

**Reflection**  
**Walking in the Buddha's Sandals**  
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NB: Originally this reflection was to be on "What the Dalai Lama Taught Me." I am not talking about that today, however, because while working on that topic, I became very discouraged and sad. His Holiness the Dalai Lama teaches and encourages us to be guided by love and compassion in everything we do. I agree with that. But upon reflection, in my humble opinion, love and compassion are not enough.

Since 1959 the Chinese government has intruded on the territory where the Tibetan people have long lived, claiming that their autonomous region is a part of China. The Dalai Lama escaped to India in 1959, and India gave him and many of his people refuge. The Tibetan people have continued to disperse, to the great sadness of the Dalai Lama, who has tried valiantly to keep their religion, language and culture alive. Bit by bit over the years, the Peoples Republic of China has taken over Tibet, building roads and infrastructure, setting up a fake "Panchen Lama" as their puppet, harassing monks and the Tibetan people, destroying the monasteries, and imposing the Chinese language on the Tibetan people. Why has this been permitted? Because love is not enough. The Government of India fears her powerful neighbor to the north. Although nobly providing spaces for Tibetan refugees to live and opportunities to work, mainly building roads by hand, i.e., breaking up rocks with hammers, weaving carpets,

selling trinkets and developing artistic troupes who perform Tibetan Buddhists dances, chants and music, the powerful Chinese government has intimidated the governments of India, the United States, and others such that no serious actions other than pronouncements and occasional audiences with United States government leaders have occurred. In fairness, the United States for many years armed and trained Tibetans to fight against and resist the Chinese, but has never recognized Tibet as an independent country. This is realpolitik at its rawest. The strong and the powerful control and rule and those who would protect the weak often succumb to fear and caution and utilitarian choices rather than rocking the boat or challenging injustice perpetrated by tyrannical rulers and governments. It's a familiar story, complicated, and sad. Tyranny still prevails. Perhaps I should have written more, and given this as my sermon, but I chose another path.

Meanwhile, please do remember that love and compassion alone are not enough. To dissuade tyrants, love and compassion must be backed up by strength, resolve, and willingness to risk. I weep for the Tibetans, those kind and gentle Buddhists whose only "crime" has been to occupy a strategic area of the world between India and China, and to promote and practice love and compassion. Please remember them in your prayers and support their cause whenever and wherever the opportunity presents itself. Amen.

Now, for the Sunday reflection, which I have entitled, "Walking in the Buddha's Sandals" but is actually a personal introduction to basic

Buddhist thought. I gathered the information for this talk from a wide variety of sources, and in my heart of hearts, am not aware that I have violated any copyright laws. So here goes!

### **Walking in the Buddha's Sandals**

On an evening a few years ago, I was noodling around on my laptop in my living room and I heard some Indian music. I had on a pair of Indian sandals, lightweight leather sandals called "chappals". I have lots of them for sentimental reasons. They are old-fashioned and come from a particular village, and I worry that because they are old-fashioned, the market for them will go away and they will disappear. They are not exactly like the sandals that the Buddha probably wore, but they are simple and keep me from stubbing my toes when I wander around the house.

So, wearing my sandals, I heard the Indian music and looked up at a television screen I'd been ignoring and there was PBS program about India, the life of the Buddha, with pictures of places I'd traveled. Speaking to me from the screen was the teacher who led the two Buddhist journeys I've taken. There was my teacher, on PBS! showing us a tiny cave near a hilltop where the Buddha had meditated, and where I bought a prayer flag that is somewhere in my yet unpacked belongings.

The cave is tiny, and near the top of a big hill, and you have to climb up lots of steps to get to it. In other words you really have to want to go there. After the cave there are more steps and turns and

when you get to the top and you look out over a plain with farms and fields and little houses scattered about. The first time I went there the cave was empty except for a few small lamps and candles, and there was no one at the top of the hill. The cave is small, and I suspect that long ago it was simply dug out of the rock to provide shelter for the Buddha by the monks in his sangha, his group. It's no bigger than eight feet square -- although it isn't square -- and I couldn't stand up in it, had to crouch to go inside. Not a very comfortable place, just a simple shelter from the rain and wind.

The second time I went a few years later, the cave was crowded with candles. Several boys were outside selling prayer flags and prayer beads, and at the top of the hill there was an attendant of sorts, collecting donations that to my cynical thinking probably went no further than his pocket. A group of Tibetans were there on a pilgrimage, all decked out in their colorful Tibetan costumes, and they had brought things to leave at the holy site, as is the custom. All sorts of food items, flowers, fresh fruits, boxes of cereal, cookies, and a bottle of expensive whiskey that I am sure the attendant must have enjoyed.

The coincidence of seeing my teacher on television at the cave I'd visited reminded me that we sometimes wonder how to interpret events (was the attendant a bona fide Buddhist who would take the money back to his sangha or temple for religious use or was he simply an opportunist)? Most religions I've come across seem to have at least a few charlatans and opportunists. I will never know the truth about the attendant at the shrine at the top of the hill above the Buddha's cave.

Such events and observations and coincidences remind us that consciously or unconsciously, we search for meaning. Some idea or concept to ground us and center us and help us frame our lives and guide our actions. And how do we explain coincidences?

Is there an unexplained energy, or a divine process at work when we think about someone, and get a call from him right then, or hear some news about a person right at the moment when she was in our thoughts?

Is there some intervening supernatural force that causes us to feel uncomfortable when something fearful or tragic is happening?

Is a butterfly flapping its wings in Mexico, causing a tornado in Texas?

These phenomena are different, the first searching for an explanation of coincidental feelings of discomfort and tragedy; the second, a mathematical explanation of the effects of motion on the weather system, and an illustration of our interdependence.

As we search for meaning in our lives, questions arise about a loving God that allows bad things to happen to good people. To make sense of life, to derive meaning from experience, we struggle to understand why we exist.

Sometimes, when tragedy strikes, and we lose someone, we don't understand why, and perhaps we think to ourselves, "Well, everything happens for a reason." That thought comforts us, even if we doubt it intellectually. Besides, who is to say that the flight of a beautiful

butterfly in one country didn't change wind patterns and cause a tornado in another?

We suffer, we need relief, comfort, and to understand why and what for. What's is all about? Why are we here? What is the meaning of life, or is there meaning to life at all?

In addition to the wonder and awe and joy and love we experience, we all suffer physical and emotional pain, we suffer sadness, we suffer longings and have dark thoughts that are so strong we hide them and keep them deep inside us.

Several hundred years before Jesus, back when the Old Testament was being written, an Indian prince left the grandeur of his father's palace to learn more about the world. He had been sheltered from pain, sickness, suffering, poverty, and injustice. The young prince was curious. He put on a simple pair of sandals, left his family, his extravagant life, and wandered around northern India. The prince was searching for meaning in a topsy-turvy world of great privilege, great poverty, great joy, and great sorrow. Not unlike the world we live in today, where there is great disparity between the rich and the poor in many countries, and frighteningly so right here, where our middle class is disappearing while the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. The prince was grieved by the unhappiness, illnesses, poverty, and certain death that made so many people unhappy. He would have been grieved by the widening gap between the incomes for the 99% and the 1% in this very country. The prince saw the suffering

associated with poverty, poor health, and death and wanted to help, but didn't know how.

So he wandered and worried, over a big area, and for a long time.

Eventually he sat down beneath a shade tree, ate very little, and continued to contemplate and worry about the nature of things, and why there was so much suffering. After several months, he finally received some insight, an intuitive message, a transformation called "enlightenment". It was a huge "aha" moment, that came after sitting and fasting for many days under a tree out in the middle of nowhere, in a lonely place now called Bodhgaya.

People come from all over the world to see the place where the Buddha found enlightenment. The original tree long since died, but whenever the Bodhi tree dies of old age, another one is planted in the same place. For many years people have come on pilgrimages to study there, to pay their respects, and you can see the remains of the walls of where they stayed. A shrine with a huge Buddha image inside sits in front of the Bodhi tree. Pilgrims walk down to the shrine and circle around it counter-clockwise, often chanting. It is lovely to perch on the low wall around the shrine and watch and listen to pilgrims in groups from Thailand, Korea, and other places as they walk round and round the shrine chanting Buddhist prayers in their own languages.

The pilgrims usually come dressed alike, in Buddhist garb typical of their countries. A leader with a long stick or pole with a little flag on it proceeds ahead of them, guiding the group. A tall iron fence surrounds the Bodhi tree, which is festooned with prayer flags. Once a

day, usually in the early evening, a monk unlocks the big gate and pilgrims are allowed to enter, a few at a time, for a brief visit.

I struck up a conversation with a pleasant-looking monk (most Buddhist monks are pleasant-looking) while waiting to go inside to visit the tree. The monk told me lives in France but comes to India for three months out of the year and said that he was going next to Austin, Texas. I was astonished that he was going to Austin and asked him why. His answer: To renew my drivers' license! Who would have thunk it?

Out behind the shrine and the Bodhi tree there is a Buddhist cemetery with Japanese stone lanterns and all sorts of interesting stones, very old.

At the top of the steps leading from the road to the shrine there is a place for leaving shoes. Vendors sell little terracotta lamps, souvenirs, and for one rupee an old man who will carve your name onto a single of rice, and put it in a little glass container with a loop on it so that you can put it on your key ring. Needless to say I bought one for each of my grandsons.

The prince who became the Buddha decided that we suffer because we want too much. We become too attached to people, to things, to money, to pleasure. We suffer because we want so much, because we are greedy. That same wanting, that sense of attachment to someone, some thing, some idea, becomes a driving force in our lives.

When things don't turn out the way we want them to, when our love of things becomes obsessive, when we lose something or someone,



when we are motivated to have what we don't have, we become unhappy and we suffer.

In his realization, the prince transformed himself and his thinking. He created a new framework of meaning in his life. The prince became the Buddha. He organized his new way of thinking like this.

**There are Four Noble Truths:**

1. Life is suffering
2. Suffering is caused by desire and attachment,
3. The good news is that there is a way to overcome desire and attachment, and
4. That way is by following the Eight-Fold Path:

**Here is where it gets a bit more complex. But the governing foundation is a state of mind.**

**The Eight-fold Path: The first two have to do with wisdom.**

**1. Right View or Vision.** Having the right view means that we should overcome ignorance, develop an open mind, and not cling to our own viewpoint as a dogmatic position. We must work to become more clear-headed, and less confused. We must learn. We do that with purpose, by practicing mindfulness and open mindfulness.

**2. The second aspect of wisdom is Right Intention, Right Attitude, Right Aspiration, and Right Thought.** This means that we constantly exert our own will to **change**. That is, we aspire to eliminate the parts of us that are wrong and immoral. **Right**

**Intention** involves renunciation of worldly things, living more simply. Right Intention means that we focus on good will, commitment to the spiritual path, and a commitment to nonviolence and respect toward other living things. In other words if we don't think about how we want to become, we won't change and grow. Right intention is purposeful.

That's a lot, and it's only two out of eight.

**3. Right Speech.** Clear, truthful, uplifting and non-harmful communication. To abandon divisive speech, to refrain from using what we hear to break others apart, or to encourage bad feelings between others. Rather than speaking in ways that turn people against each other, **Right Speech is to speak in such a way as to reconcile, and to bring people together.** Right speech is to speak gently, politely, and affectionately

**4. Right Action, Right Behavior, Right Conduct.** An ethical foundation for behavior that does not exploit others. Thinking about ethical behavior is not enough. We have to **do** something. We have to live it. Walk the talk. Put our money where our mouths are.

**Don't do bad things to other people!**

Refrain from lying and stealing or sexual misconduct, especially with children and family members, or the partner of another person. As in, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife."

**5. Right Livelihood.** Conduct your business honestly without exploiting or taking advantage of others. Right livelihood also refers to the **kinds of businesses** that the Buddha says we should not engage in: trading in weapons (please note that the United States of America

leads the world in selling weapons). Right livelihood prohibits trading in human beings, such as prostitution or buying and selling of children or adults. The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Khailash Sayathi, an Indian who has saved countless children from slavery warms my heart, and so does the award to Malalla, the young Pakistani girl who from age twelve campaigned and blogged to pressure her country to make schooling safe and available for girls. **Right Livelihood** prohibits the selling of meat or breeding of animals for slaughter (that's a big problem for those of us who are carnivores). **Right Livelihood** prohibits manufacturing intoxicants – that's wine, spirits and beer (also a problem for some of us). **Right Livelihood** prohibits selling addictive drugs, or producing or trading in any kind of poisonous substance, designed to kill (hopefully not a problem for most individuals but it can be for some businesses). I have problems with this when it comes questions of how to control mosquitoes, mice and rats, cockroaches, poisonous spiders and other creatures that carry diseases. In several parts of our country there is a big problem with controlling the deer population, because they destroy crops and foliage and flowers.

We struggle with these issues. At my community garden back in Washington, we buy and release “beneficial” insects that eat the insects that destroy the vegetables we grow. Right livelihood is a goal that requires considerable values clarification. We see the struggles with right livelihood in the arguments about how to control carbon emissions, and a variety of pollutants. Whether to invest in companies

that pollute the environment with chemicals and carbon and smoke from coal. These are not small questions.

**The last three aspects of the Eight-fold path are all related to mental discipline, concentration and meditation.**

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**6. Right Endeavor.** We should make every effort to work at what would be good, or helpful to others. Diligent work to eliminate evil, and harmful behaviors. We should promote wholesomeness and clean living. Conscious, purposeful evolution and changing – self-transformation by dedicated effort.

**7. Right Mindfulness** means that we should stay focused on self-awareness, focusing on our bodies, staying focused on our mental qualities themselves. **Right Mindfulness is disciplined introspection.** Focused awareness of things, oneself, feelings, thought, people and reality. All day, every day.

**8. Right Absorption and Concentration** means to **meditate** in a focused manner through mindful breathing, visualization, and repetition of phrases, or chanting. Right concentration in meditation, fixing the mind on a single object. At the next level of meaning, concentration and meditation represents not just the mind but the whole being in various levels of awareness.

The Buddha said: "Now what, monks, is noble Right Concentration with its supports and requisite conditions? Any singleness of mind equipped with these seven factors — right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort,

and right mindfulness — is called noble right concentration with its supports and requisite conditions.”

Now I don't know what you think about all this, but it seems very different from the Ten Commandments and Christianity.

When we walk along the Eight-fold Path, we are not asked to behave and think these ways to avoid punishment from some judgmental god. Instead, we are given a way of thinking and behaving to rid ourselves of the suffering around us and inside us. The essence of that way is to act thoughtfully, intentionally and respectfully toward one another -- and to all we encounter every day.

Buddhism is not an easy path. It is a philosophy with no god to worship. The Buddhist life requires constant, continuous discipline of mind and body -- and we, not a mysterious god, are our own judges.

I'm a Unitarian Universalist, but perhaps adding more Buddhist thinking and practice is worth considering. Certainly many elements of the path are consistent with Unitarian Universalism. Not all, but most are compatible with Unitarian Universalism.

Maybe it is too scary, too daunting to try to follow such a path. Nobody likes to fail, and some of us – especially those of us who are hard on ourselves, try not to bite off more than we can chew.

On the other hand, around home, I put on those sandals and sometimes think about becoming a serious Buddhist. I recall all the smiling Buddhist faces I've seen in my life. I remember how gentle and kind and gracious my experiences with Buddhists have been, here and

in the land of the Buddha. I recall the composure, the calmness, the patience, the serenity of the true Buddhists I have known.

I'm **not** sure about the meaning of life, or what life is all about or why. Just like you, I'm working on it. I **do** know that when I slop around the house in my Indian sandals, I'm more relaxed, mindful, peaceful, gentler. I become less cranky, and kinder-hearted about the world. Wearing those sandals reminds me. For one thing, they aren't all that comfortable for someone with a high instep who is accustomed to marching around in loafers or tennis shoes. You literally have to adjust your walk...so that you slide, rather than stride. Everything feels different, sense of balance, speed, length of step. Sliding in sandals is not like the way I usually walk, like my daddy did, hitting the floor heel first.

I keep thinking how wonderful it might be to wear those sandals outside, to learn to slide and glide outside my own small space. Softly, gently, gracefully, unhurried, like I'm sure the Buddha must have walked in his sandals. Softly, gently, gracefully, unhurried, smiling more, and probably suffering a lot less. I just may try that one of these days, and walk softly around outside wearing my "pretend" Buddhist sandals. Maybe walking outside in sandals sort of like the Buddha wore will remind me to become more gentle, compassionate and graceful. Maybe I'll do more Right Living, and smile more and suffer less. With or without the sandals, it's worth a try.

Amen

**Closing Words**

May you move forth humbly and compassionately, focusing your thoughts and actions as you see fit to grow yourselves, honor your parents, and love all children. May your feet slip smoothly into your sandals, and may you walk softly, in grace and in peace. Amen

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