

## **Buddha and UU**

By Pat Smith

October 3, 2010

*Inspiration from the book "Buddhism Without Beliefs" by Stephen Batchelor. Quotes with reference to page numbers only are taken from this book.*

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<http://www.retrogalaxy.com/sports/yogi-berra.asp>

*"When you come to a fork in the road, take it!"*

That's a quote from Yogi Berra. He was a baseball player and manager. Very successful. His real name was Lawrence Peter Berra. He got the nickname "Yogi" from a friend who said he looked like a Hindu holy man, a yogi.

Yogi says that when he made that statement about the fork in the road, he was giving driving to directions to his house. There's a fork in the road and either one will get you to his house.

You may know several other expressions due to Yogi Berra, and I'll sprinkle in a few as I go along.

*"When you come to a fork in the road, take it!"*

Often we must choose. Sometimes it matters. Other times, it doesn't. The two paths may not be a choice between right or wrong, just different.

And sometimes we can take two paths simultaneously. We can take both forks in the road!

That's how I've come to view Buddhism and UUism. We can do both.

----- *A little bit about Buddhism* -----

I've read about Buddhism off and on for the last ten years.

- I've participated in meditations.
- I've taken part in discussions with Buddhists.
- I've been to instruction by Buddhist monks.
- I have taken the instruction seriously.

But I have not seriously followed Buddhism, at least I did not think so.

And I have not reached Nirvana. According to the Buddha, *Nirvana is the perfect peace of the state of mind that is free from craving, anger and other afflicting states.*

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nirvana>

I found, and still find, many of the Buddhist ideas difficult.

A lot of the words are quite long and strange-sounding to me. Probably because my native language is English.

I mentioned “Nirvana”. This is one of the simpler words. Two other simple-sounding words are Dharma and karma. They just happen to rhyme. And I’ll talk about these later.

Here are some tougher ones: *(taken from the Internet)*

- Bodhisattva (one definition of Bodhisattva: an enlightened being and how the Buddha referred to himself)
- Sariputra (one of two principal disciples of the Buddha)
- prajnaparamita (wisdom acquired experientially)
- Avalokiteshvara (the bodhisattva of compassion)

So not only was I learning new ideas with Buddhism, but also a new language.

And there’s more. There are different branches of Buddhism. The three main ones are:

- Hīnayāna
- Mahāyāna
- Vajrayāna *(or Tibetan Buddhism)*

And there’s still more. There are various schools within these.

So it gets quite complicated. And confusing.

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I grew up as a Christian. A Methodist. So I’m familiar with some of the different Christian denominations. As I was getting confused from all the Buddhist things I was reading about, I tried to imagine myself in a Buddhist’s shoes, or sandals, as the case may be. Someone without any knowledge of Christianity, struggling to understand subtle differences in the various branches of that faith. The Buddhist might say, “You’re all Christians, right? Why all these different interpretations and practices?” That’s how an outsider to Buddhism, like me, reacts to all the various Buddhist branches. “You’re all Buddhists, right? Why all these different interpretations and practices?”

About 10 days ago a I attended a Lubbock Interfaith Association meeting at Second Baptist church. The program was learning about their beliefs, and in particular how their beliefs were like, and unlike, other Christian and Protestant beliefs, and even other Baptist beliefs. Before I heard the presentation, my thought was, “You’re all Baptists, right? Why all these different interpretations and practices?” They had several disputes with the Southern Baptist Convention, an association of Baptists churches. One was that the congregation of Second Baptist Church accepted into membership people who are baptized by *alien immersion*. *(hum do-do-do-do)* So there are concepts that are foreign, at least to me, in areas of Christianity.

So the idea that Buddhism has different branches and interpretations and followings, should not be surprising.

*---- a little about the Buddha -----*

Here's a little about the Buddha.

*The Buddha was born Siddhar'tha Gau'tama, a prince ...[in] Nepal, in approximately 566 BC. When he was twenty-nine years old, he left the comforts of his home to seek the meaning of the suffering he saw around him. After six years of arduous yogic training, he abandoned the way of self-mortification and instead sat in mindful meditation beneath a bodhi tree.*

*On the full moon of May, with the rising of the morning star, Siddhar'tha Gau'tama became the Buddha, the enlightened one.*

*(<http://webspaceship.edu/cgboer/buddhaintro.html>)*

We might think of this as the Buddha's *aha* moment! Think about Sir Isaac Newton sitting under the apple tree, and having his *aha* moment about gravity when an apple fell on his head.

After this *aha* moment,

*The Buddha wandered the plains of northeastern India for 45 years more, teaching the path or Dharma he had realized in that moment. Around him developed a community ... of monks and, later, nuns, drawn from every tribe and caste, devoted to practicing this path. In approximately 486 BC, at the age of 80, the Buddha died. His last words are said to be...*

*Impermanent are all created things;*

*Strive on with awareness.*

*(<http://webspaceship.edu/cgboer/buddhaintro.html>)*

I can imagine an Englishman saying, "Tally ho!"

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The most recent book I read on Buddhism is *Buddhism Without Beliefs* by Stephen Batchelor. It was an eye-opener. The author put the ideas, at least most of them, into words and phrases I could understand. Much of Buddhism was no longer a mystery. I say, most. A lot of it is still beyond my understanding.

Recently, when I reviewed the notes I had taken when I first read the book, I realized how many Buddhist ideas were UUistic. But then, Unitarian Universalism is based on some core human values. And it draws inspiration and guidance from other religions and spiritual texts and practices, including Buddhism. So it's no surprise there is lots of overlap.

I've already mentioned one example: prajnaparamita — wisdom acquired experientially.

That's an alternative way of stating the first of the Six Sources of our Faith: *Direct Experience*.

Here's another connection.

*(Back jacket)* "What the Buddha taught is not something to *believe* in but something to *do*....it is a practice that we can engage in, regardless of our background or beliefs..."

That's very UUistic: deeds not creeds. It is not so much our beliefs that are important but our actions. Rather than a creed, both Buddhism and UUism have basic values and guidelines for ethical conduct.

UUs have the Seven Purposes and Principles and the Six Sources from which we draw inspiration. Buddhists have the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path, both of which I'll talk about later.

Buddhism, as described by Batchelor, is a culture: *(p20)*

*An internally consistent set of values and practices that creatively animates all aspects of human life.*

That's an *aha* moment!

That sounds UU, doesn't it?

Sounds like we can do both. *"When you come to a fork in the road, take it!"*

----- *dharma* -----

I mentioned *dharma* earlier.

*Dharma refers to the teachings of the Buddha as well as to those aspects of reality and experience with which his teachings are concerned. (p xi)*

Religion is a belief system.

But dharma is a *practice*, "not something to believe in but something to do." *(p 17)*

I like that. It's very UU. It's not about believing, it's about being.

Being, not believing.

Dharma practice is a course of action. Again, sounds like the UUistic deeds, not creeds.

Another *aha* moment!

The author gives an interesting example to explain dharma. He says,

*A smoker may fervently resolve to give up cigarettes, but that does not prevent the tug of longing each time he enters a smoke-filled room. What changes is resolve. ...Dharma practice is founded on resolve. This is not an emotional conversion, [it's not] a devastating realization of the error of our ways, [it's not] a desperate urge to be good, but [it's] an ongoing, heartfelt reflection on priorities, [on] values, and [on] purpose. We need to keep taking stock of our life in an unsentimental, uncomplicated way. (p41)*

Now, that's really UU!  
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Batchelor also talks about ethical integrity. It originates in empathy and requires courage and intelligence. He says,

*Ethical integrity is not moral certainty. A priori certainty about right and wrong is at odds with a changing and unreliable world, where the future lies open, waiting to be born from choices and acts. (p47)*

Ok. That's UU, too!

*"It's like déjà vu all over again." (Yogi Berra)*

Sounds like we can do both. **"When you come to a fork in the road, take it!"**

**-----Rebirth and karma -----**

What about *karma*? It's related to rebirth.

*Karma is a law in Hinduism which maintains that every act done, no matter how insignificant, will eventually return to the doer with equal impact. Good will be returned with good; evil with evil. Since Hindus believe in reincarnation [as do some Buddhists], karma knows no simple birth/death boundaries. If good or evil befalls you, it is because of something you did in this or a previous lifetime. (<http://www.skepdic.com/karma.html>) (emphasis added)*

*The wheel of life, or "samsara", is an ancient symbol that has the same meaning in Buddhism and Hinduism. It ...symbolises the cycle of birth, life, and death. When one revolution of the wheel is completed, life begins again with rebirth. (<http://www.thebigview.com/buddhism/karma.html>)*

It's on the cover of the Order of Service.

Here's a simplistic way to think of karma. A jar with good and bad "stuff" in it. (**Hold up jar**) When I was born, this jar of stuff came with me. If the jar has a lot of bad stuff, then my life will be worse than if I had started out with a jar of lots of good stuff. And to have a better "next life", I must try to get rid of the bad karma and load up on the good karma. "Karma Loading!"

The idea of rebirth is common to many religions. Batchelor says that “*Religions are united not by a belief in God but by belief in the afterlife.*” (p35)

“*Religions are united not by a belief in God but by belief in the afterlife.*” (p35)

In most Western religions, each person has one life and one afterlife. And our actions in this life determine the quality of our after-life.

This is true of many Eastern religions also, including Buddhism and Hinduism. But, there’s more. More lives. Your after-life is actually another life on this earth. Which means you had a *before-life*. So every life has an after-life which is really another life. So every life is really both a before-life and an afterlife. Every life is a pre-life to the life following and an afterlife to the one before.

Yes, it’s confusing. Until you think of it as a continuous cycle of death and rebirth. We die and we are reborn. Continuously.

We die and we are reborn. Christianity talks about this. It’s just that death and rebirth happen only once. And death is literal. Physical. Rebirth can be physical or metaphorical.

So one difference between Western and Eastern religions is one after-life versus many after-lives. And this difference has a big implication.

In Western religions, as I said, you have one life and one after-life. *One* life and *one* after-life. That’s it. This life and the next. You do not get a do-over. No second chance. In Eastern religions, on the other hand, you *do* get a do-over. In fact, you get many do-overs. You do over and you do over. And this is the anguish (the suffering) that the Buddha talks about. “*The aim of life is to attain freedom from the anguished cycle of rebirth*” (p35). And so finally you do over enough times, and you finally get it right. Your jar has only good karma, and it is filled to the brim. You have reached Nirvana. Then you can stop. Whew!

Now that sounds good. I need a do-over. Well, I also need a do-over. (*point to hair*) In fact, I need lots of do-overs. Why? I make mistakes.

Paraphrasing Yogi, “*I made too many wrong mistakes.*” (*Yogi Berra*)

I wish I could do-over those mistakes. Take back those words that were ill-considered.

Quoting Yogi, “*I didn’t really say everything I said.*” (*Yogi Berra*)

I wish I could take back those actions that hurt others in body or spirit. But I cannot. The only do-over is not to do it again in this life. To learn from my mistakes in this life. That’s because I believe my after-life is now. My here-after is now. Not later. There is no

here-after later on. And I cannot go back. I can only try to make up for my mistakes in this here-after, in this life.

Batchelor says (p38)

*Irrespective of our personal survival, the legacy of our thoughts, [our] words, and [our] deeds will continue through the impressions we leave behind in the lives of those we have influenced or touched in any way. ...shifting concern away from a future life and back to the present... demands an ethics of empathy rather than a metaphysics of fear and hope.*

That's UUism. Focus on the here and now.

Another *aha* moment!

So we can do both Buddhism and UUism. *"When you come to a fork in the road, take it!"*

### ----- *The Four Noble Truths* -----

One of my stumbling blocks in studying Buddhism is what is known as the *Four Noble Truths*.

### --- *flip chart* ---

1. *Life is suffering.*
2. *Suffering is due to attachment.*
3. *Attachment can be overcome.*
4. *There is a path for accomplishing this.*

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*Suffering is perhaps the most common translation for the Sanskrit word **dukkha**, which can also be translated as imperfect, [or] stressful, or filled with anguish.*  
<http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/buddhawise.html>

The word Batchelor prefers is anguish. And I like that better. Because I don't see life as being all about suffering. Yes, there is suffering. We have all suffered. Certainly some more than others. But to me, that is not all of life. Life is not *all about* suffering. It's also about joy, about helping others, about accomplishment.

There is a "Bubba" version of this first Nobel Truth. It's from a sermon at Emerson UU in Houston given last summer (*July 26, 2009*). It goes something like this: *Life is hard*.

Now that I can understand. Batchelor says

*Contributing to the anguish is ... the fact that all things are impermanent, including living things like ourselves.*

Furthermore, ...all things are interconnected and interdependent, so that no thing -- including ourselves -- has a separate existence.

(<http://webspaceship.edu/cgboer/buddhawise.html>)

**Another aha moment?** Sound familiar? That's the seventh of our UU Principles: *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

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The second Noble Truth, *Suffering is due to attachment*, means that we cling to life the way it is. We do not want it to change. Batchelor puts it this way.

*I set out on the absurd task of re-ordering the universe to fit **my** agenda. I try to create a perfect situation, one in which I have everything I want and nothing I don't want. I dream of a life in which all imperfections are removed. (pp 68-69, emphasis added)*

The bubba version of the Second Noble Truth might be stated this way. *You've got an ego.*

And then the Third Noble Truth, *Attachment can be overcome*. Bubba says: *Get over yourself.*

And Fourth Noble Truth, *There is a path for accomplishing this*. Bubba says: *Yes! There is a way! You can do it!*

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Batchelor emphasizes that the Four Noble Truths are not propositions to be believed, but rather, challenges to act. That's UU.

### ----- *Eightfold Path* -----

So how do we do it? Well, how do Buddhists do it? They follow the Eight-fold Path.

To paraphrase Yogi, "*When you come to the eight-fold path, take it!*"

It's printed on the back of the announcements in your order of service.

(<http://www.thebigview.com/buddhism/eightfoldpath.html>)

1. Right View
2. Right Intention
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood.
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

And we can do these all at once.

*“When we come to the eight-fold path, we can follow it!” (paraphrasing Yogi)*

*----- Ending -----*

At the beginning of this message, I said I had not seriously followed Buddhism, at least I did not think so.

But now, because of the great overlap I have found with UUism, I realize that I have actually been a follower of Buddhism all along, at least to some extent. I have been practicing Buddhist principles, which have so much in common with UU ideas.

*“When I came to a fork in the road, I took it!” (paraphrasing Yogi)*