

Stepping in the Dukkha...

and the suffering we may cause

(Version 2a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on January 29, 2017, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

WELCOME

Dear friends, some who are new, some who are not, you are welcome here – one and all. We are a welcoming community which honors the inherent worth of all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, orientation, socio-economic class, or other attributes that only serve to divide our society. Here, we welcome you as you are, and are glad you came to be with us today. You may have been coming here for years, even decades; or you may have been coming here for just a few weeks; or, this might even be your first time here, ever. Regardless of how long you have been here, we have one thing to say to you all: **Welcome Home!** Please take a few moments now to greet your neighbors.

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

We light our Flaming Chalice in honor of one of the great wisdom traditions of the world that I plan to speak of today: Buddhism.

In this tradition, one is taught to act from a place of Love, Wisdom and Compassion; to seek Truth, knowing the Truth has many facets like a jewel; and to wake our senses, throwing the veil from our eyes and seeing life and the world as it really is, and not how we wish it to be.

It is in honor of all of these teachings, and more, that we light our chalice today.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

MEDITATION

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are now invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds. We will bring our meditation to a conclusion by joining in singing a Musical Meditation, Hymn # _____, _____ (name) in the (grey/teal) hymnal.

[Silence]

Thank you. Blessed be.

OFFERING

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is _____.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

Stepping in the Dukkha... and the suffering we may cause

Reverend Michael Walker

This morning, we are exploring Buddhism as part of our monthly worship theme about World Religions, Theology and Cosmology. I will talk about *dukkha*, the basic Buddhist teaching that has often been translated as “*life is suffering*.” This is not as bleak as it sounds, and although I will talk of some bleak aspects of life today, I will bring us back around to the sunshine by the time we are done.

In fact, I’d love to share with you the story of one of the most enduring symbols of Buddhism: the **Lotus** flower. Have you ever seen a lotus growing in its natural

habitat? If so, you were likely up to your knees in muck. You see, the Lotus is a swamp flower. It is rooted in the mud, underwater, and the stalk of the flower must reach up through the mud and up through the water. It is seeking, it is reaching, reaching for sunlight. And when the stalk has grown and reached the surface of the water of the swamp, then the flower can bud and bloom. Here in this dismal environment, is this thing of beauty that arose out of the mud and opened its petals to the sunshine. And so, if a Buddhist is speaking of *life-as-suffering*, they are speaking about one’s life being rooted in the muck and mud, deep underwater far from the rays of the sun. Life is the struggle to send that shoot to the surface so that it can bloom — so that life can bloom into its full glory.

And so, it was with tongue-in-cheek that I settled on a pun for the title of today's sermon: *Stepping in the Dukkha*, when we are talking about rising out of the muck. Before I go on, we should define two terms that I'm going to be using today, both of which come from the ancient languages of India. The first is *dukkha* and the second is *ahimsa*.

I quote a Theravada Buddhist teacher for the definition of *dukkha*:¹

No single English word adequately captures the full depth, range, and subtlety of the crucial Pali term dukkha. Over the years, many translations of the word have been used ("stress,"

"unsatisfactoriness," "suffering," etc.) Each has its own merits in a given context. There is value in not letting oneself get too comfortable with any one particular translation of the word, since the entire thrust of Buddhist practice is the broadening and deepening of one's understanding of dukkha until its roots are finally exposed and eradicated once and for all. One helpful rule of thumb: as soon as you think you've found the single best translation for the word, think again: for no matter how you describe dukkha, it's always deeper, subtler, and more unsatisfactory than that.

As you may know, the foundational teaching of Buddhism as often expressed in English is that life exists in a default state of suffering, and that it is our work to

¹ <http://www.accesstoinight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca1/dukkha.html>

bring about the end of suffering. This is often presumed to be in the context of one's own, singular life, but I always felt that that was a little self-centered, so I will also look at how we may address suffering in the lives of others, as well as ourselves.

The second term I need to define is *ahimsa*. This quote from the Metta Center helped me get a better grasp of the concept made famous by Gandhi. They wrote:²

Ahimsa ... is the ancient Sanskrit term usually translated as, and possibly the model for, 'nonviolence.' The translation is unfortunate, however, in that such negative compounds in Sanskrit were more positive in effect than the corresponding, literal translations in English. [...]

² <http://mettacenter.org/definitions/gloss-concepts/ahimsa>

Ahimsa should actually be translated something like 'the force unleashed when desire to harm is eradicated.' Of course, 'nonviolence' is handier! And that's fine, as long as we realize its limitations.

They go on to describe the work of Gandhi, as related to this principle:

... Ahimsa is derived from the Sanskrit verb root san, which means to kill. The form hims means "desirous to kill"; the prefix a- is a negation. So a-himsa means literally "lacking any desire to kill," which is perhaps the central theme upon which Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist morality is built. ... It is, as Gandhi puts it, the very essence of human nature.

“Nonviolence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law – to the strength of the spirit.”

The word nonviolence connotes a negative, almost passive condition, whereas the Sanskrit term ahimsa suggests a dynamic State of mind in which power is released. “Strength,” Gandhi said, “does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.” Therein he found his own strength, and there he exhorted others to look for theirs. Latent in the depths of human consciousness, this inner strength can be

cultivated by the observance of complete ahimsa.

Now that we have defined these concepts, let’s move on to how they may affect our lives.

Buddhist philosophy posits what they call Four Noble Truths, which are: *the truth of dukkha* (suffering, anxiety, unsatisfactoriness); *the truth of the origin of dukkha* (in our pasts); *the truth of the cessation of dukkha* (in our hoped-for futures); and *the truth of the path leading to the cessation of dukkha*. Clearly, this dukkha concept looms large in this world-view.

The first aspect of dukkha regards suffering, pain, anxiety, unsatisfactoriness with the status quo of life. They go further to point out that **birth** is by definition a time of great pain, and **yet**, it is a time of becoming and

being. Coming forth into a new life. Likewise, they teach that **life** is by definition a time of suffering, and **yet**, it is also a time of becoming and being. Coming forth into a new life, should we take the steps to make it so. Finally, it is taught that **death** is a time, perhaps of pain, perhaps of suffering, perhaps the anticipation of which is full of anxiety, and **yet**, it is also a time of becoming and being. Coming forth into a new life... that is, some new state of existence – whatever that may be.

Whatever dukkha may have come at the time of each of our births, or whatever dukkha may come at the time of each of our deaths, we have no control. One of the precepts of Buddhism is called ‘Right View,’ and is about accepting *that-which-is* or an objective reality over which we have no personal control. Reinhold Niebuhr’s

Serenity Prayer is another way of describing this principle. I’ve spoken it here before, but wish to share the short version of it again now:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things

I cannot change,

The courage to change the things I can,

And the wisdom to know the difference.

We’ve been looking at dukkha as suffering or pain, which may be mental, emotional or physical. However, the serenity prayer suggests to us what may be a root cause of suffering in life. That is, failing to recognize that life exists in a constant and perpetual state of impermanence or change. And one aspect of our suffering is our attachment to something that is changing,

which we cannot prevent.

It seems to me that the greatest disappointment in a person's life could very well be railing against that thing that occurred, whatever it may be, over which we as mere humans have no control, whatsoever. One of the early stories of the Buddha talks about him as a young man, before his enlightenment, in which he came face-to-face with disease for the first time. It's helpful to recall that as a prince, the young man that became Buddha had led a very sheltered life in his father's palace, and had never seen poverty or hunger, sickness or death, until as a young man he went out walking on his own and saw it for the first time.

The Buddha was later to teach his students that sickness is in itself a cause for suffering; so why would

one wish to magnify that suffering by refusing to accept the reality of what it is. The person so afflicted has no control over the affliction, and spending one's entire energy in denying this objective reality only makes the suffering even worse.

There are many things that happen in life, not just some sort of sickness, that are beyond our control. Kicking the tire does not make the broken-down car run any better. And, it turns out that crying cannot rescue the spilt milk.

The final aspect of dukkha will also take us into a discussion of ahimsa. In Buddhist teachings, their Right View includes that all phenomena are connected, that they all originate from the same point. That all beings arose from the same primordial soup, if you will, and so

we are all connected. The concepts of separateness and an independent Self is an illusion. We address this by seeking clarity, above all – by removing the veil before one’s eyes, seeing through the illusion of separate selfhood. In Unitarian Universalism, we frequently speak of *the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part*. Buddhist’s view interdependency as the very foundation of all existence.

Dukkha related to interdependency centers on a human tendency to consider the Self as separate from the rest of existence; and that adhering to this illusion causes suffering in our lives and perhaps in the lives of others. When we *wake our senses*, when we really pay attention to life, we realize that we are connected, you and I, and to all others. If someone out there is suffering, so are you

and I. Although I do not know the answer to this great problem, I’ve watched the news with a sinking feeling in my gut as the death toll rises from epidemics around the world. Now, it is easy for a white, middle-class male living in a first-world country to just disregard that suffering. I believe that would be a mistake on my part; another person’s suffering affects my soul. But that may be too big of a problem for us to really tackle today, so why don’t we pick a smaller one.

Let’s say that by some manner of careless word or deed, I have caused suffering for another person. This is something that anyone can do, has done, because we are human. Humans make mistakes. But realizing that brings me to a remembrance of the concept of ahimsa, of

nonviolence, but more than that – ahimsa is the power to do good and to bring love into the lives of others. And this is the response that I wish to convey. Ahimsa is so much more than a passive principle of nonviolence; it is an active principle of *Love-in-Action*, or as Albert Schweitzer put it, Reverence for Life. When one has, as I have many times before, stepped in the dukkha – when one has caused any sort of pain, hurt or suffering in the life of another – than one is called to try to put it right for that other person and also for oneself. It is not always clear how that may be done. And one person’s opinion of what needs to be done may be quite different than another person’s. But I am reminded that no one knows what is in your heart but you, yourself. No one knows what is in my heart, but me.

So, one must find a way that rings true for oneself to put *love into action* as a way of alleviating the suffering of another. For me, that has at times meant reaching out to another person and directly addressing the dukkha I caused... and making amends. At other times, it was after many attempts to reach out, much soul-searching and consultation with others, that I realized that the other person may not hear me in the way that I wish to be heard... That they cannot see what is in my heart. And coming to the painful realization that the best way I can relieve that person’s suffering is to step back and say no more, until they are ready to speak to me. Ahimsa is difficult, as both Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to teach humanity. Like every spiritual practice, when I realize that I have stepped off

the path, the best thing I can do is stop, contemplate where I am and what I'm doing, and then try to step back onto the path. And that is the best advice I can give to you, too. If you fall off the horse, get back on and keep riding. We will get bruises along the way, but that is how we learn, and if we accept them rather than doing all we can to avoid them, we will be happier for it, in the end.

Instead of my usual closing, I will leave you with this Buddhist benediction... *Namaste* - I honor the divine in you. *Namaste*, to one and all.

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

We are each the rootstock of the lotus plant,
rooted in the detritus and messiness of life,
deep below the surface the water.

We are each the tender shoot of the lotus,
growing up through mud and murkiness,
reaching for the glorious sunshine.

We are each the lotus flower-bud,
awaiting the moment of becoming,
opening into a bloom of perfect beauty.

We are each the lotus flower,
overcoming adversity and suffering,
and helping others to do the same.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!
