

The Buddha Laughs, the Buddha Weeps

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By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

It is good to be with you this morning in Wilmington Delaware! I consider it an honor to be named as the candidate for Senior Minister at First Unitarian Church, and I want to publicly thank the Search Committee for offering me this fantastic opportunity. They are obviously intelligent people with discerning taste! I am very much looking forward to getting to know as many of you as possible during the course of the week ahead.

This reminds me of a story. There was a candidating week where everyone was excited about the ministerial candidate and trying to be on their best behavior and checking out the candidate. His first Sunday he preached in the morning and it went well. In the afternoon the annual church picnic was scheduled, which was on an island in the middle of a lake. As the boat pulled away from the dock, someone looked back and noticed that they had left all the coolers with the lunch in them on the dock. The ministerial candidate said, "No problem, I'll get them." Without batting an eyelash, he stepped out of the boat and walked across the open water to the dock. Everyone was completely amazed by this. Everyone, that is, except for one old curmudgeon in the back of the boat, who turned to the chair of the search committee and said, "Wouldn't you know it. You got us a minister who can't swim!"

You have to love those curmudgeons don't you?! Well I can't walk on water, though I am not a bad swimmer. I am just an imperfect human being trying to find meaning and significance in the world, and sharing what I find with whomever will listen.

This morning I want to paint with some broad strokes, broader perhaps than I normally do, and talk a little bit about our Unitarian Universalist tradition. In particular I want to use some of the symbolism of Buddhism, a spiritual path very near and dear to me, to shine some light on Unitarian Universalism. Much of the way I find that meaning and significance in the world is by moving between these two paths, Unitarian Universalism and Buddhism. So today I want to give you a taste, an appetizer if you will, of how I live and think in both of these worlds.

In the reading by Daniel Leighton, he talks about Hotai—the “Laughing Buddha.” Hotai is perhaps familiar to you. He is that fat guy smiling at you as you enter a Chinese restaurant. He is not the historical Buddha, but rather Maitreya, the next Buddha to appear in this world. While some traditions take this literally, that there will be another Buddha to appear in the world sort of like a messiah, I don’t. I think what Hotai is telling us is that Buddhism is not pessimistic. It is not “the whole world is suffering” sort of philosophy that it sometimes is made out to be. Hotai is a joyful state of being; an archetype of the human psyche common to us all. Whenever you are filled with hope, compassion, joy, abundance, and a zest for living then you are Hotai. Right then, in this very body in this very moment, you become the Buddha reappearing in the world.

I think there is a sort of Hotai spirit that runs through Unitarian Universalism too. One of the people I associate with this spirit of joyful celebration of life is Walt Whitman. In the Song of the Open Road he writes, “Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road, healthy, free, the world before me. Henceforth I ask not good fortune—I myself am good fortune; strong and content, I travel the open road.” There was this confident optimism within the Transcendentalist movement that resonates with us down through the centuries. “I don’t need to ask for good fortune, *I am* good fortune.” Whitman and others build upon the original insight that William Ellery Channing had: we are not fully fallen creatures. We may not be perfect, but we can reason and think. We can love and be loved. We can choose to do the right thing—it has been known to happen. And so we can’t be that far gone. There has to be some potential for beauty, goodness, and truth within the human experience.

You see this taken even a step further in the early days of the Humanist movement. Now there was a Hotai spirit! The early Humanists believed that human evolution would take us to the next level of insight and understanding. We would evolve into great ethical and spiritual beings that would create a near utopia on earth. “The progress of mankind onward and upward forever!” While the Humanists of the late nineteenth century were perhaps a bit naïve about how far they thought we would evolve, you have to give them points for exuberance. They dared to have a larger vision of their religion than just the neighborhood of Boston. They dreamed big, and they worked like the dickens to make that dream come true. They were perhaps the first people to really understand Unitarian Universalism as a world religion.

Unitarian Universalism has this spirit of the laughing Buddha. Ours is a faith tradition that understands people’s need for hope. It is a tradition that tries to articulate a vision of what could be, of what is possible when we see the world as abundant. That is not to say that a culture of abundance means that we are all rich. No what I mean is

that Unitarian Universalism urges us to think creatively about the resources we have. To be mindful and grateful for whatever life has presented to us, and not to be worried or fearful of what we do not have. Hotai is about abundance, and he calls us to see abundance, the creative possibilities, that lie within even a small amount of resources. If you have a lot of resources, but are constantly aware of what you can't do or what is impossible because we still don't have enough, then you are stuck in a culture of scarcity.

I became a Unitarian Universalist because of this outlook that sees life as precious. None of us really know what the next life holds for us, or even if there is a next life. Therefore, we have to create as much meaning and blessedness in this world while we can. So that when it comes your time to die, the only thing you have left to say at your death bed is "Thank you." Thank you to the universe for having this brief time between eternities to live and love, to cry with friends, and to find a place of belonging. Thank you for making me at home in the universe. That is a key goal of Unitarian Universalism—to lead us to a spiritual place where we are at home everywhere and anywhere we choose to go. Hotai, is after all, the consummate traveler.

There is, however, another stream or theme that runs throughout Unitarian Universalism in addition to the Laughing Buddha of Hotai. This second stream of our tradition I call "the Buddha Weeps." You may not be as familiar with the weeping Buddha, but it is a popular wood carving in Southeast Asia. It depicts the Buddha sitting in meditation with his head in his hands weeping because he feels the suffering of all living being so intensely it is as if it were his own. In some ways it is not unlike Christ suffering on the cross, but not nearly as central to Buddhism as that symbol is to Christianity. If the Laughing Buddha represents the first Principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, then the Weeping Buddha exemplifies the seventh: the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part.

Imagine what it must be like to feel the pain and suffering of other beings so profoundly. What would your reaction be? To weep surely, but what then? What action would you take? I think that it is when we become aware of the pain of another person or another being that we become aroused to action. A kind of holy anger emerges within us that calls us to the work of justice. This is what James Luther Adams called the "Prophethood of all Believers." We are all called to speak out against injustice and to not just speak, but to actively work on behalf of justice.

Martin Luther King said that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." We see this principle come to life in our Unitarian Universalist tradition. There is the march on Selma, Norbert Chapek protest against the Nazis, and the UUSC

helping Jews escape from Europe in World War Two. More recently we can point to Unitarian Universalist commitment to working for the equal rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, creating a sustainable environment, bridging the gap between rich and poor, and a whole host of other issues in which we not only weep, but we act. These are social justice issues that many UUs are passionate about because we feel that interconnectedness to each other both at the macro level of global suffering, but also at the micro level of interpersonal suffering.

One of the things that I take from Pema Chodron's story about her husband telling her about his affair is that we are connected to each other by our suffering. We relate to Pema Chodron's story, not because all of us are Buddhist masters who have attained enlightenment, but because we can relate to her pain. While we may not have had that particular experience, we can all at some level understand it. We experience that interdependent web of existence not through a profound moment of mystical union. We experience it because we all know what it is like to cry, to lose something important to us, to be afraid. That is how we connect to each other.

This past Wednesday we remembered the one year anniversary of the shooting at Virginia Tech. I remember very well where I was when I heard about the deaths in Blacksburg. I was on sabbatical at the time, and so I watched a lot of the new coverage. What surprised me was how personally I seemed to take it. I have no specific connection to Virginia Tech or anyone involved in that horrible incident. And yet I felt emotionally wounded, as if my own family had been hurt. The suffering of people on TV was not distant for me; I was sharing in it in a way I never had before.

Then it occurred to me that this was the first big national tragedy that had happened since my son was born. He was almost one at the time. The next day I could see that everyone you met was a little shaken by the images of death. I dropped Thomas off at his daycare in the morning. And as I was turning to leave, a little boy about Thomas' age walked up to me. He was crying. The teacher said that it was his first day at the daycare and he was missing his mom and dad. He came up to me and put his arms in the air as little kids do when they want you to pick them up. Without a moment's hesitation I picked up this little boy and hugged him as if he were my own son. I told him, "It's OK. You are alright. You don't need to be afraid. Everything is going to be fine." I handed him off to one of the teachers and went on my way.

As I was walking to my car, I was surprised at my own behavior. Before becoming a parent, I am sure I would not have picked up that child so fluidly without even thinking about it. And I think I did it because if it were Thomas who was crying, who was afraid of being in a new place and feeling abandoned by those he loved and

who loved him, I would want someone to pick him up and comfort him. Given the events of the day before that still resonate with us a year later, the world just has to be a place where people love each other. It just has to. We cannot be disconnected from the weeping of our brothers and sisters. Spiritually, ethically, religiously our health and well-being in this world depends on the actions, large and small, we take to help heal the pain of others. We can only do this if we, like the Buddha, make ourselves vulnerable to weeping a little bit. Because weeping leads to prophetic action and pastoral solace.

These two streams within Unitarian Universalism can be symbolized by two Buddhist images: the Buddha laughs and the Buddha weeps. Hotai is that celebratory spirit of abundance in life. He looks at the world and loves it just as it is with all of its flaws. The weeping Buddha looks at the world as it is and is moved to tears by the suffering and injustice in the world. Although a paradox, these two streams within Unitarian Universalism are both right. We cannot do without one or the other; we need them both. We Unitarian Universalists need to keep in mind that broad vision of hope that sees a world that could be and is inspired by it. Yet we cannot become wild-eyed idealists without also retaining something of our pragmatism. We must take seriously the suffering of the world. Every religion from to Unitarian Universalism to Buddhism; from Judaism to Christianity; from Atheism to Santeria has to at some point come face to face with the reality of human pain and suffering and do something about it. Realism must temper our idealism. The Buddha must laugh at times and weep at times. We must grow in our spiritual lives to the point where we too can laugh and weep along with him.

Together, may we seek to make our vision of a better world real in this place and in this time in history. May we laugh in celebration of abundant life and weep together when we need comforting. And may we grow in spirit together. Amen Blessed Be.