

Spiritual Practice in the Interdependent Web
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento
May 29, 2017

Inhaling the crisp November air, I felt its coolness at the nostrils. Exhaling, I saw the breath float like a white cloud, spread out, and disappear. “There is nowhere to go. There is nothing to do. There is no-one to be.” Frost glittered as I walked on the gravel driveway, my boots crunching with each step. “Trust the present moment and let it be good enough.” Inside the meditation hall, an hour of gentle steady mindfulness flowed by, without mental chatter or fantasy. “See the positive mental factors unfolding without a doer. Be with ‘ordinary’.” Then, 19 days into a 6-week silent retreat, I woke up to a well of grief, with no clear cause or focus. I stayed with the feelings of heaviness, the fleeting images of my late father, my late sister, our disabled daughter, the sound of my sobbing. A few hours later, I saw a folded blue paper on the bulletin board labeled “U.S. Presidential Election Results.” I lifted the flap and read three words: “Winner: Donald Trump.”

Now what? In these moments when life throws us a curveball, where do we turn? What spiritual, intellectual, and ethical resources are available to guide us through uncertain and challenging terrain? How do we live out our deepest values without burning out?

Unitarian Universalism has its seven principles to guide our engagement with the world. Our congregations covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

These principles were given their current form in the mid-1980's. Even before they were articulated, Unitarians and Universalists were living them out in the world. In 1790 the Universalist Convention in Philadelphia adopted an antislavery resolution by Benjamin Rush, who also signed the Declaration of Independence. (from Faith Like a River, uua.org)

As Mark Harris writes in *Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith*, “The Universalists believed in a God who embraced everyone, and this eventually became central to their belief that lasting truth is found in all religions, and that dignity and worth are innate to all people regardless of sex, color, race, or class. Growing out of this inclusive theology was a lasting impetus in both denominations to create a more just society. Both Unitarians and Universalists became active participants in many social justice movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”

Kimberley French, in a 2003 article in the *UU World* magazine on modern-day slavery, said we rightly claim many nineteenth-century abolitionists: Samuel J. May, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Julia Ward Howe, Theodore Parker, and Sylvanus Cobb Jr., among others.

Mark Harris continues: “Other reformers included Universalists such as Charles Spear who called for prison reform, and Clara Barton who went from Civil War “angel of the battlefield” to become the founder of the

American Red Cross. Unitarians such as Dorothea Dix fought to “break the chains” of people incarcerated in mental hospitals, and Samuel Gridley Howe started schools for the blind. For the last two centuries, Unitarians and Universalists have been at the forefront of movements working to free people from whatever bonds may oppress them.”

This congregation has its own heritage of activism. In his doctoral dissertation, “From a Culture of Conflict to a Renewal of Covenant” Rev. Dr. Roger Jones writes, “The giving of one’s service, resources, and presence to ease or prevent the suffering of others is a value and a legacy of this congregation’s identity as (first) a liberal Christian church and (later) a Humanist and (now) a theologically diverse congregation...” Roger reviewed newsletters of our Women’s Alliance from 1946 to 1953 and found that every issue “bears an article about programs and activities of the church’s chapter of the Fellowship for Social Justice, a larger Unitarian denominational body.” Rev. Ford Lewis marched in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, with support from the Board and congregation. With Ford’s support, Phyllis Gardiner hosted organizing meetings at UUSS to found a Sacramento chapter of Planned Parenthood.

Our activism continues to this day. Our seventh principle, Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, reminds us that we are all in this together. While the injustices in our country and world may at time seem overwhelming, we can take strength from the inclusive and sometimes surprising coalitions that are forming to defend water, indigenous rights, disappearing species, oppressed minorities, universal health insurance, and scientific facts, among many others. As you may have heard

in last week's service honoring our volunteers, UUSS has 13 racial equity and social justice initiatives representing a wide diversity of collaborative efforts [addressing modern day slavery, environmental destruction and injustice, homelessness, detention and deportation of immigrants, the global refugee crisis, racism and white supremacy]. Our justice theme for the year, Confronting Economic Inequality, has been a multi-pronged exploration of this complex issue, using everything from movie nights to joining an interfaith effort to build a house with Habitat for Humanity. [mention June 4 Native Voices and Earth Justice event if Lucy does not announce it]

But in all of this worthy activity, where have we turned for spiritual support? Have we stayed connected to our highest values? What prevents us from burnout? In Mary's reading, David Loy reminded us that "*The paths of personal and social transformation are not separate from each other.*" While I have found the UU principles and this community helpful in navigating the outside world, I have found myself looking for spiritual practices to support the inner life.

The deepest support has been provided by the practice of insight meditation, also known as vipassana. I was introduced to this practice in 2003, after the death of my father. This form of meditation is based on the teachings of the historical Buddha over 2,500 years ago. In our beginning meditation courses at Sacramento Insight Meditation, we define insight meditation as "non-judgmental, present-moment awareness." Others have defined it as "paying attention in a particular way on purpose" and as "remembering to recognize the present moment's experience." By practicing this open, dynamic awareness, in formal daily sittings, on longer retreats, and in daily life, we

cultivate a mind that sees the world just as it is, and is less reactive to the worldly winds of gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, fame and being ignored. We find balance in the relief from our usual habits of chasing after what we want and avoiding what we don't want. We learn to recognize the deep-seated characteristics of all experience: a constant flux of change through all things, from subatomic particles to the gradual erosion of a great mountain, from the fleeting thoughts coming in and out of our minds to the hopeful possibility of change in our unhelpful habit patterns, from the gradual process of the body's aging to the certain yet mysterious transition at death. We learn not to take everything so personally, knowing that everything is the result of causes and conditions and is ultimately out of our control. We learn to see the way things are and not turn away. And we learn that the arrival of adversity or discontent in our lives is not a signal that something has gone wrong but rather that this is how things have come to be – for now. Instead of “Why ME?!” we may find it more appropriate to respond with “It's about time.”

The ultimate goal of the practice of meditation is the development of wisdom leading to freedom from suffering, dissatisfaction, and discontent. On the path to personal and social transformation, wisdom is balanced by qualities of the heart – kindness, joy, compassion, gratitude, forgiveness, acceptance, equanimity. Through both formal cultivation of these qualities and informal practice in daily life, we incline the mind-heart away from suffering and toward peace. The ultimate goal of these practices is to make them the default setting of the mind and heart. In times of stress, rather than reacting from our old habits of selfishness, fear, or anger, we respond appropriately. For example, when spontaneous protests began in Tibet in

2008, the Chinese authorities responded with brutal repression. The Dalai Lama said, “*I deliberately tried to keep compassion and a sense of concern for the Chinese hardliners. I tried to take their anger, their fear, into myself and give them my love, my forgiveness.*” [from Book of Joy]

One other essential training on the path is ethical living. Buddhism provides very useful training precepts to help us gauge the results of our actions. The five basic precepts are to refrain from harming sentient beings, to refrain from taking what is not given, to refrain from sexual misconduct, to refrain from lying, and to refrain from intoxicants that lead to heedlessness. These can be stated positively to make clear that the precepts are offered for training, not as absolute prohibitions like the ten commandments. So, we strive to protect life, to be generous with our resources, to act skillfully and harmlessly in all our relationships, to communicate truthfully, and to develop and guard a clear, balanced, and calm mind. In practice, we set our intention to follow the precepts. Inevitably, we will fall short in some area, hopefully becoming more and more subtle as our practice matures. When this happens, rather than judge ourselves, we observe how it feels when we act unskillfully. We resolve to do better. When our actions align with our intentions, we see how that feels. In this way, we positively reinforce skillful behavior and move away from harmful behavior. The perspective offered by the precepts also opens us up to the value of community. As the Buddha said, “*When a society comes together and makes decisions in harmony, when it respects its most noble traditions, cares for its most vulnerable members, treats its forests and lands with respect, then it will prosper and not decline.*”

Each of these areas of Buddhist practice supports action in the world. Some folks less familiar with Buddhism may buy into the stereotype of living alone in a cave as the ideal Buddhist lifestyle. This is not the case at all. In fact, Tenzin Palmo, who actually lived in a cave for 12 years, was one of the first westerners to be fully ordained as a Buddhist nun. As soon as she emerged from the cave, she began educating, advocating, and fundraising to promote equal rights and opportunities for female monastics. The historical Buddha faced the question of what to do after his enlightenment, and ultimately chose to share his knowledge, wisdom, and compassion by deeply engaging in the society of his time. In our time, Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh coined the term “Engaged Buddhism” to describe the efforts he and his community made to address the suffering caused by the “American War” in their country. He counsels us to recognize our place in the interdependent web of all existence, or as he calls it, interbeing: *“We are here to awaken from our illusion of separateness. We are imprisoned in our small selves, thinking only of having some comfortable conditions for this small self, while we destroy our large self. If we want to change the situation, we must begin by being our true selves. To be our true selves means we have to be the forest, the river, the ozone layer.”* The Buddhist Peace Fellowship was formed in 1978. It is a nonsectarian international network of nonviolent social activists now headquartered in Oakland. Katie Loncke, their co-director who was born here in Sacramento, articulates her vision like this: *“The next American dream to which I aspire is not a dream at all, but an awakening. A realization and dissolution of America itself— beyond borders as we know them. Beyond the dualism and domination of the nation-state, toward a reverence for life and generous caretaking of the global commons. Toward everyone having enough food, water, shelter, medicine.*

Toward healing, compassion, and trust in our fellow beings. Toward liberty and justice for all. And even if this awakening never comes to pass — aren't we here to try?" Bhikkhu Bodhi, an American monk who has translated many of the Buddha's discourses, started Buddhist Global Relief in 2008 and has been a steady voice advocating deeper involvement of Buddhists in social issues. *"Action requires more than personal decisions to consume less and be more mindful about one's use of energy"*, he writes. *"If we are going to stem climate change, what is needed is a fierce compassion ready to stand up to lies and expose the truth. What is needed is courageous action that can awaken minds and change hearts, that can startle people out of their complacency."*

Locally, Susan Orr, Diane Wilde and I taught classes about the usefulness of the Buddhist precepts in addressing climate change. These classes lead to the formation of the Sacramento Climate Sangha, which meets monthly every fourth Tuesday. While we exchange some information, the primary purpose is to connect our practice and mutual support to the challenges of working on climate change on the individual and collective levels. In November of 2015, we organized an Interfaith Climate March at the Capitol to highlight the Paris Climate talks. Diane Wilde of Sacramento Insight Meditation founded the Buddhist Pathways Prison Project in 1997. Their volunteers currently bring Buddhist services to 13 prisons and two jails in California.

So, we circle around to that question: Now What? As I read the three words on a folded blue paper on the bulletin board, I did not have any immediate reaction other than disbelief. When I entered the meditation hall and closed my eyes, two more words appeared like a neon sign in my mind: Supreme

Court. I knew when I left the retreat there would be much to do. I also felt a groundedness and a confidence that this period of silent practice in community would serve me well in that work.

Roger writes, “We start our work in the world by bowing in humility to the beauty, randomness, and mystery of life, and by bowing to one another in trust and love. Our theological inheritance has not vanished, but we may have left it lying around somewhere while hard at work trying to get things right.” To that theological inheritance of Unitarian Universalism, I offer encouragement to add a personal spiritual practice that nurtures you and find a justice-loving community to practice with.

Mushim Patricia Ikeda, a poet and teacher at the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, authored a “*Great Vow for Mindful Activists*”: “Aware of suffering and injustice, I, _____, am working to create a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world. I promise, for the benefit of all, to practice self-care, mindfulness, healing, and joy. *I vow to not burn out.*” Perhaps a meditation practice would bring these qualities into your life, as it has for me. Perhaps a practice cultivating positive heart qualities like kindness, forgiveness, gratitude, and equanimity would provide further support. Perhaps living as ethically as possible would bring ease and clarity. Perhaps other spiritual practices are already supporting you in your engagement with the world.

Roger ends his dissertation with these words: “The Covenant has held us together, the Values have guided us, and the Mission has called us forward.” Recognizing our theological diversity and our part in the interdependent

web, let us work together to extend the legacy of this congregation's identity, giving of our service, resources, and presence to ease or prevent the suffering of others.

May it be so. Blessed be and Amen.

Mary:

The paths of personal and social transformation are not separate from each other... Engagement in this world is how our personal awakening blossoms. We overcome self-centered habits by working compassionately for the healing of our societies and the healing of the earth. This is what's required for the Buddhist path to become truly liberative.

— David Loy

Responsive reading (to be read by each side of the congregation, led by Lucy and Mary):

L: *May all places be held sacred.*

M: *May all beings be cherished.*

L: *May all injustices of enslavement, oppression and devaluation be righted, remedied and healed.*

M: *May those captured by hatred be freed to the love that is their birth right.*

L: *May those bound by fear be released to the safety of understanding.*

M: *May those weighed down by grief be given over to the joy of being.*

L: *May those lost in delusion find relief in the path of wisdom.*

M: *May all wounds to forests, rivers, deserts, oceans, all wounds to Mother Earth be lovingly restored to bountiful health.*

L: *May all beings everywhere delight in birdsong and blue sky.*

M: *May all beings abide in peace and well-being, awaken and be free.*

Source: People's Climate Movement

<http://www.greenfaith.org/programs/environmental-justice/vigil-prayers>

accessed May 19, 2017