

“Buddhist Perspectives on Faith”

Sermon Reprint by Rev. Dr. Tess Baumberger
Unity Church of North Easton
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If this is your first time with us, you’ve dropped into the middle of a conversation, so let me catch you up. Starting in September, my sermons have centered on the theme of values and virtues. We’ve talked about the four cardinal or “hinge” virtues of prudence, fortitude, and justice so far (next week, temperance). We’ve also talked about one of the three the “theological virtues” - love. In a couple weeks we’ll discuss another these, hope, but today we’re talking about the virtue of faith.

As the reading from Sharon Salzberg’s book suggests, what the word “faith” means to me and to many of us here is different the wider world. Since some folks out there use the word “faith” as a spiritual and emotional battering ram on people who believe differently than they do, it can be a sensitive word for many of us.

There are different ways we could respond to our sensitivity around that word. We could choose not to use it and cede that territory to the religious right. We could do that. However I prefer, as Sharon Salzberg does, to take the word and define it in a different way, staking out our own territory as we proclaim that there are other ways to be religious and to be faith-full.

Now let me tell you how I discovered her Buddhist perspective on faith, the topic of this sermon. Each summer before General Assembly (a gathering of Unitarian Universalists), there are “Professional Days” for ministers. These days include a workshop with a major presenter, smaller workshops, numerous schmoozing opportunities, and business meetings for our professional association.

In the summer of 2006 the presenter for the big workshop was none other than Buddhist meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg. She co-founded the Insight Meditation Society and The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts. In her presentation, she talked about her book, *“Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience”* the introduction of which was our reading for this morning.

As a presenter, Ms. Salzberg was delightful - wise, wonderful, and very funny, so I ran right out and bought her book. Though her sense of humor doesn’t come through as

clearly in the book as it does in person, it is a gem. I highly recommend it whether your leanings are towards Buddhism, or not. This sermon draws heavily on both her presentation and her book.

The thing that most struck me about both was the Buddhist idea that faith is a verb rather than a noun. Faith isn't a commodity we possess, Salzberg says. Instead, it is an unfolding process of the heart that grows and deepens all the time. We don't have faith, we faithe.

In her book, Sharon Salzberg draws on her own deepest experience to show how this process of faithing, trusting our capacity for love, wisdom, and awareness, can draw us through hard times.

Salzberg's story is a sad one – her father disappeared when she was four years old. After her mother died when she was nine, she went to live with grandparents she barely knew, who rarely even mentioned her mother. Her father reappeared later, but his mental health problems interfered with his ability to parent her. In some ways she had to parent to him.

As a young adult her interest in religion led her to India and to a Buddhist meditation teacher. She even sat under the descendant of the same tree where the Buddha sat when he experienced enlightenment. This proved to be a life-changing event for her. From that point she began, through meditating daily and embracing Buddhist teachings, to build a faith in her capacity to change her own life through love and awareness.

In order to redefine the word “faith,” Salzberg looks at the word in Pali, the language of the original Buddhist texts. The Pali word translated as faith, confidence, or trust is “saddha,” which literally means “to place the heart upon.” She says that “saddha” is the willingness to take the first step on a new journey, even when you don't know the destination. The real point is the setting forth, which takes a leap of faith.

The first step in the journey of faithing, according to Buddhism, is recognizing that everything within us and around us is always changing, moving onward. Using our loving awareness, we draw near the truth of the present moment, even as it changes, pulling us onward to the next moment.

One basic Buddhist belief is that suffering is a part of life. Now suffering can seem like this big clunky thing that sits on us, never changes, and so will never go away.

Seeing suffering in this way can lead us to despair. It nearly did for Sharon Salzberg when she recovered the memory of the night her mother died. It was a traumatic experience for her, as it would be for any nine-year-old, which explains perhaps why she suppressed its memory.

As she grappled with the memory of that night by practicing meditation -- loving awareness of the present moment - she was able to see that her suffering contained many emotional parts that were always changing. She says that by becoming aware of the multi-faceted, ever-changing nature of her suffering she was doing what musicologists might call “unpacking the chord,” finding the notes that made up the music of her grief.

Unpacking the chord of her suffering helped her to recognize that it was made up of evolving components of anger, fear, and pain. She saw that her suffering was not some big, unchanging, horrendous thing, but something that was already changing. She began to see gaps within her suffering that gave her hope that it would diminish. Not only that, she began to see that she had the ability to change the repeating patterns of suffering in her life.

Salzberg says this definition of faith is not smarmy. It does not say that events around us will be all right, because we can't know how events will unfold. The final destination is not clear most of the time. However, this type of faith can, she says, “allow us to recognize and trust the helping hands stretched toward us. It enables us to aspire to a better life than we have inherited.”

Like suffering, this aspiring to a better life, this faithing, is a multi-faceted, ever-changing process. As a young adult Sharon Salzberg decided to place her heart upon the teachings of the Buddha. From there, she journeyed through the three stages of faith laid out in the Buddhist tradition.

The first stage of faithing in Buddhism is called “Bright Faith,” and is like falling in love. She says it's like we've lived our lives feeling constrained, when suddenly “the door swings open” and all the limitations we impose on ourselves no longer imprison us. We are freed from our small sense of self, and it is dazzling.

She describes bright faith as a “state of love-filled delights and eager joy at the prospect of actualizing them.” Bright faith goes beyond claiming the possibilities you

find in yourself by immersing yourself in those possibilities. From this immersion you then begin acting on your potential.

Salzberg is quick to distinguish bright faith from blind faith. Both tend to be inspired by something or someone outside our selves. Unlike blind faith, which is an unquestioning devotion to a teacher or a teaching, bright faith is the beginning of a journey that must include a great deal of questioning.

Bright faith rejects what she calls a “guru mentality,” an unwillingness to question a “higher” authority. Bright faith, unlike blind faith, does not ask us to “check our brains at the door” to quote a favorite Unitarian Universalist saying. Bright faith does require us to surrender cynicism and apathy, to believe in and to begin working for change. Its energy pushes us forward in a journey of awareness, wisdom, and compassion.

The Buddhist tradition teaches that after “Bright Faith” we enter “Verifying Faith.” On the journey, we must learn to base our faith on our own experience, with “eyes wide open,” as Salzberg puts it. This forces us to challenge, to lose, and ultimately to deepen our faith.

Our faith journey can end with bright faith if we’re not willing to go deeper by refining our bright faith through some very hard work. We need to transform inspiration into effort, she says, or our faith will remain immature. We need to test anything we’re told against our own experience.

Like the next stage of falling in love, we need to examine that upon which we have placed our hearts. Placing one’s heart is a powerful thing, and to respect that power we need to be aware, and intentional about what we are doing.

Now in some traditions, doubting or questioning one’s faith is seen as a problem or a failing. However, in our tradition and in Buddhism, we think faith actually grows as we question, and as we put teachings into practice in our lives and look at the results.

Salzberg quotes the Buddha himself who said,

“Don’t believe anything just because I have said it. Don’t believe anything just because an elder or someone you respect has said it. Put it into practice. See for yourself if it is true. If you find that it leads to a kind of wisdom that is like looking at a wall, and then the wall breaks open and you see in a more unbounded way, then you can trust it.”

Salzberg warns that if we fail to question our faith, that on which we place our hearts, bright faith can become blind faith, dogmatic, fundamentalist. To make the most of the verifying stage Salzberg says that we need to practice “skillful doubt.”

Skillful doubt is “a sincere, critical questioning combined with deep trust in our own right and ability to discern the truth.” Skillful doubt requires being close enough to care about an issue, and yet open enough to let the questioning come alive. It asks us to trust our faith enough to question it skillfully.

Buddhism teaches that there in addition to skillful doubt, there is another type of doubt that can stop the faith journey dead in its tracks. This is what they call “unskillful” or “walk away” doubt. Unskillful doubt is cynicism, a stance that allows us to feel smug and unthreatened because we’re not really involved. It is doubt without due investigation of the object of doubt, or of faith.

In these conversations about the virtues, one recurring theme has been that each virtue is the high road between two valleys of vice or extreme. It strikes me that the Buddhist notion of “skillful doubt” is this middle road between skepticism and blind faith. It may be way to faith that we can embrace as a questioning, questing, journeying people.

Salzberg suggests some skillful doubt questions. They include asking about each belief, “Can it transform my mind? Can it help reshape my pain into wisdom and love? Does my experience match the belief system?” If not, then let it go. If so, explore it more deeply. In this way – verifying and exploring each belief more deeply, faithing becomes an open, active state of wonder, inspiring us to explore, moving onward into each new moment.

As we immerse ourselves in the verifying stage of faith, Buddhism teaches, we gradually come to the third stage, the stage of abiding or unwavering faith in our deepest experience. In abiding faith we have tested something so deeply we are living it.

Salzberg writes, “Abiding faith does not depend on borrowed concepts. Rather, it is the magnetic force of a bone-deep, lived understanding, one that draws us to realize our ideals, walk our talk, and act in accord with what we know to be true.” In abiding faith, we place our hearts upon what Paul Tillich calls “issues of ultimate concern.” These ultimate concerns are the glue that holds together the pieces of our experience.

Each of us may have a different “ultimate concern.” For some it may be justice, for others it may be compassion. For some ultimate concern might be a faith in a Divine power, and for others it might be faith in the laws of nature or the beautiful potential for good in humanity. For Buddhists, the ultimate concern is our Buddha nature, the capacity to live our lives in love, compassion, and awareness. According to Buddhist teaching, this a capacity we each have that nothing can ever destroy.

As we place our hearts upon our ultimate concern, as we faithe our lives around that commitment, we begin to let go of the destination, and trust our selves in the journey. Salzberg quotes Alan Watts who says, “Belief clings, faith lets go.”

In addition to teaching that life is always changing, Buddhism teaches that everything is deeply connected. Buddhists believe that we all have died and been reborn countless times. At some point we have been mother, father, child, student, teacher, friend, lover, even enemy to those with whom our spirits are most closely connected. We have all loved and hurt one another, we have all shared laughter and tears. We have all already reminded one another to breathe, to faithe.

We can see the same deep sense of personal connection in this faith community. Whether or not we believe in this kind of death and rebirth, over time here in this congregation, people have acted in all sorts of roles. We have given, we have received. We have suffered, and we have supported one another in our suffering. We have wondered with the wonder of childhood, we have advised with wisdom of experience. Over time spent in loving faith community, the experiences we share build those bonds that comfort and sustain us.

Sharon Salzberg talks about this power of faith community during a time when she nearly fell into despair, which she sees as the opposite of faith. In her time of deepest despair, it was the faith of others that helped pull her through.

She writes that it was not only their faith in the process that helped, but also their faith in her capacity to move through her own suffering. Holding on to their kind belief in her, and with their loving support, she was able to use the spiritual tools she’d practiced for years to move through her time of suffering.

Salzberg relates an experience of walking a labyrinth during that period of her life. At times she found herself close to the center, the goal, but then the path would lead

her away again, out towards the edge. Yet all the time, whether close to the goal or far away on the labyrinth path, she realized that she was always moving toward the center.

This is a comforting thought – that always as we move, even if we feel our path is taking us to the outer edges, even when we cannot see it, each step is actually taking us closer to the center, to the goal. With each step we faithe, placing our hearts upon that ideal and trusting in our own deepest experience, and the helping hands around us, to take us where we need to be.

This understanding of the virtue of faith is one I can embrace – a virtue that walks the middle road between cynicism and unquestioning acceptance. It is the path of skillful doubt that can lead us to faithe in an abiding way. This definition of faith says we should cherish our doubts because done skillfully, doubting can take us to deeper faithing. Practicing skillful doubt can take us into an abiding sense of trust in ourselves and in one another, as we faithe together. So may it be. Namaste.