

BUDDHISM: HOW IT HAPPENED TO ME

October 10, 2013

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What follows is material I am working on for a cable TV show. I thought I would post some of it here and perhaps we can have a discussion.

When I remember my first introduction to Buddhism, all that comes to mind are the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma," also called the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind," or just the "Four Thoughts." Some traditions call them the "Four Reversals," because these thoughts are so convincing and natural that they (when properly understood) divert us from our distracted lives and cause us to actually change our own mind and direction.

Now these four thoughts were not the first Buddhist texts or teaching that I ever came across. My first encounter with Buddhism was in the 1950s (and early 1960s) when Buddhism, like existentialism and other so-called "deep" topics, was something my friends and I stayed up late nights talking about while we drank lots of coffee (back then we even drank instant coffee, which looked and tasted like mud) and smoked too-many cigarettes. In those years Buddhism was considered a philosophy, something to think about and ponder. Yet it was mostly Zen Buddhism that was being written about and discussed. The "Zen" was very cool, while the "Buddhism" was... well, at the time we had little idea what it was all about.

However, the first Buddhist teaching to really seize my mind and touch ground with me, so to speak, were the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind."

Perhaps I had better say just a few words about where I was coming from in my religious upbringing because it was in the process of morphing from so-called "religion" into just spirituality.

MY UPBRINGING

I like to say that in my opinion Buddhism is not a religion, but rather just a method to become more aware. And I cite my Catholic upbringing as proof of this. I was brought up going to church, to catechism class, to Catholic school, and all of that. I even was an altar boy and learned church Latin. This was my parent's choice for me and it went against the grain of my natural interest in spirituality.

When I began to discover alternative spirituality (and eventually Buddhism), I did not reject Catholicism or "turn my back on Jesus" as it is often put. Buddhism does not work like that. It does not reject other faiths, but rather completes them, enhances and fulfills them. You see, I was looking for a path not a philosophy. I needed direction, and I needed to take some direction as opposed to just reading another book or endlessly talking philosophy. Remember, this is in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Things were

different then. My generation was busy dreaming a bridge over which the future would run. This was the 1960s.

Buddhism is, if nothing, else a method and a path, a way of taking life, of living and it simply answered many of the life-questions that I had as a Catholic, and I went on from there.

I never looked back, but when at times I did, Catholicism was right where I left it. Not a hair on its head had been harmed; only my view of it had changed. I just never went any further into it. I had found something more immediately practical, something actually useful, and it was intuitive and organic.

They say that Buddhism takes about 300 years to come into a country. As of 2013 we are hardly a third of the way there in America. And when it does come in, Buddhism does not confront or deny the religions or faiths that are already there. Buddhism is much more fluid and subtle than that. On the contrary, like sacred water, it just flows around ideas and perfectly preserves them just as they are, like insects are preserved in amber.

The proof of this is the fact that the pre-Buddhist Bon religion of Tibet is still with us today, carefully preserved (again: like insects in amber) in the more accommodating Buddhism. What other "religion" is non-intrusive while also being invasive at the same time? Buddhism just naturally made sense to me.

The point here is that to my mind Buddhism is not a religion. It is non-confrontational. It is passive in nature and simply allows whatever religion was there to continue on its own merits. In a very real way, Buddhism fulfills the various faiths it encounters. I didn't have to give up the Catholic faith I was raised in when I began to learn something about Buddhist mind practice, but I did find myself ceasing to identify solely with the tenants of Catholicism, and that quite spontaneously on my part. In fact, it was a great relief to the tyranny of priests and nuns, not to mention god. I am sorry to have to say that in my life (at the time) god was mostly a tyrant.

Buddhism was gentle and had more to offer me that I could actually use on a day-today basis. It answered the questions that religion could not or at least had not up to that point.

NOT A RELIGION

As mentioned, Tibetan Buddhism answered questions I had that went unanswered by Catholicism. Buddhism is primarily a path or method to awareness rather than some kind of religion or faith in itself. Buddhism has no god, no beginning or first cause, and no end times. Instead it is all about the process and processing of life rather than making other assumptions. Buddhism is a method, plain and simple, a method through which to become more aware -- nothing more.

I still value the sense of mystery and devotion that the Catholic Church imbued in me, but I don't have any need for the fear and trembling that the priests and nuns I came across tried to instill. My very core being rejects that approach. And faith without reason, without questioning and testing, is not acceptable to me. Buddhism is all about finding out for yourself, everything important.

TAKEN TO HEART

Despite being exposed to various forms of Buddhism in the 1950s, much of which was intellectual in nature, it was the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma" that made the most sense to me. When I say "made sense" to me, I mean common sense. To my mind these thoughts were obviously true. I was struck by the realism I found in the four thoughts. In fact I had been thinking almost the same thing myself. For me, Buddhism was a way of confirming what I had been wondering all along.

It was not that I did not take the religious rules I had been brought up with to heart, things such as the Ten Commandments. Like Moses, I was given the Ten Commandments from those above. They were handed down to me, literally, from on high by priests and nuns as the law of God. Do not do this; do not do that. Well, I probably wouldn't do those things anyway, but IMO these rules lacked the innate obviousness of the Buddhist's Four Thoughts. In my opinion Buddhism is spiritually organic.

My Catholic faith looked up to heaven for answers, but Buddhism looks inward at the mind that looks to heaven and examines that. It is far easier to adjust my own mind's attitude than it is to change the external world, much less affect whatever is meant by "heaven."

