

(Taken from the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship home web page):

"Since the introduction of the first Buddhist texts to America in the mid-nineteenth century, Buddhism has been an extremely influential force among Unitarians and, over the last thirty years, Unitarian Universalists. Early Unitarians, such as Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Ralph Waldo Emerson responded with great enthusiasm to Buddhism's emphasis on individual experience, rather than appeal to scriptures or belief in miraculous events, as the basis for authority in spiritual matters.

In recent years, Unitarian Universalists have increasingly been drawn to explore Buddhist religious practices, especially seated meditation, in order to ground the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" that is one of the guiding principles of the UU tradition. Meditation invites a direct and immediate experience of reality and provides a balance to purely intellectual inquiry."

When I first heard of the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship, I was curious to know more and so I Googled the website. It looked promising and so I Yahooed the Group Discussion Board. Well, not much happened for quite a while, much like sitting on a cushion without mindfulness. Then all hell broke loose. Discussions romped, Buddhist tempers flared, loving kindness prevailed. I knew right then and there I was way over my head. There was no way I would ever be comfortable enough to go toe to toe with these "Buddha Bubble Heads" No Way! Just as quickly as the discussion appeared, it disappeared and for weeks not a word. This seems to be the pattern. But the one thing that has remained with me from the beginning was the disconcerting thought that I am not sure I belong in this group. So, I sent out a private email to Rev Sam Trumbore, President of the UUBF and minister of the First Unitarian Society of Albany NY, who assured me I was "just what they wanted".... I am still not too sure about that; but, I have learned a great deal since joining the UUBF....mostly as a voyeur of their Discussion Board, and from the teachings put forth in the journal [UU Sangha](#). In April of 2007, I will be attending the UUBF Convo in Garrison NY. So, where is all this going? Well, I will try to explain.

There are times when engaging with UU Buddhists seems no more than monks pissing in the snow and saying " See, my Zen, Bon, Tibetan, Theravada practice is better than your Zen, Bon, Tibetan, Theravada practice." "Or maybe my UU practice is better than your Baptist, Catholic, Baha'i, Methodist practice. You get the idea.

The primary reason I have not discussed this to any great detail is that all that wrangling takes a lot of energy and.....I never was very good at 'snow writing'.

I bring you small offerings this morning, much of which has come from many sources and mentors, including various writings, blogs, books, magazine articles, etc. And, some of which are my own concoction, which as with all things Buddhist is of a 'beginner's mind'.

For me, Buddhism is not a religion; it is a philosophy, an moral system, and a psychology. Its methodology and techniques have much to offer members of other religions. I know of no other religion that invites people to sit around for three days and just ask "Who am I?"

Theosophy perhaps, but that is a cushion I have never sat on.

Therefore, to this beginner's mind, all religions seem to stop at their ready made, highly refined, pre-packaged answers to that question.

Even when they want people to know, more often than not, the very dogma of the religion is the very thing that keeps people from discovering the answer for themselves. Is it possible that sometimes we grasp so hard at our own belief, for dear life in fact, that we think it is the only one that will do the job?

And, isn't there a point when grasping on to our own belief just becomes another form of grasping? In Buddhism, it is taught that the source of all delusions is a distorted awareness called 'self-grasping ignorance'. In other words, the more we grasp at this desire to protect our own belief system the more we suffer....it is a Buddhist teaching.

I describe myself as a Buddhist and a UU because both are mutually exclusive and I practice both. Both support me in my search for liberation and happiness. I attend this group and the larger UU community to be part of the evolution of liberal religion in America.

One of the cornerstones of liberal religion – UUs in particular, is that revelation is not sealed. And, I know that there are UU's who struggle with this word "revelation".

Our minds are not closed and our understanding is not static, frozen in time, clinging to revelations spoken to a particular people at a particular time, by some particular incarnation. Nor does wisdom lie in any particular practice.

The past is useful to us only in our search for wisdom, meaning, and yes, revelation, right here and right now.

In other words we are open to the new.

We Unitarians have even come up with something new a few times ourselves.

Buddhists and UUs may have points of agreement; but, there are differences in their fundamental assumptions.

What intrigues me is the time and energy people have spent trying to show otherwise. But in reality, do we UU's have a clue about what Buddhism is and are we all that interested once we learn of there is a bit of 'religious drama and superstition....yes ,you heard me, superstition associated with Buddhist beliefs. Particularly in the Bon and the Tibetan traditions and even in many of the Zen sangas.

So, why do we spend so much energy to show we are all alike? Especially when both Unitarian Universalism and Buddhism are mutually exclusive.

There has long been a movement among some to show that fundamentally all the world's religions are the same, that at heart they all teach the same lessons.

Unitarian-Universalists have played a large part in all this.

Recognizing the imperative of religion as both a motivating and dividing force in human history, it has been a dream to harness that powerful force in the cause of unity.

To show that fundamentally religions are all the same would go a long way to showing that fundamentally we are all the same.

However, it just does not work, does it?

It should come as no real surprise that there are points of similarity between religious beliefs. Most, if not all, religious beliefs seek to address the human condition, the awareness of our existence and of our mortality. So yes, some insights will be shared.

However, it seems to require a selective blindness not to see the fundamental differences that also exist.

For example:

Buddhism and Confucian-ism profess no Creator God.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam insist upon one.

Hinduism has no central theology.

Taoism believes in a central force that is impersonal in nature.

Christianity insists on one true path through Jesus to God.

Judaism claims a special relationship to the Universal God.

Native American religions are closely tied to the physical world;

Islam and Christianity seek to transcend that world.

Islam and Christianity have sealed revelations - sacred texts that are eternally true.

There is no way I can see to make all of these, and so many other religious beliefs, the same.

Nor, is it necessarily a good aim to have. We do have similar needs and questions but we also have different responses. Different religious beliefs point in different directions, cause us to explore different spiritual journeys. We can dialog with persons of different religious beliefs revealing different insights.

There is no point in talking to someone who agrees with you all the time.

We learn nothing that way.

We also fail to see others as they truly are if we concentrate only on discovering our likeness.

We can NOT understand another culture, country, or religious belief if we seek out only what we share. Down that road lies dangerous assumptions. Failing to appreciate differences leads us to assume we can act towards others as we would to "one of our own".

We fail to see that we could cause offense or miss a key treasure because we looked past difference to sameness.

So, one might say that this is my spiritual journey. To follow the teachings of the Buddha and those who have proven a life of compassion, non violence and a tested prescriptive to be free from suffering. Where did I get all these

ideas, thoughts and feelings ?

As mentioned earlier, I have read numerous books, magazine articles that have help shed light on my journey as well as meeting when able with the Insight Meditation Community of Charlottesville which explores the many benefits of Vipassana meditation. And the UUBF on-line discussion group. And, most importantly, insights from my time in sitting meditation. I would also like to thank Tom Endress for his guidance and support, especially his talent at speech editing. You should thank him for that too !

In closing, I would like to share with you the words of

James Ishmael Ford, who is the Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Society of Newton, Ma and a lineage holder in the Soto Zen traditions. Sensei Rev Ford is the guiding teacher for the Henry Thoreau Zen Sangha in Newton and a founding member and past Secretary of the UUBF. He is the author of This Very Moment: A Brief Introduction to Buddhism and Zen for Unitarian Universalists.

Quoting:

“Within Unitarian Universalism, I find I can honestly pursue the meaning of my spiritual upbringing within the context of my adult faith. This is a precious gift that Unitarian Universalism has given me. And one for which I will always be grateful. So, while I certainly understand it may not be the best choice for everyone, I feel quite a few Western Buddhists can find much of value in joining UU societies.

Buddhist meditation groups of nearly every type seem to have a place within UU churches. In fact, bringing Buddhist practices into the life of Unitarian Universalism may well be the greatest gift Western Buddhist can bring us should they decide to come into our churches. Meditation is a precious gift, and one many that UUs want.

Now, this UU/Buddhist connection is very much a two-way street.

Besides providing the frame for a Buddhist religious education experience for our children, and places to engage our own spiritual practices; Unitarian Universalism offers interesting challenges to Western Buddhists.

UUs have been in the forefront of ordaining women, as well as gays and lesbians to the clergy. Unitarian Universalists are deeply concerned with how human beings live lives engaged in the community.

UUs are seriously confronting the questions of how we can live our lives fully in the real world.

I certainly feel these are serious questions Western Buddhists need to be addressing.

Within UU societies one encounters a forum to engage those concerns of real life in the real world. Without a doubt, challenge and dialogue come to Western Buddhists entering Unitarian Universalist churches. Indeed, thorny and difficult questions are asked on both sides. It is a gift that Unitarian Universalism gives to Western Buddhists.

I believe our Unitarian Universalist Buddhist conversation is rich with possibilities.

If we pay close attention. (Still quoting Rev Sensi Ford) Smile !

This is the teaching of the Buddha, we need to pay attention. This is our ultimate Unitarian Universalist spiritual practice. Whether we sit staring at walls, or speak with each other with complete attention--in our paying attention we may discover much. We may discover everything that counts.

I suggest we may discover the very way the universe is made, and how we can act in a manner that blesses the world.

For me, this is both the wisdom of Buddhism and the wisdom of our Unitarian Universalist way.

In my life, these two ways have woven together so tightly that I can no longer unravel which is which. They have become the rope which is nothing other than a strand of the great web itself.

And, this is why I count myself as a Unitarian Universalist Buddhist.”

And, in community with Rev Sensi Ford, the Rev. Trumbore and all other UU's engaged in the practice of peace and compassion, I too count myself a UU Buddhist.