# The Zen of Unitarianism

**What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist? To find the answer, taste a strawberry ripened in the sun, or look into a newborn baby's eyes, or listen to what the bluejay says to the mountain. If they can't tell you, nobody can.**

**People who ask about our faith are often puzzled by the answers they receive. A religion with no doctrine, a time honored tradition of breaking with tradition, teaching people to trust their own wisdom more than any official teaching. Ask a Unitarian Universalist what he or she believes about God, or the immortality of the soul, or similar matters and they're likely to say, "Well I kinda believe ... but not exactly, maybe yes, maybe no." We have a hard time explaining ourselves to others, and to an outsider, it can all sound very confusing, rather opaque. In some respects, our faith is like Zen, the spiritual tradition of China and Korea and Japan known for its inscrutable, enigmatic aspect. Those knocking on the temple door find it hard to enter in, but to those on the inside, the tradition seems simple and transparently clear.**

**Now Buddhism is often misunderstood by Westerners, as in the old joke about the Buddhist monk who approaches the hot dog cart and asks the vendor, "Make me one with everything!" Sometimes the stereotypes are positive, of saffron robed mystics, but more often negative. Because Buddhism is non-theistic, some say it puts a void in place of God and emptiness in place of salvation. And all things are empty, the Buddha taught, empty of any enduring form or permanent identity. Everything that seems so important to us, our resumes, our ambitions, our possessions and sense of personal security, even our own egos are like smoke--evanescent--slipping through our fingers when we try to grab on. And it's this grabbing and grasping, trying to hang on to what can't be held that creates much of life's misery and worry, the Buddha said.**

**Letting go means experiencing the Void, which is often taking to be a bad thing. But emptiness from a Buddhist perspective is a little like the Grand Canyon, with its abysses and vast spaces offering an immensity of room to inhabit and explore. Emptiness may sound like a negation. But if you're looking for a doorway, or a window, or a spacious container for the spirit, emptiness is just what's needed.**

**At least since 1844 when Elizabeth Peabody offered the first English translation of a Buddhist Sutra in the Transcendentalist journal *The Dial*, Unitarians have been attracted to Buddhism. And today, nationally, about 2% of our members call themselves Buddhists while many more have some kind of regular meditation practice. While I don't identify myself a Buddhist, I have done enough sitting and study to know a little about it.**

**First of all, the differences between our own faith and Buddhism are obvious. Stories are told about Zen masters who sit for years in silence trying to understand the nature of the primordial mind. We don't like silence. UU's get a little nervous if there's a lull in the conversation at coffee hour. And yet there are also these affinities between our movement and Zen. First, both are experiential religions. Second, both are this-worldly, life-affirming faiths. And finally, each is a path of liberation that aims to free us from the neuroses and self-defeating attitudes we use to make ourselves miserable and free us for a more savory, satisfactory, full-bodied existence. So let me say a little about each of these.**

**Unitarianism and Buddhism are both experiential religions, which means they can't be defined or circumscribed by verbal formulas. What the Zen master is interested in teaching isn't something that can be conveyed in words. And what Unitarian Universalists find sacred isn't something that can be contained in creeds or catechisms. For both, the essence of religion is found in the spirit, not the letter.**

**If you were to ask a Zen master what she or he believes about God, or revelation or similar matters, you might be answered indirectly with a response like, "I believe ... I'd like a cup of tea" and then an invitation to see if you'd also like a cup. It would be her way of saying that one's formal religious beliefs are less important than enjoying each moment and sharing it in hospitality with others. Unitarians agree. We sometimes find it easier to say what we don't believe than what we do. Because our faith like Zen is experiential, it's sometimes best expressed by saying what it's not, the way a sculptor chips away pieces of stone to reveal the underlying form.**

**A puzzled monk once said to Fuketsu, "You say truth can be expressed without speaking and without keeping silent. How can this be?' Fuketsu answered, "When I was in southern China, when I was only a lad, ah! how the birds sang among the blossoms!"**

**An experiential religion isn't obtained from books, or handed down from higher-ups. It's caught, not taught. The Chinese proverb, "What comes in through the gate is not family treasure," is interpreted in Zen to mean that what somebody else tells you isn't authentic knowledge. At one Zen retreat I attended, our instructor, a young Malaysian woman who headed an abbey on Taiwan, prodded and challenged us to examine our own immediate reality: to feel our own feelings, uncover our own motivations, to become conscious of our own thoughts and intuitions. "Be your own confidence," the Buddha said, "and hold to the truth within yourself." For Zen, for Unitarianism and other experiential religions, faith is a verb rather than a noun. It consists not in a passive reception of truth-handed-down but in a continual alertness and engagement of heart and mind. There's a Zen saying, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill**

**him!" It means nobody else's wisdom, however deep or profound, can substitute for your own personal insight.**

**A young student was told to go on a long journey to another monastery. He was much upset, because he felt that this trip would interrupt his studies for many months. So he said to his friend the advanced student Sogen: "Please ask permission to come with me on the trip. There are so many things I do not know, but if you come along with can discuss them and in this way I can learn as we travel." "All right," the older student said. "But let me ask you a question: If you are hungry, what satisfaction to you if I eat rice? If your feet are lame, what comfort to you if I go on merrily? If your bladder is full, what relief to you if I piss?"**

**Unitarian Universalism and Zen are both earthy, life-affirming religions. We feel no shame about being who we are, about our own bodies or physical needs. "Every human being has a basic nature of goodness," as one Tibetan teacher writes. "That goodness contains tremendous gentleness and appreciation. As human beings, we can make love. We can stroke someone with a gentle touch. We can kiss someone with gentle understanding. We can appreciate beauty. We can appreciate the best of this world."**

**Unitarians call this the inherent worth and dignity of each person. And both our faith and Zen can be contrasted with religions which feel human beings to be fundamentally sick or sinful. Living well, as we understand it, does not require subduing or negating who we are, but cultivating our best selves and allowing our own healthy instincts to emerge. One Zen monk I know described the essence of his religion as "making friends with ourselves." And "friendliness" could be a good translation of the Buddhist term "maitri," which means an attitude of unconditional acceptance toward what is. What is includes birth and death, order and chaos, uncertainty and change. Like Unitarianism, Zen is a religion rooted firmly in insecurity. "Above, not a tile to cover the head; below, not an inch of ground for the foot." In a world with no guarantees and few absolutes, we make our journey through life with an awareness of the wonder involved in each and every step.**

**Several years ago, I spent a semester at a Buddhist study center in Colorado, the Naropa Institute. One of the courses that interested me there was Zen archery. Some of you may know that the English word "sin" was originally an archer's term which meant "to miss the mark." But in Zen archery, there is no question of either hitting the mark or missing it, since the beginner stands only a foot or two away from the target. The point is not to score a bulls-eye, at least not at first, but to learn to hold the bow and release the arrow with the correct frame of mind. Eugen Herrigel, author of *Zen in the Art of Archery,* recounts that he spent almost five years trying to find the right way of releasing the bowstring, for it had to be done spontaneously and naturally, in the same way**

**that a ripe fruit bursts its skin. Instead of looking at life as a game of keeping score, accumulating points and winning prizes, Zen plays a game where every shot is excellent when released with the proper elan.**

**A life-affirming religion is a tolerant religion, for it finds no sinners in the world, only other human beings in need of compassion and help. In the third century BCE, the Buddhist emperor Ashoka of India issued a proclamation permitting the free practice of all religions in his domain, and from that day to this, not one drop of blood has been lost in crusades or inquisitions to make converts to the Buddhist path. Unitarian Universalists share this commitment to tolerance and respect for people of all faiths. There is no need to insist that one way is superior to all others.**

**While Bankei was preaching quietly to his followers, his talk was interrupted by a Shinshu priest who believed in miracles, and thought salvation came from repeating holy words. Bankei was unable to go on with his talk and asked the priest what he wanted to say. "The founder of *my* religion," boasted the priest, "stood on one shore of a river with a writing brush in his hand. His disciple stood on the other shore holding a sheet of paper. And the founder wrote the holy name of Amida onto the paper across the river through the air. Can you do anything so miraculous?" No," Bankei quietly answered. "I can do only little miracles, like when I am hungry I eat, when I am thirsty I drink, and when I am insulted, I forgive."**

**The Zen philosopher D.T. Suzuki once remarked on what he saw as the contradictions of most Western religions: "Man against God. God against man. Man against nature. Nature against man. God against nature. Nature against God. Very funny religion." We might say the same thing in more inclusive language, but its the belief of Buddhists and of Unitarians as well that life need not be a perpetual conflict, that the universe is not a fundamentally bad place, that we can acknowledge pain and anxiety while still being conscious of the marvel and delight of being human. The Buddha told the following parable:**

**"A traveler, fleeing a tiger who was chasing him, ran till he came to the edge of a cliff. There he caught hold of a thick vine and swung himself over the edge. Above him the tiger snarled. Below him he heard another snarl, and behold, there was another tiger, peering up at him. The vine suspended him midway between two tigers. Two mice, a white mouse and a black mouse, began then to gnaw at the vine. He could see there were quickly eating it through. then in front of him on the cliff side he saw a luscious bunch of grapes. Holding onto the vine with one hand, he reached and picked the grapes with the other. How delicious!"**

**The liberating message of Zen and Unitarianism alike is that life is sweet and meant to be appreciated, not rejected, savored, not hurried through, celebrated,**

**not mourned in its swift, bright passing. The Zen tradition maintains that the Buddha transmitted his teaching to his chief disciple, Mahakasyapa by holding aloft a flower and then remaining silent. To understand Unitarian Universalism, study the mists rising over the mountain, listen to the sound of your own footfall as you walk through autumn aspens, or ask the wild rose where it gets its red. If they can't tell you, nobody can.**