

The Buddhist Path

November 22, 2013

Overview

This is a position paper for the purpose of explaining the purpose of the Waltham Buddhist Meditation Group, what we practice, what we teach, and the guidelines for what does and what does not come within the auspices of the group. Everyone who wishes to do so is invited to practice with us for whatever benefit it is to them, but you are also entitled to know who we are, and the view and intention of the leaders of the group.

First Parish in Waltham, a Unitarian Universalist Congregation has welcomed this meditation group and provided it with hospitality and a meeting space. We are grateful for this. UU Churches have a well-deserved reputation for their inclusive attitude toward all genuine spiritual practices and for including them in their educational and practice programs.

This paper is entitled *The Buddhist Path* because we are a *Buddhist* Group and we see Buddhist practice as a *path* of spiritual transformation. The remainder of this paper expands this view.

The Buddhist View – Ground, Path and Fruition

In order to talk about the path, we need a broader view. Sometimes the path seems like a broad trail going through the forest. There are trees on both sides, and we cannot always see where it is going. At times, we may arrive at a point where there is a vast perspective and we see lots of open sky and distant mountains. Sometimes there are swamps and obstacles, sometimes we may feel we are lost and wandering around, and cannot even remember why we took this path to begin with. Other times, we might arrive at a resting place with a lovely prospect, picnic tables, a campfire and a shelter, all of which feels so comfortable that we do not want to move on. So it is helpful to have an overall view of where we are going. In Buddhist language, the big picture is often discussed under the topics of *ground*, *path* and *fruition*.

By **ground**, we mean that which is ultimately real. The Buddhist view is that the world we live in, our bodies, our minds, our emotions, that which we perceive as outside of ourselves, other people and other living things are all ultimately good, pure, sacred, energized, colorful and workable. These are only words used to point to a realization that can only be experienced. However there is a rich tradition of analogies to help us make the leap from words to experience.

Our original nature is said to be like a beautiful gold statue of the Buddha which has become covered with filth and mud. By removing the accumulated filth and cleaning the statue, its genuine nature appears spontaneously and without effort. All the qualities we most admire and want in ourselves such as courage, compassion, strength and intelligence are already within us and do not need to be imported by education or by being zapped by some god or charismatic leader. They are already there. All we have to do is to unravel and clean up the accumulated layers of anger, lust, pride, envy, greed and sloth which are not our original nature; rather they are long standing habits and mental patterns which we can transform.

Another traditional image is of a poor person living in a hut, a hovel with a dirt floor. Unknown to this person, there is an immense treasure buried beneath the hut, and all that is required to discover it is the work of digging and uncovering it. The only question is, will we unearth and utilize the treasure of unlimited energy, insight, intelligence, courage, compassion and joy already within us, or will we die with much of it unused because we have not trained in uncovering it and making it manifest.

The ground of reality is not an idea, religious belief or philosophical theory. It is the bedrock nature of our mind beyond description but not beyond experience. Our view of the ground is the fundamental orientation that energizes our lives. However there are plenty of alternative views ready to capture our minds:

For example, we could be experiencing our basic nature as sinful, and it is only through faith in a savior that seems to be outside of ourselves that any salvation is possible. Or we could be subjects of an angry and jealous God, who must be constantly appeased by our devotion to him or he will bring down further disasters on our heads.

Alternatively, we could see a universe of basic particles banging into each other, and life and intelligence as epiphenomena of a transient nature that have evolved by accident and will shortly dissolve and so are ultimately meaningless.

Or we could emulate the ancient Greek stoics who did not see mortal human life as a particularly good deal, but since this is the only life we have, we should live it well and behave honorably and with courage.

If we look at ourselves honestly, we are likely to find some mixture of all of the above, and much of it unexamined, because we have been too busy, because it is too painful for us to look at or because our minds are too confused to hold such basic issues in sharp focus. We may find a wall of fear warning us that such an examination is disruptive and dangerous. That fear may be subliminal and manifest as anger, resentment, distraction, indulgence, or fatigue.

The Buddhist **path** is the process of training by which we uncover our original nature. There are many different practices or skillful means found in the various schools of Buddhist training. The tradition is very rich. Many practices have been taught including formless meditation, mantras, visualizations and yogic exercises. There is a rich literature of texts and books in many languages. Most importantly, there is an unbroken lineage of teacher to student relations since ancient times, which has kept the practices of the path vibrant, alive and authentic even as they evolve to meet the needs of practitioners of a particular time, place and culture.

Fruition means that as a result of following the path, our obstacles and defilements have been cleansed and transmuted, and we have awakened to our basic human birthright.

Now pain and pleasure alike have become
Ornaments which it is pleasant to wear

...

All apparent phenomena are the play of the mind.
All qualities are complete within the mind.

I awaken into the wisdom with which I was born
And compassionate energy arises without pretense.¹

Is this level of realization actually possible and available to us ordinary people? It would be a mistake to generate naïve belief in awakened mind only because it seems so wonderful and we would like it to be true. However we can begin to explore the possibility. This is to a certain extent a matter of honest, inward contemplation. We can also learn about the lives of great teachers of the past and present, and even better, we can take the effort to visit and meet some of them who travel and sometimes visit New England. When we meet such a teacher, we may see a person free from anxiety and fear, completely relaxed but with unlimited energy, alert and able to pay attention to any detail, and totally devoted to the welfare of others. If this is possible, why should we not aspire to be like that too?

Entering the Buddhist Path

Grant your blessings so that my mind may be one with the dharma.
Grant your blessings so that dharma may progress along the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path may clarify confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion may dawn as wisdom.²

The Buddhist path is one of self-discovery, and is not about developing a belief system. Meditation practice is an important component of the path, as is study, and bringing the practice into one's life situations.

We encourage new students to have a regular meditation practice, even if it is for only a few minutes a day. This develops stability of mind or staying power, and makes everything else possible including being able to listen to, read and understand the teachings, as well as bringing the mindfulness of meditation into daily life. In addition to group meditation instruction, our teachers are available for free private meditation instruction on request.

There are several ceremonial gateways on the path, and the first and most basic one is the *Refuge Vow*. It is the point at which one makes the public commitment to follow the Buddhist path. There is a time to experiment with many practices and traditions, and the Buddhist path may or not be the right choice for you. But as with learning a musical instrument, no proficiency is gained unless you pick one and stay with it. Such a commitment should be made only after careful consideration and upon having a clear intention. It is perfectly acceptable never to formally commit to the Buddhist path.

One takes refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The *Buddha* is a human like us who has developed to the point of realizing his own nature, so we can do that too if we really

¹ *The Sadhana of Mahamudra* by Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche

² *The Four Dharmas of Gampopa*. Gampopa, 1079–1153 AD, was an important lineage holder of the Kargyü school of Tibetan Buddhism.

want to commit to it. The Buddha is not a god or someone to be worshipped. The *Dharma* is the teachings, written and oral, which are for us to explore, rather than being offered as dogma to be believed. The *Sangha* are the fellow travelers on the path who encourage us and help us to stay honest.

As commitment, understanding and joy deepen, we start to realize that our problems and self-limitations are not really that big a deal, and that our practice is really about being of benefit to others— loved ones, family, friends, community, enemies, the whole world, as far as our mind has the courage to leap. At this point, one may take the second vow, the *Bodhisattva Vow*. We vow that our practice results and our life generally are not just for ourselves but are now offered for the benefit others. Dharma in the greater sense of *that which is real* is the foundation of our lives, and we are no longer operating from a small center of personal concerns.

Conclusion – Our Buddhist Meditation Group at First Parish Waltham

We always begin with shamatha because stabilizing the mind, holding our seat, and returning to our focus are the essential prerequisite to doing anything else. We have recently begun to introduce another practice called *tonglen* or exchanging oneself and other which is a practice to develop compassion, and we will continue to practice this.

Starting in February, 2014, we meet every Thursday at 7:00 PM. This simplifies the schedule, make it easy to remember, and allow people who have conflicting appointments on some Thursday's more opportunities to be present.

At the same time, we have introduced a program of study. We have done this before in other places, but finding a format that works for this group is something we are still investigating, and your input will be appreciated. Live talks in front of a group have worked well in the past, but there also needs to be a web component, possibly including a blog, so that people who have missed a class can also participate.

The first study module we plan to present is training in compassion, which goes with the practice of *tonglen*. After that, we will most likely be introducing some basic Buddhist teachings such as the Four Noble Truths and Buddhist Psychology.

So we already have the beginnings of an experience of path. We intend to take it further, but this requires building the group, and increasing the energy level. Your ideas are most welcome, and if this brief discussion has created more questions than answers, that is what we most enjoy. What we need now is for some sort of blog or other forum to create a discussion, and a better web presence which we are working on.