

## **Reflections of a Zen UU**

Allison Claire

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This time last Sunday I was at the San Francisco Zen Center, for a ceremony in which I formally entered the stream of Zen Buddhism. I received this rakusu that I am wearing, which you'll hear more about, during the ceremony. It represents my formal commitment to the path of Zen practice, and more broadly to what Buddhists call the Bodhisattva Way. This morning I want to tell you what that means to me, and what it has to do with Unitarian Universalism.

I have been a Unitarian Universalist for going on 30 years, and for a long time I described myself as a UU whose spiritual practices and world view were both nature-based and Buddhist. I had been interested in Buddhism since my teens, and for decades I was what you might call a “free range Buddhist” — exploring and borrowing from a wide range of traditions, reading books and taking meditation classes, but never aligning myself with any particular school or lineage of Buddhism. I was — and still am — particularly interested in socially-engaged Buddhism, which I'd known was a thing since the 1980s when I went to jail for anti-nuclear civil disobedience alongside members of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. My eclectic approach to Buddhist practice fit well with my Unitarian Universalism, which honors all wisdom traditions and encourages the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Unitarian Universalism and Buddhism have several core commonalities that make the fit a natural one for me. **First**, both traditions are non-theistic — You're free to believe in God or not, but what brings us together isn't faith in a supernatural power, it's faith in our ability to discover the truth for ourselves — and in the value of doing that together. **Second** is a belief in the fundamental goodness of people, or at least in the innate capacity of every person to awaken to the goodness of their own true nature and the truth of our fundamental connection to each other. In both traditions, the harm that people do to each other, even the true evil that humans are capable of, is understood as the consequence of failing to recognize that true nature and state of connection.

**A third commonality** is that both Unitarian Universalism and Buddhism are primarily concerned with how to live in the here and now, rather than focusing on an afterlife. **Fourth**, both faiths encourage questioning, rather than requiring acceptance of dogma. Buddha himself told his followers not to take his word for anything, but to verify the teachings for themselves according to their own experience.

Most importantly to me, both Buddhism and UUism emphasize **interdependence** as the basis for a life of compassion and service. The passage from Thich Nhat Hahn that Celia read is a beautiful expression of the Zen understanding of interdependence. The basic idea is that nothing exists independently of its context, and the context is always “All of Creation” throughout space and time.

Back in my “free range Buddhist” days I never felt particularly drawn to Zen. I had been influenced by some contemporary Zen writings — including those of Thich Nhat Hahn — but I had never set foot in a Zen practice center or temple, nor wanted to. I had this idea, no more than a stereotype really, that Zen was a rigid and hierarchical type of Buddhism. I certainly wasn’t interested in that! Then a little over 5 years ago I fell in love with someone who happened to be a Zen priest, and I had the opportunity to see Zen close up and experience it for myself.

What I saw with my own eyes, and felt with my own body, was nothing like my preconceptions. Zen offers a radically simple style of meditation that really appealed to me. It has a philosophical side and a literary side, both of which appeal to me, but the core of Zen is a profoundly embodied practice. In sitting meditation and walking meditation we experience being alive in the present moment in our bodies. In going about our daily lives, we manifest our practice through our bodies. That emphasis on embodiment REALLY appealed to me. But most of all — and for me this is really an aspect of embodiment — the ritual appealed to me. Bowing and chanting and moving together with others as one body in services — I LOVED that. The first time I participated in a Zen service I felt as if my whole body was a giant bell, ringing and ringing. I knew I’d come home.

Coming home to Zen didn’t mean leaving Unitarian Universalism. If I used to be a UU with a Buddhist perspective, now I'm 100% UU **and** 100% Buddhist. My own Zen teacher — with whom I study the Buddha’s teachings and who guides me in my practice — is both a Zen priest and a UU minister. Which makes her the perfect teacher for me! “100%

Buddhist and 100% UU” is how she has described herself, and I borrow the phrase from her.

In last Sunday’s jukai ceremony, my teacher “gave” me — meaning passed on to me as they had been passed on to her by her teacher — the Bodhisattva precepts. I “received” those precepts and I vowed to uphold them. So what’s a bodhisattva and what are the precepts?

A bodhisattva is someone who practices (follows the spiritual path) not to attain enlightenment just for themselves, or transcend this world of suffering, but to help all beings wake up and find liberation. The bodhisattva chooses to stay *in* the world as long as there are suffering beings. To use traditional Buddhist language, the bodhisattva chooses not to “cross over” (out of this painful and messy world into nirvana) until ALL BEINGS are able to cross over together. It’s just like Bill Shultz said in the words of the chalice lighting: “No one is saved until All are saved, where All means all of Creation.” That’s the Bodhisattva Way. It means a life dedicated to compassionate action for the benefit of all beings: human and non-human, plants and animals, mountains and rivers.

In Zen services we often chant the Four **Bodhisattva Vows**:

Beings are numberless, I vow to save them

Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them

Dharma gates (that means opportunities to encounter the truth) are boundless, I vow to enter them

The Buddha’s Way is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it

These are quite obviously impossible vows — if we think the point of a vow is to achieve a goal. But it's not! We vow not to *accomplish* these things, but to live our lives one moment at a time, one word and action and intention at a time, in service of freedom for all beings, clarity for all beings, and the transformation of suffering. Another key point about the Bodhisattva Vows is that “all beings” includes ourselves. So when I vow to save all beings I am not dedicating myself to perpetual codependency or the rescue of others at the expense of myself! Another translation makes this clear: I vow to awaken **with** all beings. That's what “saving beings” means!

So those are the Bodhisattva Vows.

The **bodhisattva precepts** are ethical principles that guide our conduct. The precepts aren't commandments, but more like lenses we can use to discern appropriate responses to life's daily challenges. They address things like non-harming, telling the truth, taking only what is given, refraining from various kinds of self-centered action, and taking action that serves connection.

**Jukai** is the Zen ceremony in which someone commits to following the precepts, and to living as a bodhisattva. It's an initiation ceremony or, as we call it, lay ordination.

I received this rakusu as part of my jukai ceremony last Sunday. A rakusu is a smaller version of Buddha's robe, which we call the “robe of

liberation.” Rakusus are worn by Zen monks, lay practitioners, and priests, much as stoles are worn by ministers, to symbolize the ordinand’s commitment to ministry and service. I sewed this rakusu myself, by hand, over a period of many months, following a rice-field pattern that has been handed down over centuries.

The sewing itself is an important contemplative practice. You chant as you sew, either aloud or in your head, and each stitch represents your vow. When I completed the rakusu I gave it to my teacher, who added calligraphy to the silk panel on the back and formally presented it to me during the ceremony.

I love the rice-field pattern of the rakusu, with its several panels sewn together in what looks like a patchwork. The stitches are visible, making the interconnection of the pieces the most important thing. Traditionally, Buddhist robes were sewn from old rags that were collected, cleaned, dyed, and pieced together. To me this suggests something even more radical and beautiful than the transformation of the dirty and discarded into the sacred — it’s a rejection *of any distinction between* the dirty and discarded and the sacred. In Zen there is no separation between the sacred and the profane. My rakusu illustrates the non-duality of life as it really is: Nothing “dirty,” nothing “holy,” no stitch perfect, no stitch imperfect— everything just as it is, unlimited by categories or labels that separate this from that, self from other.

Which brings us back to interdependence. From a Buddhist perspective, interdependence means no separation of this from that, of self from other.

Interdependence means not only that we need each other and affect each other — which we do! — but that we are literally not separate beings — as the paper is not separate from the cloud. We do not and cannot exist without each other. The structure of the rakusu, with its pieces interconnected and the stitches visible, reminds me of this interdependence every time I put it on. And it reminds me of my vows. Of course the two are related.

The Way of the Bodhisattva, following the precepts and helping others cross over, is a natural expression of interdependence. When I *really get it* that you and I aren't separate, compassion for your struggles comes naturally, like water bubbling up at a spring. When I know I'm not separate from the mountains and rivers, of course I'm going to do what I can to protect and heal them! When I know that the folks being swept out of their encampments or bombed in Gaza are not separate from me, of course I want to do whatever I can to relieve their suffering!

Both Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism emphasize that compassionate action and service to others follow from the principle that we are all part of one another. The Seventh Principle in our old UU formulation of shared values — respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part — sealed the deal for me when I was first checking out Unitarian Universalism. I remember hearing it and thinking, that's so Buddhist! In our new, graphic representation of UU principles, Love is at the center and Interdependence is one of the other values extending out from Love like the petals of a flower. The centrality of Love, which UUs talk about more than Buddhists do, is a big part of why I am here.

Still, as a UU Buddhist, if I were designing my own personal mandala I think I would put Interdependence at the center. Interdependence is more than a value, it's the basic nature of Reality itself! It seems to me that love, justice, equity, and the rest of our shared principles — all of which are attributes of human experience — follow from the fundamental truth of Interdependence. You could say they are the ways that Interdependence expresses itself in the realm of human experience.

Luckily we don't need to decide "which comes first," Love or Interdependence, chicken or egg. The point is that each implies or includes the other, and this relationship between Love and Interdependence invites us to explore ever more deeply what it means to "Inter-Be."

In my jukai ceremony, I was asked over and over again whether I would uphold the bodhisattva precepts until all beings awaken together. Over and over I said, "Yes, I will." The fundamental commitment of the bodhisattva is to say in each moment, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves: "Yes, I will." Yes, I am will-ing to be present with whatever is happening right now, present with an open heart and willing hands. It's a vow to show up. Not necessarily to fix or to rescue, but to show up with an intention to be of benefit however I can. To show up for the lived experience of interdependence. That is how a bodhisattva "saves all beings." By saying "Yes."