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CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

After Buddhism

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If we could go back to the nineteenth century, we would find that most Unitarian and Universalist congregations were not open to the world's religions equally. Rather, they were often among the most **liberal Christian congregations of their time**. Compared to most other Christian traditions, our Unitarian and Universalist forebears did tend to allow congregants more room to question traditional dogma, and there was often more emphasis on following Jesus's *ethics* rather than worshipping him. But within most historically Unitarian or Universalist congregations, it was well into the twentieth-century before Christianity became "one among many" world religions, rather than "the one" most important religion.

And while there are many ways in which our liberal Christian heritage influences us today (and while there is plenty of room within the big tent of Unitarian Universalism to identify as a UU Christian) there is also a sense in which **Unitarian Universalism is one example of what can come "after Christianity."** Likewise, there is a sense in which Ethical Humanism is an example of what can come "*after* Judaism."

While both traditional Judaism and Christianity are also very much still around, I have been thinking recently about the various trajectories that religious traditions can take, while reading the Buddhist teacher and scholar Stephen Batchelor's latest book **After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age**. In the spirit of full disclosure, it's a fairly academic book, published by Yale University Press. So although there is a lot I appreciate about

Batchelor's approach, be forewarned that the book is not the most accessible for newcomers to Buddhism.

From a more positive light, Batchelor's new book is a synthesis of the perspective he has been working out through more than thirty years of Buddhist scholarship (ix). In 1983, he published his first book, *Alone With Others: An Existential Approach to Buddhism*. During the intervening three decades some of his other books include *The Faith to Doubt: Glimpses of Buddhist Uncertainty*, *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*, and *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*. The driving question he has carried through his more than three decades of publications has been **"What does it mean to practice the dharma of the Buddha in the context of modernity?"** (ix).

And just as a modern, secular, Enlightenment perspective once led Christians on a Quest for the Historical Jesus, so too a modern, secular, Enlightenment perspective has led Batchelor and others on a Quest for the Historical Buddha.

Buddha, of course, is not the birth name of a historical figure. Just as Christ is not Jesus's last name (it's a title meaning "anointed one") and Gandhi's real name is Mohandas not Mahatma (a title meaning "Great Soul"), so too Buddha is a title meaning "Awakened One." **The historical Buddha's name was Siddhartha Gautama, who lived in ancient India c. 480 - c. 400 BCE** (x). One aspect of the Quest for the Historical Buddha is seeking to remove the accretions of dogma and tradition that have evolved over the years to uncover the actual teachings of the historical Buddha (ix).

So what do you find if you go back to the earliest Buddhist texts such as the Pali Canon? Similar to early Christianity, you find some surprisingly egalitarian passages—that all people, men or women, lay or ordained, are all equal. I am not trying to say that either early Buddhism or early Christianity correspond precisely to twenty-first century understandings of gender as a social construction, but in both cases **some of the most patriarchal passages seemed to have been added after the founder's death by followers who became orthodox hardliners** (12-13).

All that being said, here's the much more radical implication that can follow from the question "What does it mean to practice the dharma of the Buddha in the context of modernity?" It can mean that although one continues to be interested in the quest for discovering what the

historical Buddha actually said and did, one may decide that *even if archeologists somehow discovered tomorrow that Siddhartha Gautama was an unrepentant male chauvinist, one would maintain a commitment to gender equality* in one's own contemporary Buddhist practice.

In my own theologically conservative congregation of childhood, I was taught that we should seek to restore the norms of the early church to today's world. In that paradigm, the Bible was seen as the highest authority, and we were taught to reform the world to be in line with so-called "biblical norms." In seminary, I learned a more balanced approach: that one should preach with the Bible in one hand and *The New York Times* in the other hand. Today, as a Unitarian Universalist, my bias is more in the opposite direction of my childhood congregation: that the wisdom of the world's religions should be critically interpreted through reason, science, and personal experience. This perspective may seem basic, but if an orthodox community has formed you, it can be **incredibly liberating to affirm that reason, science, and experience are equal to (or more important than) religious hierarchy, community, or tradition.**

Along those lines, Batchelor writes:

Just as the term "Tibetan Buddhism" describes the kind of dharma that evolved in Tibet, so, in its broadest sense, would "Secular Buddhism" describe the kind of dharma that is evolving in this secular age. And although many modern Asians are Buddhists who find themselves becoming secularized, I am a secular European finding out what it means to become a Buddhist. We might meet each other on the road, but we are heading in opposite directions. Just as their Buddhism is being challenged by secularity, so my secularity is being challenged by Buddhism. My concern, therefore, is as much about imagining a Buddhist secularity as about imagining a secular Buddhism. We have seen what can happen to Buddhism when it becomes secularized [what is sometimes called "McMindfulness"], but **what would happen to a secular perspective inflected by the principles and values of the dharma.?** (19-20)

As someone who escaped the dogmas of Christian orthodoxy (but who is still shaped by Jesus's teaching and ethics in many positive ways that I am grateful for), I have found myself wary of

Buddhist orthodoxy and dogma even as I have been increasingly drawn to Buddhist wisdom, ethics, and practice.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Having spent many years embroiled in research and debate regarding various theologies about what the claims around Jesus' death and resurrection mean, I came to find that such theological debates were at most a side issue for the historical Jesus. Similarly, when I first started exploring the Buddhist tradition in college, I at first had a lot of concerns that in order to fully engage with Buddhism, I had to start believing in metaphysical doctrines such as reincarnation and karma. Over time, I have also come to find that those debates were also not central for Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha (294-296). Just as Jesus of Nazareth cared less about theological debates and more about justice, mercy, and building a beloved community, so too Siddhartha Gautama cared less about metaphysics and more about **“embracing the suffering of the world, letting go of reactivity, and experiencing that still, clear center from which we respond to the world in ways no longer determined by self-interest alone”** (305-306).

Allow me to be clear that my point is not to dissuade you from exploring the debates around atonement and resurrection or reincarnation and karma if they are compelling to you. Rather, I'm inviting you to consider that these metaphysical and theological debates are *optional*, not central, to the earliest layers of the Buddhist and Christian traditions, especially from the perspective of Siddhartha and Jesus, who—as we UU's sometimes say—cared more about *deeds* than creeds.

Relatedly, consider the following insight from Batchelor: the core teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, “no longer tied to the religious dogmas and institutions of Asian Buddhism....might help encourage the dawning of a culture of awakening, **which may or may not call itself ‘Buddhist.’**” I've been reflecting on this perspective a lot recently since the practice community that I have been a part of the last few years has recently shifted its name from “Buddhist Geeks” to “Meditate.io.” Buddhist Geeks lasted from 2006 to 2016, and included a popular podcast that was downloaded more than 10 million times. A central question for Buddhist Geeks was **“How can we serve the convergence of Buddhism with rapidly evolving technology and an increasingly global culture?”** I benefited a lot from being part of exploring that question. But

similar to Stephen Batchelor’s perspective in *After Buddhism*, the creators of Buddhist Geeks chose to drop the name “Buddhist” for their new incarnation of meditate.io. While still influenced by and interested in the Buddhist tradition, the focus is less theoretical and more *pragmatic*: how to meditate and teach meditation in our twenty-first century world.

Now, there’s a lot more to say about all of that, and certainly there are many other significant ways—both contemporary and ancient—of exploring the Buddhist tradition in today’s world. But I wanted to share a little of how my own practice and perspective is evolving. A related part of what I’ve learned about myself is that **it is easier for me to read a book about Buddhism or talk about Buddhism than it is to practice Buddhism.** (That dynamic is something called seeking “salvation by bibliography.”) And although I have benefited immensely from studying the Buddhist tradition—and it has helped me avoid some of the pitfalls meditators can encounter—I am seeking a balance these days between *secondhand* study or talk about Buddhism and cultivating *firsthand* meditation experiences. In that spirit, I would like to invite you to experience a [guided meditation](#) that is lightly adapted from one developed from a secular perspective for the [Buddhify](#) smartphone app by my meditation teacher Vincent Horn:

If you are comfortable doing so, I invite you to take a moment to relax your body, relax your mind, and close your eyes. As you relax, let your attention settle on the inner movie theater of your mind, the screen of your imagination.

How we experience the universe affects how we experience ourselves. And I would like to invite us to explore two ways of perceiving the observable universe.

The first way will be as *ourselves arising within the cosmos*. The second way is as *all conscious experience arising within our awareness*. By meditating in this way, we gain a deeper familiarity with two of the most core ways of knowing reality. One from the Western-scientific tradition and the other from the Eastern-contemplative traditions.

We'll begin with the universe you probably know best: the physical one. Picture yourself in this room that we are in just as it is. Imagine the setting and layout and feel yourself inhabiting this place. Now allow the picture in your mind to expand to include Frederick County, perhaps as an aerial shot. See how much space you take up in this view, how much smaller you are.

Now expand your imagination even further to the larger region and then to the larger expanse of the continent of North America. Notice where you are in this picture.

Now we're going to allow the aerial shot to go all the way into space. Imagine seeing the Earth from the perspective of the International Space Station. See where you are on the planet. Notice how vast the Earth is—this big, blue marble.

Now expand even further out moving away from the Sun, past Mars, Jupiter and the rest of the planets in our solar system. See the Sun shrinking into a smaller dot and the Earth starting to vanish from sight. Take in the whole system from the very edges of our solar system, vast open space and us, sitting on Planet Earth not even visible now, hurtling around our small Sun.

Now allow your mind's eye to zoom out even further moving much faster than the speed of light and go back all the way to the point where you are taking in the whole of our Milky Way galaxy. Take in the 300 billion or so points of light that make up the luminous core and spiraling arms of the Milky Way. Notice where the Sun is located, nearly halfway between the core and the outer arms of the galaxy in the rural backwaters of the Milky Way. How much space do you take up at this scale?

Continue zooming out, going far enough back to take in the Virgo super-cluster, a grouping of tens of thousands of galaxies including our own Milky Way. Notice the self-similar pattern of organization even at this scale; how shining points of matter and light come together with vast distances of space in between.

Continue zooming out further and further, watching innumerable galaxies stream by, going all the way to the point where you can see the entire observable universe. Take in all of the known universe, which the latest research tell us contains more than two trillion galaxies. Notice how inconceivably small you are from this vantage point. What does this vantage point bring up for you? Awe? Fear? Confusion? Wonder? Notice how seeing yourself as a tiny part of the vast cosmos changes your experience.

Now during this whole thought experiment, every single thing we've imagined has been in your mind. You didn't physically travel to the outer edges of space. You imagined your way through a series of thoughts. Notice that as you sit here, not only are *thoughts* arising in your awareness but so is every other aspect of your experience: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, the sensations of your body, all wash through your experience. Waves of thought and emotion course through this field of sensory experience—arising, persisting for a while, then changing. Notice how not a single thing arises outside of your experience. All of this is happening in your awareness.

From this vantage point, every single thing we have thought, felt or known has arisen *within this human experience of ours*. See what it's like to take in the entire observable universe as what's currently arising in and as your awareness. Anything you can imagine as being outside of it, including the vast magnitudes of space, arises as a thought *within* this experience. We are the universe knowing itself.

Now, reflecting back on the meditation, take note of what it was like to imagine yourself as a small part of the vast physical universe. How did that contrast with experiencing the whole of the universe as that which is arising in your experience right now? How can these two different perspectives help illuminate more of who we are and the universe we inhabit? As we prepare to end this meditation, see if you can feel what it's like to be able to toggle between these two modes of experiencing.