

The Reverend Maddie Sifantus
7 Holiday Road, Wayland, MA 01778
508-358-7091 (office)
508-733-8860 (cell)
msifantus@uuma.org ~ www.maddiesifantus.com

SERMON “The Sacred Pause” March 22, 2009

We gather here as travelers on the path of being human, which we may name as being a spiritual path. We each bring many gifts and experiences to the table, here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield, wherever we are at in our life’s exploration, whatever we came in the door with, walking on our own individual paths but coming together for this moment in time. And then many moments of time, over time—those moments of time making up the living tradition of this faith community. We have the banners of world religions displayed at the front of the sanctuary again this week, banners which were lovingly made by members of this congregation and which once hung on the walls of the church. These banners, along with the stained glass window behind me of the “Good Shepherd”, make visible the sources of our living tradition. Perhaps one of these banners and its symbolism speaks to you.

Our tradition draws from many sources which are listed in our covenant, otherwise known as our Principles and Purposes, which you can see in the front of the grey hymnal. I will not read the whole list but highlight one of them which is pertinent to us today: “Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.” It was, in fact, the influence of the world’s religions, perhaps most especially Eastern religions such as Buddhism, that forged one commonality between the Unitarian and Universalist denominations. This influence is of long standing, already present with the Transcendentalists in the 1800s, for instance. This drawing from the wisdom of other traditions was one way that the two streams came together, the Unitarians and the Universalists. We say that we are “grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision.”¹ Wisdom from the Buddhist world is one of the ways we can be inspired in our ethical life and spiritual life.

In his book *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, Unitarian Universalist minister Scott Alexander defines spirituality as our relationship with the Spirit of Life, however we understand it to be. Our spirituality is our deep, reflective, and expressed response to the awe, wonder, joy, pain, and grief of being alive. Spiritual practices are those activities which help cultivate that response to the Spirit of Life and create a space to be present to the awe, wonder and joy, as well as the pain

¹ From the UUA Principles and Purposes.

and grief of being alive. As I look among you, I wonder if you have a spiritual practice and, if so, what spiritual practices are represented in this room. Do you serve this congregation as a spiritual practice? Do you walk or run, as Scott Alexander does? Do you quilt or knit as a spiritual practice? Perhaps some of you practice yoga. Today I am highlighting the spiritual practice of meditation.

Although there are prayer and meditation traditions from all the world's religions, it is the meditative practices from Buddhism that I am focusing on today. This is not really a sermon on Buddhism, although we will touch on it, but more about the value of the meditation practice that comes from Buddhism and how to go about practicing it. Or as I heard Insight Meditation teacher Jack Kornfield say at a retreat, "Don't go home and be a Buddhist. Go home and be the Buddha." Sit under your own Bodhi Tree.

For one thing, the only way to know what it is to do it is to do it! Sit on that cushion and make a regular practice of it. Or sit on a chair, if that is what works for you. Whatever works. See what comes up, sit with it, let it come and go. If you can't do it on your own, find a group to sit with that meets regularly. I started a group at the Wayland church in 1991 that is still meeting, whether or not I am there. Knowing the group is there means that even in the busiest of weeks, there can be one day that I can sit and practice. And that is what it is—practice! You had a mini session of meditation this morning. If you want to try more, please join me this evening in the room under this one at 7:30 PM. If there is enough interest, perhaps we can start a sitting group here.

Let me tell you a very personal story of the value of meditation. Most of you know that I was in a horrific car accident which nearly took my life. My car was hit head on by a car that suddenly came out of the other lane. The accident was actually three years ago yesterday, and it took place within site of my home congregation in Wayland. From the moment of the collision, I went into my meditation practice—breathing in, breathing out, being present to the moment with all its smells, noises, and sensations but being present also to the Spirit of Life. My practice held me in that moment and kept me calm through the evening ambulances rides as I was transported to one hospital and then another. It kept me grounded during the hospital stay, rehab and going home. It was life giving and held me...and it was the constant practice of years that allowed me to access that place of peace even in the midst of suffering.

Saying that you are going to do a sermon about Buddhism is like saying that you are going to do a sermon about Christianity. There are as many forms of Buddhism as there are varieties of Christianity, informed by the ethnicities and social customs of the countries from which the particular stream comes or various schools or teachers but meditation is central to them all. In recent years, many teachers have brought Buddhist teachings to the West and have adapted Buddhism to be more accessible to Westerners. But let's consider classic Buddhism briefly.

Buddhism developed in India as a nonconforming system outside of Hinduism. Despite the differences with Hinduism concerning the Buddhist rejection of elaborate Vedic rites and refusal to accept the caste system, Buddhists share a number of concepts with Hindus such as reincarnation, karma, and entering Nirvana or a state of enlightenment. Their founding legend dates the birth of Siddhartha Gautama in the 6th century BCE. I will leave the story of the Gautama's path to becoming the Buddha for another day. Suffice it to say that after his enlightenment he left a set of founding ideas called The Four Noble Truths. They are:

1. Life is suffering.
2. Suffering has a cause: craving and attachment.
3. Craving and attachment can be overcome.
4. The path toward the cessation of craving and attachment is the Eightfold Path.

Right understanding

Right purpose

Right speech

Right conduct

Right livelihood

Right effort

Right alertness

Right concentration

In Buddhism, nothing is permanent. All is transitory. Everything changes. All will one day decay. Suffering will come, and our liberation comes by overcoming selfish desire and craving. Sitting with the changes. Watching the river flow.

The Buddha did not appoint a formal successor when he died. Many sects of Buddhism emerged. Over the centuries many disappeared and many more appeared. We could talk about

the earliest surviving school, Theravada Buddhism or we could talk about Mayayana Buddhism with its influence on individual discipline and solitary practice. Tibetan Buddhism incorporates both of these traditions but also another strand, the Hindu Tantric Practice, Vajrayana. It uses yogic discipline to transcend and redirect desire with the goal of enlightenment or union with the Ultimate Reality. Or, for us, we might say the Spirit of Life.

And then, of course there is Zen Buddhism. The Zen tradition does not give lots of instructions. Words are suspect, something that might be difficult for us UUs. Zen Master Rinzai said: “Rather than attaching yourselves to my words, it is better to calm down and seek nothing further. Do not cling to the past or long for the future. This is better than a pilgrimage of 10 year’s duration.”²

Which brings me back to sitting. All of these traditions have different ways they may dress up or dress down the occasion but it comes down to the fact that you just have to sit there to “get it”. We sit in the moment and watch as the thoughts go by—and many thoughts do go by when you sit in meditation. Thoughts! So many thoughts! The Buddha said in the opening lines of the Dhammapada: “All that we are is the result of what we have thought; it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts.”

Those thoughts that keep coming when you sit are called “monkey mind,” and monkey mind can drive you crazy! You sit there to clear your mind to get in touch with that well of peace, that sacred pause, and instead you start listing everything you are going to do when your allotted time for meditation is over. You start worrying about a family member or you try to remember where you left your cell phone. But you say “this too” to yourself and bring yourself back to the present. You truly engage with yourself. And that leaves you open to engage with the world. To bring loving kindness and compassion. To be engaged with social justice.

I end with a poem I found when I visited the Kwan Um School of Zen in Rhode Island some years ago: “The Human Route”

Coming empty-handed,
Going empty-handed
That is human.
When you are born,
Where do you come from?
When you die, where do you go?
Life is like a floating cloud

² The Complete Idiot’s Guide to World Religions, Second Edition, 154.

Which appears.
Death is like a floating cloud
Which disappears.
The floating cloud itself
Originally did not exist.
Life and death, coming and going,
Are also like that.
But there is one thing
Which always remains clear.
It is pure and clear
Not depending on life and death.
Then what is the one pure and clear thing?