

Mahayana Buddhism and Unitarianism

Address given by Simon Ramsay on 24 January 2016

There are religious communities that have an outlook that can be aligned with our open way of perceiving spirituality and our own spiritual path. Some paths of what is known as Mahayana Buddhism fall within this category. For the sake of filling in the some background knowledge, I will tell you the story of the Buddha. It begins as a story about a prince; his name was Siddhartha.

Now, picture in your mind's eye a prince living in India about six hundred years ago in a beautiful palace. As he was a prince, everything was provided for him. Nothing in his life was difficult. His father, the king, was incredibly protective over his son and in his desire to protect Siddhartha he made him stay within the confines of the palace.

As you may imagine this was okay at first, as Prince Siddhartha had every enjoyable aspect of life at his disposal: lovely food, doing sport and reading. But soon he came to realize that there was something stopping him going outside the palace walls on the wishes of his father. And you know what it is like when somebody says: 'Don't look at that!' or 'Don't do this!' There is a little bit of something in all of us that wants to do it just a little bit!

Well that is certainly the case with me anyway!

One day Prince Siddhartha managed to sneak out of the walls of the palace and for the first time he saw people who were sick, people who were poor, people who were hungry and suffering all kinds of diseases. You can imagine how shocking this was to an adult who had never experienced these things before.

So, he made a plan to escape the palace. He vowed to himself that he would find the cause of suffering – a remedy to the suffering that all humanity experiences.

One night, as the palace slept, he managed to escape.

In searching for a place to begin his spiritual journey, Prince Siddhartha came across some holy men by the River Ganges; they had dedicated their lives to yoga. Now, these austere practices involved eating very little, doing lots and lots of yoga – lots of difficult things that

we would never normally do voluntarily. For five years he engaged with these practices but still without finding the cause of suffering and how to alleviate it – even though he had done these spiritual practices he was no closer to his goal. And he sat, perplexed and tired, watching a man in a boat tuning a sitar (for those don't know, a sitar is like a big Indian guitar). Then Siddhartha realized while watching him that if the strings are too tight they will snap and if the strings are too loose they won't make a sound. He realized at that moment that there had to be a Middle Way in spirituality, and with this thought he nourished his body once again, sat under the Bodhi Tree and meditated. It was at this point Prince Siddhartha became the Buddha, which means 'the enlightened one'.

So now we know the basic story of how Prince Siddhartha became the Buddha.

We needed to the basic story of the Buddha so I could talk today about Mahayana Buddhism. There are two main schools within Buddhism: Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism. Hinayana means 'the little raft' and Mahayana Buddhism means 'the great raft'.

The 'little raft' is a school of Buddhism that emerged along the lines of: if one is incarnated into a body in this life and becomes a monk, one has reached the pinnacle of human existence, because it was thought that being a monk was the only way that one could become enlightened .

In Mahayana Buddhism, it was believed that there is no level of life that prohibits one from being enlightened – at the heart of this theory is that enlightenment is available and open to every person; it was a universal potentiality. Everybody, with discernment and concentration, could find their own spiritual depth. It was possible for everyone to find a way to stop their own suffering. The 'little raft' and the 'big raft'. The 'little raft' opened enlightenment to a few and the 'big raft' opened enlightenment to all.

Mahayana Buddhism believes at its heart that there is an element of our being that is fundamentally good and only needs to be uncovered; this is called Buddha-nature. Here lies a clue and the reason why I am concentrating on Mahayana Buddhism rather than Hinayana Buddhism today. Unitarians have traditionally believed the same thing: that in essence humans are fundamentally good, not fundamentally flawed, and we have the right to trust our own discernment in our spiritual path.

One of the thoughts in traditional Christianity Unitarianism has not agreed with is the concept of Original Sin. We are not all born into an eternal darkness from which we can only be

saved by the grace of God. We believe that we humans are born good and, depending upon how we were raised, we are free to strive toward spiritual depth, and that those strivings would eventually lead us to a place of peace and understanding.

Once, when I was at university in Bath, I had an experience of participant observation in a ‘Hinayanan’ or ‘Theravadan’ Buddhist monastery. I have to say from the outset that everybody – monks and laity alike – were lovely people and made me feel most welcome. I am not saying that Hinayana Buddhists are bad people – they are certainly not! They were really, really lovely, and I spent some quite considerable time with them in a place called Petersfield. It was quite an arduous time – I wasn’t allowed to eat after twelve o’clock, which, if you know me, was an ordeal in itself. I got woken up at four o’clock in the morning by the sound of gongs to go down into the shrine room and meditate. Whilst I was there I became friends with a novice monk named Isramuni – translated, it means the ‘full moon’. One early morning we arose for meditation. So picture in your minds a long room with a huge golden Buddha at one end. Along the length of one wall sat monks and the other sat the nuns. On this particular morning the Head Monk, the abbot, couldn’t lead the Pali chanting that day, and so the assistant abbot took his place. The Pali chanting was a traditional form of chant and response. The assistant monk had a very nasal voice, and Isramuni began laughing, and before much time had passed everyone in the shrine room with us was laughing – and so it goes to show that, even though it was quite a strict place, there was a lot of joy and there was a lot of laughter there.

And it was about this same time that I also had an experience of Mahayana Buddhism. I used to go to a friend’s house, knock on his door, go in, and we would have some sort of coffee ceremony – not a tea ceremony, but a coffee ceremony – where we would take time and do everything properly, and once the coffee had been made then sit, drink and talk about Mahayana Buddhism. This friend was particularly fond of a man named Nichiren. Nichiren was a Buddhist who believed that you didn’t need to be a monk to find enlightenment. Enlightenment was, to his mind, available to ‘householders’. And so even those people who are leading normal lives could still find spiritual fulfilment.

Again, this is quite similar to our movement. We believe that we find our own way ... It is not dependent upon one’s social status, it is not dependent upon one’s sexual orientation, it is not dependent upon one’s political affiliations. It is dependent upon one making the correct spiritual decisions and following one’s own path diligently towards the truth.

Nichiren was the main person to move to emphasis of Buddhism to be more encompassing and available to all. Within his form of 'Mahayana' Buddhism, the 'big raft' became potentially so big that the whole of humanity could sit on it; no one was barred from enlightenment. In this school of thought there is also the theory of the Bodhisattva. I am sure that many of you know what a Bodhisattva is, but I will tell you just in case you don't! A Bodhisattva is somebody who treads a spiritual path, reaches the point of enlightenment and, rather than taking that step into Nirvana, decides to turn back and help others find their way. This theory has compassion at its heart. A Bodhisattva will reach the point of enlightenment, turn round, then go back, pile everyone on the raft and then move them all towards enlightenment. Central to this theory is an understanding that we are all connected. As such, it is no good if I am saved and you are not; or it is no good if I am enlightened and you are not enlightened. We all must strive together to reach the heights that we couldn't reach by striving on our own.

I think this is similar to our Unitarian message as well; in our togetherness in community we are there, in community, hopefully to support one another up as we strive to go deeper. If any of you have reached the point of enlightenment, please don't step over that threshold into Nirvana: come back to the rest of us, because in one way or another we all need help. We are there to help each other, and the world that needs our liberal message, so in essence we have our own 'big raft'; no one is excluded from finding depth and meaning. We have, at the centre of our religious life together, a freedom, an openness that we can move towards a greater spiritual understanding, a journey which is best travelled in the company of others or in community together.

To this extent the paths of Mahayana Buddhism and Unitarianism seem to be similar. As Unitarians we tend to move away from more exclusivist points of view – the outlooks in life that include the thoughts that any one individual has *the* Truth. We tend to move away as Unitarians from this exclusivist point of view, which is 'I have got the Truth'. Our truth, if we do find it, is always going to be with a lower case t and never with a capital T, because we recognize that all humans are partial creatures, and therefore our truth is going to be *our* truth not *the* Truth or, as the Tao te Ching, says: 'The truth that can be named is not the truth' or 'That which can be told is not the truth.'

As Unitarians we accept that each person has had their own experience, and that we don't perceive life in the same way, but each of us has our own experiences. Our experiences shape

who we are – but in Unitarianism we unpack the stories of our life in freedom. We are free to unveil the deepest and abiding aspect of our being (our Buddha-nature) and in community with one another bring that to the fore. I will be talking about how we might be able to do this in services to come, when we talk about spiritual practice and things like that.

As a movement we tend, like most schools of Mahayana Buddhism, to be more inclusivist in our outlook in life. We tend to be more of a mind that says: ‘I have got something that I feel is wonderful and I would like to share it with you because my approach may be of use to you in your journey.’ Our approach includes everyone – it doesn’t exclude anyone because we recognize that other spiritual paths are also valid. Ideally, religion should be there not to bind us, not to put pressure on us, not to cause trouble, but ultimately to liberate us, ultimately to shine a light on the understanding of our experiences so that we can then take that next step; so we can become more peaceful, more loving, of more service to our fellow humans.

So maybe the question for us today, as we think about a very broad brushstroke explanation of Mahayana Buddhism, is: Are we prepared to act according to our deepest aspirations and be happy with the consequences of that decision? Are we actually prepared to be loving and caring towards each other, even if it is inconvenient to our life? So here in RPUC I wish to create with you all a safe place, a large and buoyant raft, for us to be as loving as we possibly can, as caring as we possibly can. A community of open hearts and minds that shares the ups and downs, knowledge and wisdom of life, treads the path with one another. It might still happen. Our community or raft is not the same as the ways of the society in which we live, although aspects of current ways of being in society will certainly be mirrored.

Ours, friends, is also a religion of the ‘big raft,’ the ‘great raft’. Whenever you have a congregation of people and you say a word like ‘God’ or ‘Spirit’ or ‘Enlightenment’, many people in the congregation will have differing opinions of what those words mean. If you go to a church where they say that everybody believes exactly the same thing, you can guarantee that the thoughts conjured by words such as ‘God’, ‘Spirit’ or ‘Enlightenment’ in fact will not be the same.

We accept that fact: togetherness in diversity. We accept that everybody has their own way of seeing things, their own particular path, and this is something that we encourage – we encourage people to think for themselves.

At the beginning of the service we had the words of the Buddha: 'Be ye a lamp unto yourself, be your own confidence, hold to the truth within yourself as to the only lamp.' That means that each of us has a quality of being (Buddha- nature) within ourselves, an abiding peace and contentment that, when uncovered, makes us feel whole. However, we have to discern and strive to uncover it. Friends, it is a matter of profound joy that we are a liberal religious community amidst other liberal religious communities that feel the way of the open heart and mind in community is still very much alive in our world. *Amen.*