

“Living Buddha/Living Christ”
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UU Congregation of Danbury

Yesterday I heard an interview with Emma González, a Parkland survivor and now activist in the movement for gun law reform. She was among the students who organized the “March for Our Lives” two weeks ago that drew hundreds of thousands of demonstrators all over the country. Emma gained national recognition with her very moving remembrance of her deceased friends at the “March.” Like others, even in her grief, Emma is still speaking out and being given wide exposure in the media.

These students are impressive in both their presence and their ability to articulate their heartfelt message simply and clearly. They have initiated a movement that harkens back to the Civil Rights and Peace movements, and more recently to the Black Lives Matter movement. In this week when we recalled Martin Luther King’s death 50 years ago, it feels as if his spirit is still at work in the minds and hearts of these young people who are leading us in the wake of too many school shootings, too many neighborhood shootings, too many dead children, youth, and young adults.

Present at the marches and demonstrations are Christians, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Quakers, Unitarian Universalists and people of other faiths, and people of no particular faith. These people came together with the youth to thwart a common enemy: gun violence. In the speeches and interviews, we hear voices from the past urging a new generation toward peace – peace in their schools, peace in their country, and peace in their hearts.

Amid all the gun violence and the hatred being tweeted in our country today, we need reminders of people who deliver a different message. Martin Luther King’s 9 year old granddaughter – Yolanda Renee King – recalled her grandfather’s dream with one of her own: “I have a dream (she said) that enough is enough, and that this should be a gun-free world,” she told the captivated sea of protesters at the March for Our Lives.

Among the many sources for inspiration we Unitarian Universalists draw from are the “words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. has long been such a prophetic voice for me. Inspired by the teachings of Jesus, Dr. King aroused a nation’s conscience about the inequality people of color and poor people faced – and continue to face -- in this “land of the free.” He did not do this alone.

“In 1966, Dr. King released a joint statement with Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh for the International Committee of Conscience on Vietnam. This statement acknowledged that the self-sacrificing Vietnamese Buddhists and the Christian and Muslim civil rights activists in America faced a common enemy.. ‘discrimination, dictatorship, greed, hatred and violence...’” (cited by Lewis Baldwin, *In a Single Garment of Destiny*)

Martin Luther King's influence was fostered by the prophetic voices of Jesus and Buddha among others. It is those voices we are hearing today from our young activists. It makes me believe that Buddha and Jesus and Martin Luther King – are still living in the world today.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, writes of the *Living Buddha, Living Christ*:

There is a person whose appearance on earth is for the well-being and happiness of all. Who is that person? ... For Buddhists, that person is the Buddha. For Christians, that person is Jesus Christ. (Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, pp. 58-59)

Jesus was very clear about the need to practice the teachings and to do so in community. He told His disciples to be the light of the world. For a Buddhist, that means mindfulness. The Buddha said that we must each be our own torch. (Hanh, p. 70)

The best way a Buddhist can keep the teachings of the Buddha alive is to live mindfully in the way the Buddha and his community lived. For Christians the way to make the Holy Spirit truly present... is to practice thoroughly what Jesus lived and taught. It is not only true that Christians need Jesus, but Jesus needs Christians also for His energy to continue in this world. (Hanh, p. 73)

To allow for the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives “is not just for Jesus alone; it is for all of us.” Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that “mindfulness is very much like the Holy Spirit. Both are agents of healing.” (Hanh, p. 14)

From a Buddhist perspective, who is not the son or daughter of God? Sitting beneath the Bodhi tree, many wonderful, holy seeds within the Buddha blossomed forth. He was human, but at the same time, he became an expression of the highest spirit of humanity. *When we are in touch with the highest spirit in ourselves, we too are a Buddha, filled with the Holy Spirit, and we become very tolerant, very open, very deep, and very understanding.* (Hanh, pp. 38-39)

Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that we must look deeply within ourselves as part of a spiritual community if we are to know how to live in the world today.

We often think of peace as the absence of war, (he writes) that if the powerful countries would reduce their weapons arsenals, we could have peace. But if we look deeply into the weapons, we see our own minds – our prejudices, fears, and ignorance. Even if we transport all the weapons to the moon, the roots of violence and the roots of the weapons are still here, in our hearts and minds, and sooner or later we will make new weapons. To work for peace is to uproot violence from ourselves and from the hearts of men and women. To... give millions of men and women the opportunity to practice killing day and night in their hearts, is to plant millions of seeds of violence, anger, frustration, and fear that will be passed on for generations to come. (Hanh, p. 76-77, adapted)

Jesus instructed us:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you... -- Luke 6:27 (*Jesus and Buddha The Parallel Sayings*, edited by Marcus Borg, p. 18)

Buddha taught:

Hatreds do not ever cease in this world by hating, but by love; this is an eternal truth... -
- Dhammapada 1.5 (Borg, p. 19)

And more recently Martin Luther King said:

When I speak of love, I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality.

Three men, of three different eras, each with essentially the same message. Each started a religious movement that transformed peoples' lives. The central message from each was that we love one another. Each professed that non-violence was necessary to our way of life if there is to be peace in the world. Each man lived what he believed, and believed what he lived. Their faith is what distinguished them from other people of their day.

For Buddhists, faith means confidence in our and others' abilities to wake up to our deepest capacity of loving and understanding. For Christians, faith means trust in God, the One who represents love, understanding, dignity, and truth. When we are still, looking deeply, and touching the source of our true wisdom, we touch the living Buddha and the living Christ in ourselves and in each person we meet. (Hanh, p. 12, adapted)

New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, offers a progressive interpretation to the teachings of Jesus and Buddha. He suggests that

They...were (both) teachers of the way less traveled... The way of the Buddha is enshrined in the four noble truths of Buddhism... according to the book of Acts, the earliest name for the Jesus movement was 'the Way.'" (Borg, p. viii, adapted)

Jesus and Buddha both spoke about a new way of seeing. Both men "sought to bring about in their hearers a radical perceptual shift – a new way of seeing life." (Borg, p. ix) The process of transformation for both was about letting go. Buddha invited his followers to let go of greed and suffering. Jesus invited his followers to become like children and "relinquish one's worldly importance." (Borg, p. ix) The transformational process of letting go leads people to become more compassionate. "The Buddha is often called 'the compassionate one...'" To follow the way of Jesus is to become "compassionate, as God is compassionate." (Borg, p. x)

For all their similarities, Jesus and Buddha conducted themselves in the world in two very different ways. Marcus Borg notes that, "in addition to being a wisdom teacher and healer, Jesus was a social prophet. He challenged the domination system of his day and its ruling elites, and

affirmed an alternative social vision.” Borg speculates that this might account for the comparatively brief life span of Jesus. It is generally accepted that Jesus’ public ministry occurred over a period of three or four years, while Buddha taught for nearly fifty years. It is doubtful that Jesus would have been executed “had (he) been simply a wisdom teacher and healer.” (Borg, p. xii)

The men were born into very different social classes. “The Buddha was born into a wealthy ruling class, Jesus into an oppressed peasant class.” Jesus’ passion for justice may have come from “the experience of injustice.” It’s also likely that Jesus was influenced by the tradition of the prophets of ancient Israel. (Borg, p. xii) His cultural and religious experience shaped Jesus’ theology as well. The concept of God is central to Christianity. Buddhists reject the notion of a personal god – “that is, God as a supernatural being separate from the universe.” (Borg, p. xiv) Jesus and Buddha are perceived differently within their own religious folds. Jesus is viewed as God, but Buddhists maintain the total humanity of the Buddha. “Buddhists regard the Buddha as a teacher and a brother, not as a god.” (Hanh, p. 40)

However, both Jesus and Buddha seem to have experienced a sacred transformation in their perceptions.

both ... had formative enlightenment experiences (that gave them a new way of seeing). From this new way of seeing flowed their wisdom teaching about the way... The similarities of their wisdom teaching flow out of the similarity of their religious experience... (Borg, p. xv adapted)

As a result of these religious experiences, both Buddhism and Christianity are “a response to the experience of the sacred.” (Borg, p. xvi)

This is my commandment, (Jesus said) that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

– *John 15:12-13* (Borg, p. 25)

(And Buddha instructed:) Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings. Let your thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world. – *Sutta Nipata* 149-150 (Borg, p. 25)

Both Christianity and Buddhism view the highest form of prayer as the practice of right living. Prayer is an active way of life that embraces Jesus’ teaching to love your enemy. He believes that if we are to “work together for peace and social justice, we do not need to take sides.

When we take sides, we misunderstand the will of God... We have to find the real causes for social injustice... We will ask, ‘Why has the situation of these people remained like that...’ When we practice looking deeply, we have the insight into what to do and what not to do for the situation to change. Everything depends on our way of looking... Everything depends on our understanding of the whole situation.” (Hanh, pp. 80-81)

Looking deeply together is the main task of a religious community. (Hanh, p. 77 adapted)

When the religious community manifests understanding, tolerance, and loving-kindness, Jesus is there... the living Buddha who teaches love and compassion..." is manifested by the way we (choose to) live (Hanh, p. 57 adapted)

To look deeply within ourselves is to pray with all our heart. "When you pray with all your heart ...you can see things deeply, understand deeply, and love deeply." (Hanh, p. 182)

As Unitarian Universalists, we are in alignment with Buddhism which sees the birth of a child as no "less than the birth of a Buddha. We... are a Buddha-to-be, and we continue to be born every minute." (Hanh, p. 46)

When we are in touch with the highest spirit in ourselves, we too are a Buddha, filled with the Holy Spirit, and we become very tolerant, very open, very deep, and very understanding. (Hanh, p. 39)

Jesus taught us to be the light of the world. Buddha instructed us to:

Be... lamps unto yourselves... (and)

hold to the truth within yourselves as to the only lamp.

Both men taught us how to live in the world as it is, and to invite its transformation into our lives. When Martin Luther King looked deeply within himself, what he saw led him to transform a nation with his faith and practice of non-violence. He made of his life a prayer.

When we pray with all our heart, the Holy Spirit is within us. That Spirit is mindfulness to being in the world. When mindfulness is present, the Buddha and the Holy Spirit are already there.

We must be mindful of what lies deep within us. Let it touch the highest spirit in ourselves; so that we, too, are a Buddha filled with the Holy Spirit. May we learn a new way of seeing life and be transformed – becoming the light of the world – the torch – as Jesus and Buddha were. May we become very tolerant, very open, very deep, and very understanding. (Hanh, pp. 38-39) And, may we come to know peace in our schools, peace in our country, and peace in our hearts.