

## Before Buddha

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*God is the answer*, the giant words of the billboard proclaimed. And someone had scrawled across the corner, in black spray paint, "What was the question?"

That's a fair response, I think. More than that, it's a meaningful response. In order to understand religion and religious answers, we need to understand what questions inspired those answers...otherwise, we will misunderstand or misuse the answers being offered.

In a wonderful science fiction novel entitled [The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy](#), researchers from a hyper-intelligent race of beings on another world construct [Deep Thought](#), the second greatest [computer](#) of all time and space, to calculate the Ultimate Answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything. After seven and a half million years of pondering the question, Deep Thought provides the answer: "[forty-two](#)."

*Forty-two!" yells one of the computer technicians. "Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?"*

*"I checked it very thoroughly," said the computer, "and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is."*

So another computer is constructed, a planet-size computer, to discover the question. Can you guess the name of that computer? That's right, *earth*.

How are we doing? Do we know the question? The questions? Are the religions we have giving us answers to our questions?

We sometimes imagine that religions are really all seeking to address the same set of questions; that they are simply different ways of approaching the same set of life issues, coming up with unique answers specific to their cultural roots, but dealing with the same set of problems. While this may be true in the widest sense, the sense may be so wide that it sometimes does us a disservice. Some folks in my family, for instance, when I bring up the teachings of non-Christian religions, can't imagine a faith where sin and salvation are not central concepts. Is Nirvana the Buddhist heaven? Is reincarnation their "life after death" reward? Do they think meditation wipes away their sin? How do they imagine being saved? By being good enough?

What is important to understand is that religions become unique even before they formulate answers. They are often unique in the formulation of the questions, their understanding of the problem.

I think Buddhism, and the stories that are told of the early life and spiritual formation of the man known sometimes as Siddhartha, who became known as Buddha, provide an interesting look at the questions that propel a religious quest for answers, the problems that call out for a spiritual solution.

And what is the problem, according to Buddhism? *Dukka*. That's right, *dukkha*. And it means...well, sort of what it sounds like. If Buddha had created bumper stickers, he might have made one that said, *Dukka Happens!*

*Dukka* is understood in various ways. Suffering, difficulty, frustrated desire... the feeling that life is awry, out of balance, out of order. (There was a sign on the elevator for the Bisbee library recently that said "Out of order—more order has been ordered." Don't you love that?) Well, Siddhartha was looking for more order, in some sense. Not an imposed order, but an entry into an order which he did not seem able to access in the regular patterns of his normal, comfortable life.

It was not that he was so disappointed with his life. In fact, there was much that he loved about his life. He loved it so much that he wanted it never to end. But slowly, by way of those harbingers of the ephemeral nature of everything that his father tried to keep from him, (those things we heard about in the reading: an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a monk), he came to realize that all that he hoped to hold onto was transient. Satisfaction, contentment, joy was fleeting, at best. Though he was happy enough now, illness, old age, and finally death awaited him, as well as all whom he loved, even his beloved young son. And the monk whom he saw and asked about—hearing the respectful tones in which people spoke of the monks—this awakened Siddhartha to the idea that there were those who left family life and societal expectations behind, who gave up the comforts and trappings of the existence that he was accustomed to, to seek out a deeper understanding of life. He decided that this must be his quest, also. He could never view the life that had once been satisfying to him in the same light again.

There is a wonderful scene of what takes place after Siddhartha sees the

monk. That evening, Siddhartha is entertained by minstrels and dancers, as he presumably was on many occasions. The difference is that Siddhartha, falling asleep on his couch, wakes to find that the minstrels and dancers have also fallen asleep all around him...beautiful women slumbering all around...but here's what Siddhartha saw: "Some with their bodies slick with phlegm and spittle; others were grinding their teeth, and muttering and talking incoherently in their sleep; others lay with their mouths wide open." Pretty picture, huh?

Karen Armstrong writes, "A shift had occurred in Gotama's [Siddhartha's] view of the world. Now that he was aware of the suffering that lay in wait for every single being without exception, everything seemed ugly—even repellent. The veil that had concealed life's pain had been torn aside and the universe seemed a prison of pain and pointlessness. 'How oppressive and stifling it is!' Siddhartha exclaimed. He leapt out of bed and resolved to 'Go forth' that very night." (pg. 33)

He was clear about the problem. The world is forever changing. We are growing old. Nothing will last, and that is most painful when we find that we are losing the things we most love, we most cherish, we most wish to hold onto. Desire itself, which we naturally try to satisfy, causes us pain in that we often miss out on the awareness of where we are as we seek to get somewhere else. We miss out on a real appreciation of one another, seeing other people in terms of their usefulness in fulfilling our desires. And we miss out on any joy we hoped to obtain because, once fulfilling our desire, we find that the fulfillment is tragically brief, that another desire has taken its place, that we are ever in pursuit of an unrealistic dream.

These are questions that we all live with; "problems" which we all face. Though we may or may not find enlightenment within the teachings of the Buddha, we can all pretty much relate to the questions of Siddhartha.

And this also brings up an interesting juxtaposition with Jesus and Christianity. Though much has been written of the similarities of Buddha and Jesus (by Thich N'hat Hanh and Thomas Merton, for example), there is a real difference in the life stories we have of them.

For Buddha, the record of his life is much richer *prior to* embarking upon his mission. His formulation of the question, his understanding of the problem, is compelling in how it arose within his life. Once enlightened, he becomes almost transparent. As he put it: "He who sees me, sees the dharma (the teaching), and he who sees the dharma sees me." When asked who he was, he would reply, "I am awake."

For Jesus, his biography is notoriously silent about the years leading up to his active ministry...outside of a couple birth stories and a story of a twelve year old who is left behind in the Temple by his parents (kind of a sacred "home alone" story...but what would this movie title be? Left Behind?), there is not much. Plus, with Jesus, depending on your vision of who Jesus was, your understanding of his divinity or humanity, there is no real sense that *he* was propelled by questions. He is here to answer ours, presumably, and even that is a little hazy sometimes.

Whereas in Buddha's story, there is no doubt that he is out to answer his own question, to solve his own dilemma. It is personal; it is literally a matter of life and death; and it is quite possibly the personal nature of it that captivates us. In the Buddha's story, even the gods are waiting to see what answers the Buddha will find; even they are waiting for his enlightenment, so it is the gods who make sure that Siddhartha sees the four signs that his father tried to keep from him; for they, the gods, are caught up in *samsara*, too, the endless cycle of death and rebirth, the "keeping going" of existence, along with the transience and restlessness that existence brings, and they are looking for escape. Buddha's (or Siddhartha's) search is for himself, it is individual, but it has universal ramifications, precisely because Siddhartha is nothing special. A nice guy, probably. Kind enough. But pretty regular. Naive. Struggling with all the same stuff everybody does, in one form or

another. Nothing special.

And, of course, hugely special...just like each and every one of you.

And living at a time that was maybe not so very dissimilar to our own. I realize that's a great leap and a gross over generalization, especially for someone who is no history scholar, and certainly no expert on Buddhism and the period, 800-200 BCE, that is known as the Axial Age.

*[But it] marks the beginning of humanity as we now know it. During this period, men and women became conscious of their existence, their own nature and their limitations in an unprecedented way. Their experience of utter impotence in a cruel world impelled them to seek the highest goals and an absolute reality in the depths of their being. The great sages of the time taught human beings how to cope with the misery of life, transcend their weakness, and live in peace in the midst of this flawed world. The new religious systems that emerged during this period—Taoism and Confucianism in China, Buddhism and Hinduism in India, monotheism in Iran and the Middle East, and Greek rationalism in Europe—all shared fundamental characteristics beneath their obvious differences. It was only by participating in this massive transformation that the various peoples of the world were able to progress and join the forward march of history.*

*A conviction that the world was awry was fundamental to the spirituality that emerged in the Axial countries. Those who took part in the transformation felt restless—just as [Siddhartha] did. They were consumed by a sense of helplessness, were obsessed by their mortality and felt a profound terror of and alienation from the world. They expressed this malaise in different ways. The Greeks saw life as a tragic epic, a drama in which they strove for katharsis and release. Plato spoke of man's separation from the divine, and yearned to cast off the impurity of our present state and achieve unity with the Good. The Hebrew prophets of the eighth, seventh and sixth centuries*

*felt a similar alienation from God, and saw their political exile as symbolic of their spiritual condition. The Zoroastrians of Iran saw life as a cosmic battle between Good and Evil, while in China, Confucius lamented the darkness of his age, which had fallen away from the ideals of the ancestors. In India, the Buddha and the forest monks [his fellow searchers] were convinced that life was dukka: it was fundamentally "awry," filled with pain, grief and sorrow. The world had become a frightening place...*

*What had happened? Nobody has fully explained the sorrow that fueled Axial Age spirituality...despite its great importance, the Axial Age remains mysterious...(Karen Armstrong, Buddha, 13-14)*

I will leave it there, in the mystery. There is much yet to be discovered (or speculated upon or wondered about) regarding this period—and, indeed, Karen Armstrong has a book that came out a matter of days ago entitled, [The Great Transformation](#), that deals with this period--but I find great hope in what we apparently do know about this period.

For one thing, it was a time of great distress. I, like many men I'll bet, know in an abstract sense, but often forget in a practical sense, that birthing, for all of its beauty and wonder, is also a time of great distress. So when I view the great distress of this present time, the pain and cruelty and seeming hopelessness that is being suffered in various forms the world over, rather than wallowing in despair, I can also ask, might this be the pains of a great transformation? A new axial age? A birthing of new religious consciousness as the old religions struggle, sometimes violently, against these changes?

I find indications of even some of those societal trends that we are most cynical about these days in this Axial age...such as "church shopping." You know what I mean? Articles and commentaries berating the "consumer culture" that has led people to hop from one church to another as they seek out the right fit, the answer they seek, or at least an articulation of the

questions they wish to ask. "Church shopping" might be viewed as a positive sign, too.

As it turns out, there was something similar going on in Siddhartha's time. The monks, the seekers, would greet each other with a question—not "how are you doing?" but "who is your teacher?"--and then would proceed to exchange information about the doctrines of their respective teachers. It was not uncommon for one or the other monk to become convinced that they were with the wrong teacher, and so they would follow the new one they had heard about. And not infrequently, they would become disillusioned with that one, too, and find another. You see what I mean? It *may* point to lack of commitment, as the critics say; or it may be about listening to the integrity of our restlessness, to move from one place to another, one teacher to another, one community to another until we find ourselves heard, or until we find ourselves listening in a new way.

And one last thing: the Axial Age was possibly, partially, inspired by a new sense of individuality, a paradigm shift in the understanding of the human being, as people moved from tribal communities into the hustle and bustle and self-centered milieu of an urban lifestyle. There may be a similar paradigm shift, one that many of our religions have not yet caught up with, regarding the *global* understanding of the human being, and a community that transcends our historical notions of that word.

We, Unitarian Universalists, often tease ourselves about how much time we spend with *the questions*. It may be, however, that we are doing a great service in our attempts to articulate the questions...because there is great distress in this world. There is a conviction that the world is awry. Many feel consumed by a sense of helplessness, are obsessed with their mortality and experience a profound terror of and alienation from the world...And our religions, all too often, play into the terror; accentuate the divisions; disconnect us further from the realities of this existence, the fragile beauty of this world, the importance of this moment.

You do not put new wine in old wine skins, Jesus said. Just as in the Axial Age, the old answers are not working. My God is bigger than your God is not working. Jihad is not working. Chosen people is not working. Left behind is not working. No one comes to the Father but by me is not working. One way to truth is not working. God speaks to me and not to you is not working. Don't worry, there will be a new heaven and a new earth is not working. Old answers are not working...

What if we asked our questions now, spoke them loud and clear? What kind of religion could hold those questions? What kind of religion could hold us all accountable to those questions? What kind of religion could encourage us to speak across our apparent differences to discover new insights, commonalities, new ways of seeing and being? What kind of religion could hold a myriad of answers and remain in covenant? What kind of religion could fully support the individual's free and responsible search for truth and meaning? What kind of religion could put an awareness of our interdependence with all of life at its center? What kind of religion could be open to new questions as they arise, while keeping alive the insights that the questions of long ago still offer? What kind of religion could that possibly be?

I wonder....

\*Many thanks to Karen Armstrong for her book, [Buddha](#), from which much of the material for this sermon was derived.