

How Buddhism Changed My Life

By Nancy James, at Emerald Coast Philosophical Society meeting, 6-1-14

You've probably all heard stories about how people have found God and how it has changed their life. They are now living as God wants them to, and they know this because they read the Bible and listen to their preacher and try their best to carry out God's plan for them. This is not one of those stories.

I never did believe in "God." My parents left their Methodist Church in Chicago to start attending a Unitarian Church, so my two sisters and brother and I were brought up as Unitarians. Unitarians seldom talk about God. They are all about humanistic values—tolerance, acceptance, helping others, treating everyone as equals, sharing. To this day when someone I am reading or talking to mentions God I get a bit of a mystified feeling because I do not know who or what they mean by God. As far as I know, everyone means something different.

Surely not the bearded wise man sitting on a cloud watching everything that happens below... And the heaven some folks talk of as if it is an actual place--what do they mean by heaven? At a recent Christian celebration of life I attended for a woman who had died at the young age of 61, lots of her friends stood up and described Susan as probably cooking up a storm up there in heaven, and bombarding God with all her questions. I'm thinking, "Really?" And then the minister had to put in his two cents and tell us that anyone who had not accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior would never see that glorious kingdom of heaven and would spend the rest of eternity condemned to hell. (This is God's plan?)

All I could think was, "People still believe this stuff?" Where were their minds?

When I was 12 my family moved from Chicago to Janesville, Wisconsin—where there was no Unitarian church. Madison had one 42 miles away, but we only went there two or three times a year. So essentially I was religion-less and that suited me fine. I didn't need a church. I loved school and learning and using my mind, and if anyone asked about my religion I said I was agnostic. In college I was once challenged on that and told I was just too chicken to say I was an atheist. But to me the distinction was, an atheist claimed there was no God—as if they knew this for sure. But as an agnostic I was simply saying "I don't know if there is or is not a God. I don't claim to have a final answer because I'm not that smart. But I'm skeptical."

So I got my journalism degree from the University of Minnesota, married my college sweetheart who had been raised essentially church-less, and we raised two sons without going to a church.

One interesting thing about my husband, Bob, was that, even though he had a very high I.Q. and his father was dean of the law school at the Univ. of Minn., he messed up in college where he was majoring in chemistry, flunked out, and suddenly was drafted into the army and sent to Korea—before the Korean War. This was all before I knew him. While in Korea he became

exposed to the Eastern world view, as opposed to the Western world view, and couldn't get it out of his mind. After his discharge he went back to the University of Minnesota and got a b.a. in philosophy. Then he used his G.I. Bill of Rights to attend graduate school at Benares Hindu University in India. The amount of money he needed to live, in India, was very small and he spent a great deal of the 15 months he was there simply traveling around India with a few friends, meeting new people in such small towns that some of them had never seen a Westerner before, and absorbing a great deal about Hinduism and the Eastern way of thought.

After returning he pursued a master's degree in journalism, figuring he needed some way to make a living—and that's how we met.

The reason I'm going on for so long about Bob is that he was a powerful influence in my life and my eventual pursuit of Buddhism. While we were still in school we worked on the student daily newspaper, and the Minnesota Daily crowd would end up many nights, after the paper was put to bed, at the off-campus beer joint—where Bob would fascinate us all with his stories about India. He was the most exotic person we knew.

As you all know – and know so totally you may never even think about it – in this country most of us are raised with an emphasis on our brains, on education, going to college, using our smarts to get ahead. We are taught virtually nothing about our feelings, our emotions, our heart. It's our intellect that matters. Competition is a big part of it. We want to get better grades than others so we can get into a better college. We want to excel in sports or music or some other field—beat out the competition, be seen as better than others. We're taught in subtle ways that such competitive behavior is what life is all about and will determine whether our future is good or mediocre. At least this was the message I got from my parents. "Use your head" they'd say.

We also were told to mind our parents, do what we were told, and don't question them. My two sisters and I were not especially close. The oldest was 4.5 years older than I, and my other sister was three years younger. (My little brother wasn't born until I was 13, after we moved to Janesville.) To the older, I was a pest she didn't want around. To me, the younger was really cute and got lots of attention and therefore I disliked her. As we grew up, I unwittingly adopted the classic role of the middle child and tried to be a peacemaker among warring factions – not real successfully. The background noise of my early years, as I lay in bed trying to go to sleep, was hushed yet heated arguments between my parents. I couldn't quite make out the words but the tone was unmistakable. It seemed as if my mother was angry about 90% of the time. I definitely preferred my dad, who made jokes about everything.

One other thing I need to mention about my childhood is that I was extremely shy, self-conscious, afraid, and had no self-confidence whatsoever. My mother was very opinionated and made snap judgments about everyone and every situation, and I had no idea how she did that. I used to wonder if I would ever learn all the rules!

I knew that when I graduated high school I wanted to get far away from this family. The University of Wisconsin, 42 miles away, was way too close. Because I loved to write and wanted to major in journalism, and one of the best j schools in the country was at the University of Minnesota, that's where I went. I remember when my parents deposited me at my dorm, unloaded all my stuff, and were finally ready to drive back to Janesville. My mother had tears in her eyes—what a surprise! I could not conjure up one tear or any sad emotion whatsoever.

So now fast-forward to Bob Pirsig and me getting married and raising two sons. (I'll skip our sojourns in Reno and Mexico.) Living in and around Minneapolis, we had some friends in the University philosophy department who taught Eastern philosophy, and through them we met others with like interests. They liked to spend time with Bob, hearing his stories and point of view. Most of the time when we socialized, I sat in the background and listened because obviously Bob was the important half of us. I was perfectly willing to serve food and drinks and tend to the children and do whatever was necessary to facilitate any get-togethers where my husband could shine.

But a little more background. We had spent two years in Bozeman, Mon., where he taught English at Montana State College. Deciding that for an academic career he needed a Ph.D., he was accepted into graduate school at the prestigious U of Chicago. So we moved to Hyde Park, the University neighborhood, to a three-story walkup. Not only was he attending grad school, he was also given a teaching assistant's job teaching English—three different courses.

And then quite out of the blue he began exhibiting some very bizarre behavior and was said to be having a nervous breakdown. He was put in a locked mental ward of the University Hospital and eventually diagnosed as schizophrenic, and I was suddenly on my own—with a three and a five-year-old. Immediately the head of the English department invited me to meet him, and asked bluntly if I could take over Bob's classes for the rest of the year. This was November, and it meant teaching till the next June.

We needed the income and I accepted on the spot. I had never taught before. I remember one class was "Business Letter Writing" but have no memory of the other two. Somehow I got through this, in spite of having to arrange for child care for Ted – Bob's parents had visited and taken Chris, who was in kindergarten, back to Minneapolis with them, and decided to keep him there – and also having to visit Bob in the hospital twice a week. He seemed happy and always wanted me to stay for much longer than I could, which I resented. He was sedated, and talked and moved very slowly, whereas I was stressed and needing to get home as fast as I could to grade papers and prepare for my next classes. I remember having diarrhea the entire six months.

As soon as I got back to Minneapolis, in 1963, I got a newspaper job. I would have liked to work for the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, either its morning or afternoon edition—but they were out on strike. So I went over to St. Paul, a city I hardly knew, and went to work for the St. Paul Dispatch, riding a bus early every morning down miles of University Avenue and into downtown

St. Paul. I worked as a copy editor, one of five. Those are the people who used to carefully read a reporter's story, correct any spelling, punctuation or grammatical errors, edit the copy to make it read better, and sometimes question the reporter if something wasn't clear or raised a question in my mind. (I don't think they have them any more.) These were, of course, the days before computers so we were handling actual paper and making marks on it with a copy pencil, and the typesetter would take it from there and set it into type, and the huge printing press would eventually run off thousands of copies.

One Friday afternoon, as soon as I got home, the neighbor who took care of Chris and Ted after school came running over to ask if I had heard the news: President Kennedy had just been shot. She didn't know if he was dead or alive. I was shocked, as was everyone, but immediately called the newspaper to see if they needed me to come back in. They did not—but they did inform me the president was dead.

And where was Bob? Shortly after we returned to Minneapolis, he underwent shock treatments. He was picked up after threatening my life, and his father and I authorized the treatment. At that time I considered us separated. I moved the boys and me away from his parents' neighborhood, over to a nice middle-class neighborhood near an elementary school and not far from the Minneapolis campus of the University. They gave the shock treatments one a day for eight or ten days. They wiped out all short-term memory. When Bob finally began to recover he started reading a newspaper and saw a reference to President Johnson, which totally befuddled him.

What I had told Bob's psychiatrist was that the Bob I saw now was not the person I had married. If the doctor could treat him successfully and bring him back to life as a normal human being, I would consider taking him back. What the doctor very compassionately told me was that it doesn't work that way. There were no guarantees, but the only possible way we could help Bob recover was if his parents and I worked with the doctor and with Bob to help get him back as close as possible to "normal." So I did—both while he was in the hospital and after he got out and came home.

Bob then became a technical writer and got a job and eventually we bought a house in St. Paul one block up from the River Road, which runs alongside the Mississippi River, very close to Minneapolis. By then I was working for the University of Minnesota in public relations—writing press releases about newsworthy stuff going on at the University. It was a great job, I got to know many of the reporters at the Minneapolis papers as well as the radio and TV stations, and also got to know a lot of the U of M faculty members who were doing interesting things. One of them was named Martin Duffy but that's a whole other story. But anyway, I had come a far way from my fearful childhood. I had handled situations that built up my self-confidence, Bob and I were finally apparently back on track, and I felt good about myself. We had a lot of friends and I could join in on the conversations, not just sit in the background serving and listening.

Then one day in 1970 Bob got a phone call from a man who was leading a very small meditation group once a week in his suburban home. He asked if Bob would like to join them. He did that, and every Monday night he would go there, with about three or four others, and they would meditate 40 minutes—the standard length of time of a Zen Buddhist group, although they weren't calling themselves that. They sat on cushions on the floor. Then they would do a 10-minute very slow walk in a circle around the carpet where they'd been sitting, and then sit for another 40 minutes. Then they'd drink tea and talk for maybe a half hour and then go home. I kept wishing I could be included. I had never meditated.

But that changed in fall of 1971, when Bob actually invited me to attend the group. Our boys were 15 and 16 so we didn't mind leaving them alone for an evening. I well remember my first time. John, the group leader, showed me the basics of how to sit, how to focus on the breath, how to let my thoughts go. I could not imagine sitting still like that for 40 minutes, which seemed an eternity. I sat as still as I could but was plagued by my thoughts and kept berating myself, telling my mind to shut up and asking who did I think I was talking to, anyway? And who cared about these thoughts? Shut up, I kept telling myself. Just shut up. When the bell rang at the end of the first sitting, I thought it had been about 15 minutes.

After the kinhin—the slow walk—the same thing happened all over. I hollered at myself (silently, of course) and thought it had been no more than 20 minutes when the bell rang again. By that time, to my great surprise, I found tears streaming down my cheeks. I hastily wiped my face with my hands and made a beeline for the restroom. Where I sat and sobbed for about 10 minutes, unable to get control of myself and having no idea why I was crying. As I thought about it later, it seemed the strong emotional reaction was because for the first time in my life, at age 38, I was looking inward. I was going inside instead of always looking outward, reacting to others' wants and needs and silently asking for their approval. So that was the start—I was hooked on zazen, or sitting meditation.

A year later, in fall of 1972, four or five of these small sitting groups around the Twin Cities were invited to a potluck supper at the home of one couple. After a nice tasty meal and lots of good conversation, two women said they had an announcement to make. They had made a trip to San Francisco, where they had spoken with Dainin Katagiri Roshi. Katagiri had been assistant to Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, who headed the San Francisco Zen Center, but had recently died. Katagiri was widely expected to be named as Suzuki's successor. Instead, Suzuki had named an American, Richard Baker. The Minneapolis women were able to persuade Katagiri to move with his wife and two young sons to Minneapolis, to start the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center.

The announcement stunned everyone who was hearing about it for the first time. What did this mean? It meant going through all kinds of hoops to get ready for this quantum leap into the future. We'll need to raise money, we told each other, to pay him and to rent a place for them to live. And to rent another place to use as a zendo, a sitting hall. We'll need a lawyer to draw up incorporation papers for a new entity named the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. We'll need to

look for the right neighborhood for the eventual center, we'll need to elect a board of directors. We'll need...on and on and on and on. It made our heads spin. Who was going to do all this? We looked around. WE were. And we could all name others who would probably be interested.

It was a very scary time and also a very exciting time, and eventually all those steps were taken. Bob served on the first board of directors. I was invited, but what with having a fulltime job and raising two kids and being involved in an education group and some other things, I declined. And the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center is thriving to this day, even though Katagiri died in 1990. It held a 40th anniversary celebration last fall and I flew up for that weekend, and had wonderful reunions with good old friends I had not seen in 30 or more years.

So, after all this background, how DID Buddhism change my life?

I figured that, for you to understand my answers, first you had to know what I was like—as a child and as I matured. I've described me in some detail. I can't possibly describe Buddhism in that sort of detail or we'd be here all night. From time to time I teach a little class on the basics of Buddhism, but even that, meeting once a week for an hour and a half, requires eight weeks.

So what is it specifically that I have learned from Buddhism that helps me be the way I am now?

First, the Buddha emphasized that his teaching was all about dukkha and how to end it. He never taught about something called God, and he was not perceived as a god, so Buddhism has no deity. As you can see from my background, that was fine with me. A religion does not have to encompass a deity who is worshipped. Dukkha is commonly translated as suffering but its meaning is much broader. It refers to any negativity you might manifest, all the way from a minor annoyance to full-blown anger, to dislike or hatred to fear to grief to desire for vengeance.

In all these situations you want something to be different from what it is. Buddhism's suggestion is, first, to accept what is. Then look at the situation—what is—carefully and compassionately, and decide if there is anything you can do to change the situation. If your response to any situation is not to accept it but rather to act out of fear, anger, hatred or any of those negative emotions—that is just you creating your own suffering. Any potential change has to start with accepting what is.

If you look at the situation and decide you can do something constructive to try to change it, then you figure out how to carry that out, knowing it may or may not work. If you cannot possibly change the situation, you do not internalize it and worry about it and come back again and again to bringing it into your consciousness. You accept what is. It might be children starving in Nigeria. It might be teenage girls raped in India. Horrible situations, but ones you likely cannot affect. So don't dwell on them. Carrying them around will not help the situations nor you.

Once I got in the habit of accepting what is, I found lots of reason to smile. If I walk outdoors and pay attention to my surroundings, I can find great beauty in such simple things as the way

the early-morning sky peeks through the leaves and branches of a tree – the way the water in Eastern Lake flows and ripples as it goes under the bridge I’m standing on – the rare sight of a paddle boarder standing on his board and paddling in my direction -- the way a mockingbird sounds as it tries out 6 or 8 different calls, one right after another. I recently watched one sounding so joyful it actually flew up into the air 3 or 4 feet and then settled back on the telephone wire, still singing. It’s like it just cannot contain its happiness at that moment. The key words are “if I pay attention.” That means not getting lost in my thoughts but actually being where I am. There are days I wear a smile almost all day long.

This attitude is good for one’s sense of humor as well. Occasionally I’m a little unsteady on my feet, and I may stumble or lurch – and while grabbing for a handhold to keep from falling I may pull on the handle of a pan holding water and send it to the floor with a crash. In the old days my reaction might have been to swear and get really angry at my stupid self—or, if I was feeling sorry for myself, to burst out crying. Now what do I do? I burst out laughing. It’s so ridiculous! And then I pick up the pan, wipe up the spilled water and go on with my beautiful day. Smiling.

It has taken me a long time to realize that worry and blame and anger are negative situations that I create. I am the only person responsible for how I feel, and if someone says something cutting or meant to be demeaning, I just give myself a second or two so as not to respond in haste, and smile and respond gently. I can no longer say “He makes me so mad!” Nobody can make me mad but me. I truly do create my own world.

Next, some other Buddhist principles that I can observe in my life are impermanence and connectedness. Impermanence doesn’t just mean that someday I will die, and so will everybody else. It doesn’t just mean that the beautiful flowers I just put in a vase of water will, in a week or so, start dropping their petals and drooping. Impermanence means that every single thing in the universe is changing all the time, every nanosecond, including all the organs in my body and every part of everything in nature—even rocks and oceans. Everything I can see, everything I think I own, is undergoing subtle changes from the moment they come into being. What do you do when your favorite ceramic vase falls on the tile floor and breaks into a dozen pieces? Long before that happens, advises one Zen teacher, you need to look at it as already broken. Really look at it and appreciate its delicacy and its beauty so much more, knowing that one day it will be broken. Cherish it while you still have it—and of course extend that attitude toward everything you think you own, and everyone you love. Really appreciate this moment.

And speaking of the ones you love, you may be able to find it in your heart to love everyone. The connectedness I mentioned before is universal. We are all connected. Whatever you want to call it, there is a life force that flows through each of us, we breathe it in with every in-breath and out with every out-breath. What prevents us from feeling connected is our ego, which wants to run our lives and often manages to do just that. My ego sees only me as important, and wants to make sure I know I am separate from, and better than, anyone else. And so does everyone else’s ego. For someone unaware of the ego’s desires and vast storehouse of tricks, he will let the ego

run things – which can lead to competitiveness, domination, acting superior or scornful of all those lesser beings, anger, hatred and delusion. It gets a lot of people into a lot of trouble. Whereas if you are aware of the ego's pull on you, you learn to recognize when it is trying to dictate your actions. Acting from the ego, you can never be genuine. You are always role-playing. Only if you can let ego go do you come to realize who you really are. And that is a lifelong task.

To wind up here, a few other things I have learned from my Buddhist readings is, first, that the head, our magnificent mind, is where the ego resides. It relies on fact and logic and reason to make you believe it, but it also seizes hold of your emotions if you let it. But where our passion resides, our soul (if there is such a thing), our humanness, is in our heart. That is where we can find equanimity and joy and the ability to love. That is what keeps me smiling all day. Second, I frequently run across the phrase “who you think you are.” Yes, I do have a story line that tells the story of my life, much as I have outlined it to you today. That is sometimes who I think I am – that person I described. But who am I really? The truth of me cannot be put into words. Nor can the truth of anyone. A friend of mine who has written four books on meditation and Buddhism says “I never wrote a true word.” He was not saying that he lies, he was describing the paradox of having to use words to try to describe something--but they never can. Words are never reality, or truth. They are symbols, representing the truth. “Who I think I am,” coming from my left brain and describing me logically and historically, cannot possibly be the ever-changing, evolving, real me.

And the last thing I want to mention is the Buddhist teaching that the self does not exist. The self is simply a collection of forms and causes and conditions, constantly changing, never the same from one moment to the next. Yet we treat it with great reverence as if it exists in some way not only throughout this life but perhaps on into the next. When the causes and conditions of my life cease, and the form dies, what is this self we talk about?

Just today, I read these words in a book I am reading with one of my small groups. “To mature spiritually is to let go of rigid and idealistic ways of being, and discover a flexibility and joy in our life. As spiritual maturity develops, it brings kindness to the heart. Ease and compassion become our natural movement.”

So to sum up: I am a happy person, I am content with who I am, I do not worry, I have no fears, I try to live in the present as much as possible. I take part in 3 small Buddhism groups, lead 4 small meditation groups including one in a men's prison, and lead one big group, the Emerald Coast Meditation Society, plus take part in a monthly liberal discussion group, the First Monday Salon. I love my life. And I love all of you. What more could anyone ask?

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