

BUDDHISM AS A UNIVERSALIST PSYCHOLOGY

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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[Insert story about “Andrew” from Kornfield, p. 29]

The story about Andrew is one of many told by Jack Kornfield in his book *The Wise Heart*. I especially appreciate this introductory book about Buddhism because Kornfield avoids the complicated terms and numbered lists that make Buddhist practice seem dry and abstract, and instead of re-telling the time-honored stories about ancient sages, he focuses on the real-life dilemmas of contemporary Americans. Many of these stories—including Jack Kornfield's own troubled family history—revolve around **recovery**: recovery from abuse, recovery from failed relationships, recovery from the emptiness of modern life. As a clinical psychologist, former Buddhist monk, and founder of two widely respected meditation centers in Massachusetts and California, Jack Kornfield is uniquely qualified to understand how Buddhist principles can be applied to contemporary life issues.

Kornfield reminds us that the most world's most revered Buddhist leader, the Dalai Lama has repeatedly pointed out, “‘Buddhist teachings are not a religion, they are a science of mind.’ This does not deny the fact that for many people around the world Buddhism has also come to function as a religion. Like most religions, it offers its followers a rich tradition of devotional practices, communal rituals, and sacred stories. **But this is not the origin of Buddhism or its core.** The Buddha was a human being, not a god, and what he offered his followers were experiential teachings and practices, a revolutionary way to understand and release **suffering**. . . . Today, it is this path of practice and liberation that draws most Western students to Buddhism.” [Kornfield, p. 7] Let me express my thanks to Anne Armentrout for offering a first-hand sampling of these practices in the Sunday service she led last August.

Today my focus will be understanding the **worldview** that undergirds Buddhism and then relate it to the worldview that undergirds the Universalist heritage within our own faith tradition. The heart of Buddhist teaching revolves around the experience of **suffering**: how we experience it and how we can be freed from it. This is summarized in the Four Noble Truths that the Buddha described to his followers:

The First Noble Truth is that **existence involves suffering**. As Jack Kornfield explains, “Suffering is different from pain. Suffering is our reaction to the inevitable pain of life. Our personal suffering can include anxiety, depression, fear, confusion, grief, anger, hurt, addiction, jealousy, and frustration. But suffering is not only personal. Our suffering includes the sorrows of warfare and racism; the isolation and torture of prisoners everywhere; the unnecessary hunger, sickness, and abandonment of human beings on every continent. This individual and collective suffering, the First Noble Truth, is what we are called upon to understand and transform.” [p. 242]

The Second Noble Truth describes the **cause of suffering**: *tanha*, variously translated as desire or grasping. As the historian of religion Huston Smith describes it, *tanha* is the selfish

craving for personal satisfaction that separates us from other forms of life. “Instead of linking our faith and love and destiny to the whole, we persist in strapping these to the puny burros of our separate selves, which are certain to give out eventually.” [Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions*, p. 103] Jack Kornfield tells us that “Buddhist psychology directs us to examine how grasping operates. **The more we grasp, the more we experience suffering.** If we try to possess and control the people around us, we will suffer. If we struggle to control our body and feelings, it is the same. If a nation acts from grasping and greed, the world around it will suffer. Meditation teaches us that we can release our clinging.” [p. 247]

The Third Noble Truth is **letting go**: letting go of our desire for control, for revenge, for satisfying our endless pursuit of **what we don’t have**. By focusing our attention on what is missing in our lives, we attach ourselves to the sources of our suffering. Life is a constant balancing act between holding on and letting go what is dear to us. Jack Kornfield says, “Letting go does not mean we do not care and respond. As parents, we can love, protect, instruct, and nurture our children. They want our support, but they don’t want to be controlled. Parenting is a lifelong learning in letting go. We have to delicately renegotiate the balance between hands on and hands off in almost every situation. When they are young, letting them go feels like teaching them to ride a bicycle, directing and balancing them but not gripping too tightly. With each new step, each new accomplishment—as our children go off on a first overnight, go to camp, learn to drive a car, go to college—we have to face new levels of **letting go**, yet loving and supporting them all the while.” [Kornfield, p. 250]

The Fourth Noble Truth of Buddhism is its prescription for how to overcome suffering: the so-called Eightfold Path listed on the back of your order of service. This is the “how-to” list for overcoming suffering and achieving happiness in its place. I will not take the time to discuss each of them, but instead refer you to the written resources that are also listed there. What is most striking about these practices is their emphasis that the individual mind is the focal point of both the cause and the cure of human suffering. Taken at face value, the Eightfold Path suggests that if we want to cure the problems of the world, what we need to do is change our individual response to suffering. To me, this is a starting point—a starting point that many of us have avoided. But it also calls for a response to suffering that extends beyond our own lives. The name for this response to the suffering of others is **compassion**, and it is deeply embedded in all of the world’s major spiritual traditions.

In Buddhism, the spirit of compassion is embodied in the concept of the **bodhisattva**—an enlightened person who has devoted his or her life to the service of others. “The way of the bodhisattva is one of the most radical and powerful of all forms of Buddhist practice. It is radical because it states that the fulfillment of our happiness comes only from serving the welfare of others as well as ourself. Our highest happiness is connected with the well-being of others. . . . Every wisdom tradition tells us that human meaning and happiness cannot be found in isolation but comes about through generosity, love, and understanding. The bodhisattva, knowing this, appears in a thousand forms, from a caring grandmother to a global citizen.” [p. 354] Being a bodhisattva does not require that we live the life of a saint. It requires a life of **balance**. Jack Kornfield suggests, “If you want to live a life of balance, start now. Turn off the news, meditate, turn on Mozart, walk through the trees or the mountains, and begin to make yourself a zone of peace. . . .” [p. 357]

The Buddhist belief in the saving power of compassion resonates with the Universalists' insistence that God's love embraces all of creation. Some of the early followers of Jesus took seriously his living example of radical inclusiveness. They refused to believe that a loving God would create an eternal separation between the saved and the unsaved. The preoccupation of the original Universalists was with what happens to people when they die. Would they be blessed with eternal happiness or cursed to eternal punishment? Over the centuries, Universalism has evolved into a concern with this world and this life. We are all one family. We are all a part of an interdependent web. The sooner we put this belief into practice, the sooner we will bring wholeness to our own lives and healing to a world torn apart by conflict.

For the past twenty years, Rebecca Ann Parker has served as president of Starr King School for the Ministry. At the end of her book titled *Blessing the World*, she poses this challenge:

You must answer this question: What will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world. . . .

The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude to search for the sources of power and grace; native wisdom, healing, and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into community:

the endeavor shared, the heritage passed on, the companionship of struggle,

the importance of keeping faith, the life of ritual and praise,

the comfort of human friendship, the company of earth—its chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.

Together—that is another possibility, **waiting**. [pp. 163-65]

Now I would like to invite you to join me in a simple Buddhist meditation—one that expresses the ever-widening circle of compassion that can bring both inner and outer wholeness.

[See Kornfield, pp. 398] The background music for this meditation is provided by a young woman named Kristen Hoffmann, the daughter of one of my college roommates.

May I be filled with loving-kindness.

May I be safe from inner and outer danger.

May I be well in body and mind.

May I be at ease and happy.

[Pause for one minute, then ring the small bowl.]

Repeat this pattern for:

A loved one (“he or she”)

Those who are in this room (“we”)

People everywhere (“they”)

All living beings (“they”)

“So may it be.”

DISCUSSION (time permitting)

HYMN # 1003 “Meditation on Breathing” (main melody only)

CLOSING WORDS # 701