

All Souls Unitarian Church — Dharma Notes

1 Meditation at All Souls Unitarian Church

Meditation is a Wednesday class in session from 7:00 until 8:00 p.m., open to anyone who cares to attend, members and non-members of the church congregation alike.

2 Buddhism in a Nutshell

Buddhism is described as a non-theistic religion, one that isn't ruled by one or more deities. Instead, it is a set of teachings or way of life discovered by a man generally accepted as being Siddhartha Gautama who lived in East India sometime between the 6th and 4th Centuries BCE.

Supposedly, Siddhartha Gautama was a prince who, having lived a very sheltered life, discovered that outside his cloistered world there was immense suffering among the people. Shocked, he rejected his upbringing and spent years of spiritual exploration, wandering, trying many spiritual teachers.

One day, Siddhartha Gautama was resting under a Bodhi tree when he realized that human life is governed by four primary truths: (1) "that all existence is characterized by suffering and does not bring satisfaction"; (2) that the cause of suffering is craving or desire for something that we haven't got; (3) that suffering can be brought to an end; (4) that there is a way or path that leads to the ending of suffering by understanding the causes and taking action to adjust one's point of view and harmonize one's way of living.

Siddhartha Gautama's epiphany under the Bodhi tree is termed enlightenment. Since then Siddhartha Gautama became known as Gautama Buddha, or just Buddha. A Buddha is just an enlightened person who is capable of helping others let go of their suffering.

I see enlightenment happening in stages. You are more enlightened now than you were in the past. Enlightenment is incremental over time.

Here's what Henry Shukman says about the Buddha's awakening, taken from his April 21, 2014 blog post at www.tricycle.com:

"According to the Pali canon, when Shakyamuni Buddha experienced his great awakening at the age of 35, it did not come about through grueling ascetic practices. Rather, after several years of mortifying his flesh under the guidance of various spiritual masters, to the point where he had brought himself close to death, he realized three things. First, he wanted to live and therefore took nourishment to restore his constitution. Second, in spite of all his asceticism, he had come no nearer to fulfilling his existential quest. And third, he remembered a time as a child when he had experienced complete happiness, without any special practices at all. Rather than put himself through more deprivation and torture, why couldn't he just be happy like then? So he decided to abandon severe asceticism and instead sit quietly under a banyan tree and let the memory of that childhood moment guide him."

Since that day twenty-six hundred years ago, Buddhism has splintered into various ways of seeking happiness and minimal suffering. The web-site www.tricycle.com endeavors to be impartial by presenting material from all flavors of Buddhism.

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2.1 Suffering

It is common to identify three poisons as the root cause of suffering:

1. *Ignorance*: misunderstanding the nature of reality; bewilderment.
2. *Attachment*: attachment to pleasurable experiences.
3. *Aversion*: a fear of getting what we don't want, or not getting what we do want.

2.2 Three Refuges

The Three Refuges are the three things that followers of the Buddhist way look towards for guidance to living life in what is known as *taking refuge*.

1. *Buddha*: Taking refuge in the Buddha is to accept the attainment of enlightenment as one's ultimate objective, using the example of Siddhartha Guatama and his teachings to help order one's own life accordingly.
2. *Dharma*: Is the Path, or way of life, described by the Buddha that leads, ultimately, to enlightenment.
3. *Sangha*: Is the body of people made up of practitioners who are actively using the Buddha's teachings to benefit themselves and others. Members of the Sangha support each other in the quest for skillful living on the way to enlightenment.

Hence, the formula: "I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha."

2.3 Karma

Karma is the Hindu or Buddhist concept of the effects of a person's actions that determine that person's destiny in the next incarnation of life. This is the normal definition.

Buddhism teaches that the past and future don't exist. Only the present moment is real. Moments come and go. The decision you make and the action you take in one moment determines what happens in the next moment. Your actions have a cumulative effect on the future. Karma is in effect from moment to moment. This is my non-traditional interpretation of karma.

2.4 Meditation

Meditation is the gateway to a more skillful life informed by Buddhist practice. Faith in anything other than yourself isn't necessary. All you need is a willingness to do what works and stop doing what doesn't.

- ◆ Meditation creates headroom, space where you have room to see what's going on in your head.
- ◆ Meditation helps give you time to think before you act.
- ◆ Meditation helps to calm the monkey-mind that chatters and rackets about from one wild thought to another.

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- ◆ We calm the mind by giving it something to do.
- ◆ As you meditate watch the thoughts as they arise, observe them and watch them disappear. Don't suppress your thoughts or engage with them.
- ◆ When you notice that you've been caught in a train of thought, gently, without judgment, return to observing your breath, letting your thoughts go.
 - You will be doing this a lot, so get used to it and be kind to yourself.

3 Enlightenment

Enlightenment is skillful living informed by compassion, wisdom, and spiritual awareness. Anyone can become enlightened, it is a question of degree. Everyone in the meditation group is enlightened more or less. Enlightenment is a continuous process, a journey with no destination that is largely about living skillfully from moment to moment, which is done by being aware of the now. To do so requires some mental space, a slight distance between intention and action; this space is achieved via mediation in which the practitioner learns to observe the workings of the mind coupled to the physical urges, thereby learning to think before acting. We are imperfect; sometimes we succeed and sometimes we fail; no matter what, it is important for each of us to continue trying to live skillfully.

In his book, *The Joy of Living*, Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche said that “thinking is the natural activity of the mind. Meditation is not about stopping your thoughts. Meditation is simply a process of resting the mind in its natural state, which is open and naturally aware of thoughts, emotions, and sensations as they occur... Meditation is so much easier than most people think: whatever you experience, as long as you are aware of what's going on, *is meditation*.”

What we are trying to do is to take what we learn here in meditation and integrate it into our daily lives, as Jan Chozen Bays explains in this excerpt, *The Gift of Waiting*, from her book *How to Train a Wild Elephant*.

4 The Gift of Waiting

“When we are forced to wait, say in a traffic jam, our instinct is to do something to distract ourselves from the discomfort of waiting. We turn on the radio, call or text someone on the phone, or just sit and fume. Practicing mindfulness while waiting helps people find many small moments in the day when they can bring the thread of awareness up from where it lies hiding in the complex fabric of their lives. Waiting, a common event that usually produces negative emotions, can be transformed into a gift, the gift of free time to practice. The mind benefits doubly: first, by abandoning negative mind-states, and second, by gaining the beneficial effects of even a few extra minutes of practice woven into the day.”

“As you undertake this practice, you learn to recognize early the body changes that accompany impending negative thoughts and emotions such as impatience about having to wait, or anger about ‘that idiot’ ahead of us in the checkout line. Each time we are able to stop and not allow a negative mind-state to come to fruition (say, getting irritated at the traffic or angry at the slow cashier), we are erasing a habitual and unwholesome pattern of the heart/mind. If we don't let the cart of the mind keep running down the same deep ruts, down the same old hill, into the same old swamp, eventually the ruts will fill in. Eventually our habitual states of irritation and

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frustration over something like waiting will dissolve. It takes time, but it works. And it's worth it, as everyone around us will benefit."

"Many of us have a mind that measures self-worth in terms of productivity. If I did not produce anything today, if I did not write a book, give a speech, bake bread, earn money, sell something, buy something, get a good grade on a test, or find my soul mate, then my day was wasted and I am a failure. We give ourselves no credit for taking 'being' time, for just being present. 'Waiting' is thus a source of frustration. *Think of the things I could be getting done!*"

"And yet, if you asked the people you care about what they would like most from you, their answer is likely to be some version of 'your presence' or 'your loving attention.' Presence has no measurable product except positive feelings, feelings of support, intimacy, and happiness. When we stop being busy and productive and switch to just being still and aware, we ourselves will also feel support, intimacy, and happiness, even if no one else is around. These positive feelings are a product that is much desired but that cannot be bought. They are the natural result of presence. They are a birthright that we have forgotten we have."

5 Modern Life

In modern life, we are nothing more than a commodity to be exploited for profit. We are kept in a state of stampede, operating on our impulses and emotions; in this state we are reacting instead of thinking, prey to externally imposed fears and delusions, and easily manipulated by unscrupulous entities. No wonder, then, that our society suffers from stress related illnesses.

Meditation can help us to regain equanimity or to discover an equanimity that was hitherto unknown. Attaining to equanimity doesn't happen quickly; it is a slow holistic process involving the mind, the spirit, and the body.

6 Aspects of Equanimity

Equanimity is "evenness of mind; that calm temper or firmness of mind which is not easily elated or depressed; patience; calmness; composure; as, to bear misfortunes with equanimity." To attain equanimity requires a holistic approach that nurtures the body in support of the mind and spirit. Look after your body by giving it good nutrition and moderate exercise.

Start by getting into the habit of walking as much as possible. Dress properly and walk in all weathers. If you have a dog then walking it is a good way to get out and be in touch with the natural world — it's good for the dog too. Don't wear headphones, instead listen to what is going on around you. If you are unsteady on your feet, try swimming or riding a stationary bike. Get help to build an exercise regime that works for you.

If you don't know what good nutrition is then consult with a licensed nutritionist or your doctor. Eat right to live right. Avoid artificial sweeteners. Soda pops and sweet drinks upset the alimentary tract and cause bowel problems like diverticulitis. Eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. Avoid highly processed manufactured foods. Wholesome food satisfies, directly supporting equanimity.

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6.1 Stress

Stress is usually psychological, for example: debt, high-pressure work environments, being in an abusive relationship, physical sickness, noise, and stridently reported news. Talk-radio is an especially pernicious incitement to discontented frustration in general and to acts of violence by weak minded individuals in particular.

Meditate about what it is that makes you feel stressed-out. Once you have identified your sources of stress, start thinking about what you can do to reduce them to manageable levels. Start with the easy things. Turn off the talk-radio or listen to soothing music instead. Shun broadcast and cable TV news. In general, avoid television as much as possible; it is all designed to feed your fears in order to sell you something. Television is predominantly a powerful instrument of propaganda and misinformation.

You can't make an obnoxious boss pleasant, but you can start looking for alternative employment; just looking and imagining alternative work will reduce stress and get you moving in a positive direction. Start working on strategies to reduce your debt, holding it at more manageable lower levels; it is possible to have fun being a cheapskate especially when you caucus with other cheapskates on ways to do things with less money. For the more difficult stressful situations in which you find yourself, seek appropriate professional help.



6.2 Environment

Environment, the places where you exist, is another aspect of equanimity and an important one. Away from home, you can control where you go to a certain extent, but even so our modern technological world is a hyperactive, restless place to be. You have much more control over your home environment.

Make your home a refuge where you can go to relax and recuperate at the end of the day. Make it into a place of peace and tranquility where you can shut the door on the world. Let plenty of natural light into your living space. Choose restful decor. Try to keep your space neat and tidy. Cultivate a few potted plants; for example, Violets are easy to grow and come in vibrant shades of purple.

If you have a family, set aside some time in the day or space where members can be engaged in quiet activity or have somewhere to be alone. Try creating a thirty-minute period where everyone sits or lies reading, stares into space, or naps; use a kitchen timer. Do what works for you, stop doing what doesn't promote equanimity.

6.3 Ritual

Ritual supports equanimity. Though the word ritual implies sacred religious rites, in this context it applies to the development of habit and order in our daily lives. A disorganized life promotes a disturbing feeling of being adrift in a welter of forces beyond our control.

An easy ritual to start in your life is to inaugurate a formal meal on one day of the

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week, like breakfast. If you are alone, you can choose to have breakfast with a friend or friends at a nearby restaurant where you can sit together, talk and eat. At home with a family, you can lay the table with place settings, prepare and serve the meal with the help of members of the family, turn off the TV and radio, sit down, eat and converse with one another. Norman Rockwell captured this ideal with his painting “Freedom From Want” reproduced above.

Take time out of your day for a coffee or tea break mid morning and afternoon; stop what you are doing. Take your break at the same time every day. As Jack Buchanan or Long John Baldry would sing: “Everything Stops for Tea.” Scan “Stops for Tea” on this page to hear Jack Buchanan on YouTube.

6.4 Exercise

Exercise is the best prophylactic for general health. Any exercise you can do is better than doing nothing. Most effective is aerobic exercise that raises your heart rate. Before starting an exercise regime, consult with your doctor and get a physical examination to make sure that you have no underlying conditions that must be considered before beginning a program of aerobic exercise.

Exercise is counterintuitive. Despite burning energy, exercise makes you feel more energetic and alive. As with anything, start small and work up to bigger effort. A small start is as easy as parking on the other side of the parking lot and walking to your destination; in the few minutes it takes, breath deeply, look around, see and listen to the world.

There are many ways in which to get exercise. Here is a very small sampling: Yoga, Tai Chi, walking, stretching, calisthenics, swimming. Tai Chi is very good for older persons and, like Yoga, improves balance. Swimming puts the least stress on joints and water buoys the body. Exercise promotes good health and equanimity of mind.

6.5 General Knowledge

General knowledge facilitates equanimity. Ignorance and fear are bedfellows. Ignorance makes us susceptible to the blandishments of scaremongers, confidence tricksters, political demagoguery, and advertising that plays upon our fears. Fear arises through ignorance. A good general knowledge and education makes us resistant to being stampeded by the wily mountebanks that infest our world.

Gaining and sustaining general knowledge is a life-long daily process. Education doesn't stop with the end of formal schooling, it is ongoing, fun, and as easy as a little daily reading that can be combined with quiet time and a cup of tea or other favorite beverage, done either on or off-line with reliable sources.

What's reliable is the problem. Try these good places to start on-line:

- ◆ Arts & Letters Daily at <http://www.aldaily.com/>
- ◆ Scientific American at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/>



AL Daily



Scientific American



Science Daily



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- ◆ Science Daily at <http://www.sciencedaily.com/>

Printed media are still useful and don't require electricity to read, any source of light will do; try:

- ◆ Lapham's Quarterly at <http://www.laphamsquarterly.org/>
- ◆ Pacific Standard at <http://www.psmag.com>
- ◆ New Scientist at <http://www.newscientist.com>

These are excellent sources of news and ideas. It is easy to be overwhelmed by information, so limit yourself to a few good sources and don't feel as though you have to read everything; browse for a set period each day.

6.6 Change

Change is inevitable. It is one of the biggest causes of suffering that arises due to our wishing things to be different. Our suffering from things not being as we wish or living up to our ideals can be banished by management and acceptance of change. We manage change by adapting to new circumstances. In nature, the species that cannot change will become extinct: the omnivorous species that can get a living via multiple means will survive to reproduce and live on.

We survive and adapt through our ability to estimate future probabilities based on present events and the probable outcomes of different courses of action. We survive and adapt by using appropriate skills from a large repertoire coupled with selecting the right tool for the job.

Change is less stressful when faced with a can-do attitude and intention for the new circumstances to be a positive experience. Change is manageable when you can adapt yourself to prevailing conditions. Change is interesting as a challenge to be overcome and survived.

Meditation is an act of change. It is recognition that one's internal state can be improved through change in our perspective.

The I Ching book of changes is a process that can be used to manage change when you are uncertain which way to go.

Having a plan of action is to have great comfort and strength.

6.7 Debt

Debt is a pernicious cause of suffering. Debt is vicious, locking the debtor into servitude, a worrisome slavery. In taking on debt you yoke yourself to the strife and worry of feeding the beast.

Do what you can to reduce and, ultimately, eliminate your debt. Some debt is necessary such as for buying a house or a vehicle. As a rule, keep debt to a minimum such that the payments needed to service your debt are a small percentage of your total income. Living with a high level of debt means that you are unable to support any



Lapham's Quarterly



Pacific Standard



New Scientist



Strike Debt

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increase in the cost of living or unforeseen expenses. Strive for low to no debt, promoting equanimity of mind.

For help with debt, see the Debt Resistor's Operations Manual, available on-line at this location: <http://strikedebt.org/drom/#toc> or by scanning the Strike Debt QCode above.

6.8 Community

Sangha is the intimate community that supports your practice. Outside of the sangha is the community that supports us all. Each of us is dependent on our broad community. Beyond the local, we are supported by our national community. And beyond the national we are, or should be, supported by the international community of peoples. For community to work, we must each invest time and effort to nurture each other, give and take in all directions.

Community begins with each person. Each of us must strive to achieve harmonious balance between the mind, body, and spirit; as with community at large, each of these parts of the whole person depend on each other. The mind cannot be at peace if the body is hurting. The body cannot be whole unless the mind guides it to exercise and good nutrition. The spirit cannot flourish if the body and mind aren't united in peaceful coexistence.

When we have our own houses in order, we can turn outward to help those around us and, in so doing, help build community. I have faith that together we can make our world a better, more peaceful place to live. There are many ways we can be of service to our community; All Souls, has a number of programs such as the Community Resource Bank and Partners In Education and Micro Banking. In the wider world, a lot is happening documented by web-sites such as www.popularresistance.com and www.openwireless.org. Our communities of the future will be more horizontal, decentralized, and egalitarian.

No matter what, the beginning and end of community is each of us. Everything we need is inside each of us if we just stop to look within.