs. He sat down to eat and talk with the lowest of the lows and the worst of the worst in his society: tax collectors, prostitutes, the poor, women, the despised Samaritans. His stubborn refusal to obey commonly accepted social boundaries raised a lot of ire against him and no doubt pushed him along the path that led to his execution.

Interestingly, the Buddha did the same thing. He spent time with thieves, murderers and palace prostitutes. Like Jesus, the Buddha was attacked by those with power for this challenging departure from social norms.⁵

This is not the only striking similarity between these two prophets. Their birth stories have a lot in common, including a virgin mother and even being wrapped in swaddling clothes.⁶ They both had transformative experiences around their thirtieth birthday: the Buddha decided to walk away from his palace and wealth and family to

³ <http://www.resultsthroughintegrity.com/resultsthroughintegrity/2009/06/equanimity---serenity-within-the-chaos.html>.

⁴ <http://www.touchtheearthranch.com/buddhastories.htm>.

⁵ Marcus Borg, *Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 1997), pp. 13, 93; <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/btg/btg93.htm>.

⁶ Borg, pp. 193, 213; Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), p. 45.

seek the truth, and Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist.⁷ They resisted similar temptations after these transforming experiences, including the temptation to become powerful world rulers instead of spiritual leaders.⁸ Though both are depicted as being fully human, both are also sometimes depicted as having supernatural abilities. For example, there are stories about both walking on water and taking a little bit of food and miraculously feeding huge crowds (a few loaves and fishes feeding 5000 in Jesus' example; a few cakes feeding 500 in the Buddha's).⁹ They both taught that people will not find meaning and worth in material wealth. They both urged their followers to pay attention and to welcome each moment with gratitude. They both viewed the movements they started as reform efforts within their traditions (Hinduism for the Buddha, Judaism for Jesus) rather than a new religion.¹⁰ And terrible thunder and earthquakes coincided with both of their deaths.¹¹

As striking as these similarities are, the most significant one surely is their insistent emphasis on love and compassion. Being compassionate and loving—particularly toward the poor, the sick and the oppressed¹²—lay at the heart of both of their messages. Jesus said, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” The Buddha said, “Consider others as yourselves.”¹³ Both instructed their followers to answer hatred with love.

I think they would have answered the three questions from today's reading (*The Three Questions*) similarly. When is the best time to do things? There is only one important time, and that time is now. Who is the most important one? Always the one you are with. And what is the right thing to do? Do good for the one who is standing at your side. And then they would both remind us that because *everyone* is our brother or sister, we're really with everybody and not just the person standing next to us.

There are so many similarities between these two prophets that some people have concluded that Jesus must have spent part of his “lost years” traveling to India or somewhere else. His “lost years” are the years between his visit to the temple as a boy and his baptism—years about which the New Testament says nothing. How else to explain the similarities between these two men who lived 500 years and 3000 miles apart? But most scholars have concluded there's very little evidence to support this claim. The Christian scholar Marcus Borg suggests that instead of being a case of cultural borrowing, the commonality lies in the Buddha's and Jesus' “similar diagnosis of the typical human condition: blindness, anxiety, grasping, self-preoccupation.” And they come to the same prescription: seeing, understanding, letting go, and loving extravagantly.¹⁴

There are also some very significant differences between Jesus and the Buddha. One is that Jesus was much more political than the Buddha. Maybe it was because, unlike the Buddha, Jesus experienced the injustice of poverty in his childhood.¹⁵ Maybe

⁷ Borg, p. vi.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-149.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. vi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 14-15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. xiii-xv, xvii, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. xi-xii.

it was also partly the result of the unusually desperate time and place in which Jesus lived. Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that the Buddha might have been crucified, too, if he lived under the oppressive thumb of Roman occupation. He would have felt called to do some of the same things that got Jesus into trouble.¹⁶

Another significant difference is their view of God. Jesus' ministry was all about God. The Buddha, on the other hand, made no references to God. Some have therefore concluded that he was an atheist. A better term might be non-theist: he was "simply silent" about God.¹⁷

Like their great prophets, Buddhism and Christianity have both similarities and differences. It's important to understand and appreciate the differences as well as the similarities. We need to avoid the kind of universalism that flattens distinctive religions into one big bowl of mush. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh uses a great metaphor to describe the similarities and differences in his book *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*. Comparing Christianity and Buddhism, he suggests, is like comparing an orange and a mango. He writes:

We don't want to say that Buddhism is a kind of Christianity and Christianity is a kind of Buddhism. A mango cannot be an orange...They are two different things. We have to preserve the differences. It is nice to have differences...But when you look deeply into the mango and into the orange, you see that although they are different, they are both fruits. If you analyze the mango and the orange deeply enough, you will see the same elements are in both, like the sunshine, the clouds, the sugar, and the acid. If you spend time looking deeply enough, you will discover that the only difference between them lies in the degree, in the emphasis. At first you see the differences between the orange and mango. But if you look a little deeper, you discover many things in common.¹⁸

For Thich Nhat Hanh, the most important thing about these two prophets is that we each have the opportunity to *be* the Buddha and Jesus. Every time we reach out in love and compassion to another person—especially to someone who is suffering—we bring them alive. Every time we stand up to evil in love, we bring them alive. When we do these things, we *are* the Buddha, we *are* Jesus. Hanh observes that when he was working with Christians to end the Vietnam War, he touched Jesus every time he touched them. They were embodying Jesus and Jesus' teachings in their actions and words. And he was embodying the Buddha in his peaceful actions and words.

So here's the truth expressed in the Vietnamese statues of the Buddha and Jesus arm in arm: the Buddha and Jesus meet all the time! Even though they lived long ago and 500 years and 3000 miles apart, they meet all the time. They meet whenever their followers come together and work to bring more love and

¹⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, p. 55.

¹⁷ Laurence Freeman in *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* by the Dalai Lama (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1998), p. 23.

¹⁸ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), pp. 16-17.

compassion into the world. They meet whenever Buddhists and Christians work together side by side at a homeless shelter rally together for peace. They meet in this very room whenever a Buddhist Unitarian Universalist and a Christian UU dialogue and arrive at a place of deeper mutual understanding. They meet all the time—and this is part of the hope of the world!

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