

Bodhi Day©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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If you would oblige me, I would like to see a show of hands of those who had heard of Bodhi Day before learning that it would be the focus of our service today. Thank you. Over the past couple of weeks I had mentioned to several people that I planned to speak today about Bodhi Day. The responses I received seemed to indicate that this holiday wasn't something people had much, if any, awareness of. That made me wonder if there would be anyone here today who was familiar with the holiday and what it commemorates.

I would imagine that by now, after hearing a Peace Candle reading attributed to the Buddha, a Story for All Ages about the Buddha, and a reading about what the Buddha taught, that you have probably all figured out that Bodhi Day has something to do with Buddhism. Bodhi Day is one of the significant holidays in the Buddhist tradition and it is celebrated on different dates in various parts of the world. In Japan, the holiday always falls on December 8th.

Now that we all know the date of the holiday the next question is what significant event does this holiday honor. In many religious traditions holidays are established that commemorate the physical birth and/or death of a spiritual leader or teacher. Bodhi Day commemorates neither of these and yet, in some ways, it encompasses both birth and death. This Buddhist holiday commemorates the day that Siddhārtha Gautama attained enlightenment. As a result of attaining enlightenment he became known as the Buddha or the "Awakened One." His enlightenment, it is claimed, represented the birth of a level of awareness that had not been attained previously by a human being. His enlightenment also represented a type of death—the death, within Gautama, of desire and craving. From his awakening to the end of his life, the Buddha would teach that in order to attain enlightenment and realize the way leading to the cessation of suffering, desire and craving needed to be extinguished.

Finding the way leading to the cessation of suffering is the fourth and final of the Nobel Truths the Buddha realized upon achieving enlightenment. The first Nobel Truth, as we heard in our reading this morning, states that there is suffering. This truth, which in the Pali language is called dukkah, claims that every human life involves suffering. Suffering, as James Baraz and Shoshana Alexander write in their book *Awakening Joy*, includes the experience of stress, unsatisfactoriness, or unreliability. Another word that could be included with these three is disappointment. So I would like to have another show of hands here if you would. Please raise your hand if you have never experienced stress, unsatisfactoriness, unreliability or disappointment. (pause) No hands. OK, let's try this again. This time let's make the number of people we are including significantly larger. Please raise your hand if you have ever met a person who never experienced stress, unsatisfactoriness, unreliability or disappointment. (pause) Still no hands.

So maybe the Buddha, with his recognition of suffering, identified a truth of life. If that is the case, I know I don't need a show of hands to find out who would like to find a way for suffering to cease. That is something I am certain all of us would want. And I think it would be safe for me to say that we wouldn't want that just for ourselves. We

would want it for others as well. That was what the Buddha wanted also, the end of suffering for all, not just for himself.

So now we all know something about Bodhi Day and what makes it an important Buddhist holiday. But does this holiday have any relevance to us? I imagine that those of you who participate in the UU Buddhist Group here at UUFB would respond that what this holiday commemorates definitely has relevance. The fact that I have chosen to focus this entire service on Bodhi day demonstrates my agreement with you. Those of you who aren't very familiar with Buddhism or the teachings of the Buddha may be unsure about how this holiday specifically relates to our Unitarian Universalist faith.

To attempt to address this uncertainty I would ask you to turn to the back of your Order of Service. There you will find the Seven Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association as well as a list of the many sources our Living Tradition draws from as we seek truth and grow in spirit. Within these Principles and Sources I believe we will find a number of connections between what we as Unitarian Universalists hold dear and what the holiday known as Bodhi Day commemorates.

To begin, let's look at the Third Source. It is one of the bullet points near the middle of the page. It states, "wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life." I would propose that if the Buddha actually discovered the way leading to the cessation of suffering, then clearly his teachings contain wisdom that our world desperately needs today.

But do we have any way of knowing whether or not what he discovered really works? In other words, do the things he taught his disciples actually reduce suffering. These are the types of questions that fit within another of the sources listed on the back of your Order of Service. The next to the last bullet point indicates that we UU's draw from "humanist teachings, which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of mind and spirit." While in some religious traditions people are expected to simply accept what is taught on faith, we UU's tend to want facts to base our faith on. We aren't very good at idol worship. The Buddha didn't take things only on faith either. Instead he questioned and he sought to test out the answers he arrived at. That is also what he did with his students. He provided them with questions to consider deeply and thoughtfully. And he instructed them to meditate on these questions until they would come to their own answer, their own awareness.

Consistently the Buddha encouraged his students to actively engage in the various practices that had allowed him to become enlightened. He also encouraged them to discover for themselves whether those practices were beneficial or not. One of the practices he engaged in regularly and taught his students was meditation. For several years prior to sitting down at the base of that tree many, many years ago, the Buddha had learned to meditate and to focus his mind like a laser beam. He could focus on his breathing for extended periods of time. Or he could focus on a question or a concept until he reached a level of perception, understanding and clarity that would otherwise have been impossible. In the last twenty plus years medical science has begun doing research on the benefits of meditation, specifically what is referred to as mindfulness meditation. The scientific research indicates that such meditation does in fact reduce the level of suffering a person experiences. And not just by a little bit.

Sara Lazar, a neuroscientist at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, was one of the first scientists who decided to test the claims about the benefits of meditation and mindfulness. She tested the claims using brain scans. What she found was that in as little as eight weeks the practice of meditation could physically change the structure and size of a person's brain. One part of the brain that meditation changes in a beneficial way is the amygdala, the part of the brain that regulates anxiety, fear and stress. Currently Richard Davidson, with the Center for Healthy Minds through the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is working with the Dalai Lama to explore even more benefits that Buddhist teachings and practices may provide. Nearly 2,500 years after the Buddha's death, science is indicating that the practices the Buddha taught may, in some cases, be a way to reduce suffering. Maybe in another twenty or thirty or fifty years science will confirm that the Buddha actually discovered the way to the cessation of suffering. Who knows, we shall see.

And there is yet another reason that Bodhi Day deserves our attention and interest. Again I would have you look at the back of your Order of Service. This time look at the fourth bullet point near the top of the page. As Unitarian Universalist Congregations we affirm and promote "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning." At least two centuries before our Principles were adopted the Buddha was doing just that—promoting a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And not only that, he was also instructing those who came to him to continually seek to demonstrate compassion in human relations. Compassion in human relations is something our second Principle calls us to do.

If by this point any uncertainty about how Bodhi Day may be relevant to Unitarian Universalism still remains, I would encourage you to speak with me after the service or attend a meeting of the UU Buddhist Group. Contact and meeting information for the group can be found in your announcements insert. My hope is that what I have shared with you today makes it clear that there is a good deal about this unfamiliar holiday that we UU's can and should relate to. So as Bodhi Day approaches I would encourage each of us to be mindful of what the day commemorates, the enlightenment of a man who sought the path to the cessation of suffering. And as we go forward from this place, it is my wish that each of us may live our lives in a manner that reduces suffering in our own lives as well as the lives of those we encounter.

May it be so.