If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill him!
Sermon by Rev. Mary Wellemeyer delivered December 3, 2006, at Unitarian Universalist Church of Manchester, NH

It happened in summer of 2005, and ended as suddenly as it began in spring of 2006. A young man, a teenager, went into the forest to sit under a papal tree, the very kind of tree the Buddha had sat under when he sought enlightenment. He sat there in silence, neither eating nor drinking, not speaking, fully committed to his meditation, as the Buddha had been so long ago. As he sat, he became a phenomenon. He did not move, he did not eat or drink, he did not speak. Some people knew him: he was Ram Bomjon, known in his role of spiritual seeker as Palden Dorje. He was fifteen years old.

As more and more people came to look, his supporters kept them at a decent distance, so they wouldn’t be poking and pinching and trying to talk to him all the time. The people who came were inclined to call him “Buddha”, some kind of reincarnation or re-visitation of the blessed sage of the Shakyas, Gautama Siddhartha, the historical Buddha. Prayer flags were strung near his tree, and vendors came to sell tea and dumplings and little statues of the Buddha and all the sorts of things that are needed by visitors to such a phenomenon. Skeptics came, and arranged to stay over night to see what was up with this no-eating, no-drinking, totally focused meditator. He really did seem to be the genuine article. He wasn’t talking, but the circus surrounding him was taking a toll.

One day, a snake came out of the forest and bit him, and he had to break concentration long enough to deal with the snakebite. He spoke then, saying that he wished people would stop calling him “Buddha”, and that he wished to remain there for six months. His supporters redoubled their efforts to keep the curious and the devoted at a distance, but visitors kept coming. The once-pristine woods were now littered with dumpling wrappers and other detritus of visitors. He continued to sit until one day, March 11, 2006, when the faithful came to pay their respects, he was gone.

There was an investigation to make sure the young man had not met with foul play, but once that had been determined to the satisfaction of local officials, no further search was conducted. It seemed likely to everyone that he had accomplished his own, internally guided mission under the pipal tree, and simply moved on. Or rather, simply taken the rather complicated steps he would have needed to take in order to leave the circus his sitting had generated. I hope he is well. I hope he is progressing in his spiritual development.

Ram Bomjon was the kind of Buddha-in-the-road that the old Zen koan warns of. The killing of this kind of Buddha does not take place in the regular world of physical bodies, but rather in the mind of the person who perceives the Buddha in the road. For the spiritual health of the people, it was not necessary to physically kill this Buddha, but it was necessary for him to leave the scene, and leave no trace. Venerating him was not doing all those visitors any good. For the Buddha, the true Buddha, is within. The historical Buddha’s very last teaching spoke to this – he said “be ye lamps unto
yourselves.” Light your own way with your own insight. Not with prayers offered in the presence of someone sitting under a pipal tree, not with veneration of a person or a statue, but with the light that comes from within.

How is it to be one of those tea-sipping tourists gazing in rapture at someone who is engaged in deep spiritual concentration? Let me tell you another story.

You may know people who have done something like this. I probably read too many books and don't take enough notes, at least, in this case I thought I knew where I had gotten this story, but when I looked, that's not where it was. I don't know where I got it, but this is what I remember. The woman in question met the Dalai Lama before he became quite so famous as he is now. She became so smitten with his message that she became a kind of hostess for him and his entourage, making it possible for him to visit in the United States, doing his advance work, running conferences. One day, she awoke to the realization that she was burning herself out, living the same sort of life she had hoped to avoid by not being in the corporate world. She began to attend to her own spiritual needs, and was no longer available in the same way she had been. Even in the presence of this great teacher, it took her awhile to "get it". Her worship of the Dalai Lama got in the way of her receiving his message.

And now, a variation on the same theme: A couple of years ago at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, I was part of a gathered group heard a talk about killing the Buddha, although the speaker did not call it that. Our speaker at the Service of the Living Tradition, the service that honors professional ministers at significant milestones in their careers, told us “Walden Woods is on fire. You can’t go there any more.” I had, as is sometimes the case when I get to General Assembly, been out of touch with the news of New England for a week or so, and I was afraid he was speaking of the real-life Walden Woods—next time I got a chance to go online, I satisfied myself that he was speaking metaphorically and not referring to actual events. He wanted us to stop retreating into contemplation and start taking action in the world. I disagreed with him in some ways, but he had a point.

He wanted us to kill our Buddha. He wanted us to stop idolizing Thoreau, reading and rereading his words, admiring his courage to build that cabin, to quietly assist runaway slaves, and to refuse to pay taxes to support a stupid war. He wanted us to have the courage ourselves to do what needs to be done in this day and time, to take our faith the public square, to each of us be our own selves in honor of Thoreau rather than to waste our time admiring him. Thoreau is a Buddha in the road, he said in effect.

The speaker, Reverend Patrick O’Neill, put it in the form of a dichotomy between contemplation and action, which seemed to me the wrong approach, since contemplation—at least in my experience—is needed to provide a firm foundation for action, but he wanted us to do the contemplation that leads to action, rather than the contemplation that leads to more and more conversation about what a great person the historical Henry David Thoreau once was. It’s not about Thoreau, it’s about what will YOU do with your one wild and precious life. If you’re going to be a Unitarian Universalist minister, he
said, you had better be about stirring people into action, not about marveling at Thoreau’s turn of phrase or pondering his relationship with his mother. This gazing at the one who appears to be enlightened is not a proper substitute for uncovering our own enlightenment, he said. Well, that’s not what he actually said, but it’s the way I understood it.

The Buddha laid out a way to uncover the enlightenment we all already have, a way to get out of our own way and let the lamp within shine forth to illuminate our journey. Instead of following that way, most of the Buddha’s followers chose to venerate the one who had achieved that uncovering. They founded a religion instead of putting everything into creating a school of spiritual awakening. The tradition for seeking spiritual awakening that has come down to us wrapped up in that religion is still powerful, but most Buddhists are not into that.

The same thing can be argued in the case of Jesus, that his teachings have been neglected in favor of bowing down to his specialness, his one-of-a-kind-ness, his being like God. In doing homage to Jesus, many Christians completely miss the teachings that are contained within the writings left to us. The Apostle Paul admonished his followers to take care of their bodies as the temple for “the spirit of God within.” Then there are the passages in the Gospel of John that refer to the teachings of Jesus as "living water". When he met the woman at the well and asked her to draw water for him, they had a little exchange, and

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”1 (John 4: 10-14)

Something happens within the people who receive the teachings -- the spirit of God is within, the living water they have taken into themselves quenches their thirst forever. They are lamps unto themselves.

If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him. If that Buddha is on the road, then it’s a Buddha who is not within you. (Actually, it is taught in Buddhist circles that every being has Buddha nature, so if you meet the Buddha on the road, you are probably just meeting another being, but that’s really not what this teaching is about.)

The Dalai Lama offers a wonderful message of peace and hope. That woman in the story helped make it possible for the Dalai Lama’s message to be welcomed and

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widely heard in the United States. Yet for her, His Holiness was the Buddha in the Road, needing to be metaphorically killed. Does that crabby old Zen koan about killing the Buddha mean to say that the Dalai Lama does not deserve good advance work for his tours, or good planning for his conference appearances, or pleasant hospitality when he visits San Francisco?

The woman who was neglecting her own spiritual self-care to bring the Dalai Lama to the world was not doing a bad thing in one sense—the message she was facilitating was something very important for the world to receive. This simple monk, this holy man, whose country and people have been brutalized by the Chinese, does not go around in the world promoting retaliation, vengeance, or violence. He is all about compassion and persuasion even in the face of hatred and ethnic cleansing. The world's people need to become more like him. Still, it’s a problem that the woman was helping at the expense of her own spiritual practice, her own self-discovery. The crabby old Zen master says that it’s vitally important for her to place her own Buddha nature first, and to do what her own lamp shows her.

To give this a Christian reference, she appeared in the role of Martha, the one who was busy providing food and places to sleep for Jesus and his entourage when they visited at the home she shared with her sister Mary. Mary wasn’t doing her part. Mary was sitting at Jesus’ feet, soaking up the teachings. When Martha complained to Jesus, you remember what he said: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:42)

Even though it may have meant his physical accommodations were not so comfortable that night, Jesus was for teachings first, hospitality second.

This caution to put your own spiritual self-care first extends to social action as well. The Vietnamese Zen teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, taught his monks during the Viet Nam War, when they would walk in solemn, slow-moving lines through rice paddies, deliberately taking trails that led them right between lines of soldiers—Viet Cong on one side, and United States troops on the other—he taught that it is critically important to spend time every day, and to take a whole day once a week, to meditate, to do the work of uncovering the Buddha nature within and keeping it uncovered.2 If those monks who were risking their lives every day needed to take time for spiritual self care, probably anyone who is doing the hard work of social action needs to do this, as well. The harder the work that needs to be done in the world, the stronger the commitment must be to do the work within. Otherwise, you’ll burn out, betray your principles -- I’ve seen it, and it's not only not pretty, it can seriously damage the cause you meant to serve.

So what spiritual work do you do to care for yourself? What intervals in your life serve to clear your mind and open up your heart? ..... Do you watch birds at the feeder? Do you go for a run every day? Do you sit in formal meditation? Practice karate? Some combination of these? It may not be obvious at first just which of the things you do

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provides spiritual refreshment. But I bet you can tell. Let’s take a moment in silence while you consider what practices of your life provide spiritual sustenance.

Today, the Sunday closest to the traditional date of the Buddha’s enlightenment, I invite you to make a little more time in your days for practices that nourish you, for what clears your mind and opens up your heart. Consider, in addition, taking one day a week – even one day a month-- to spend the whole day on those practices, and to avoid the things that make you feel busy and crazy. My belief is that as you do this, you will begin to hear the invitation from within and beyond to your own special path for doing good in the world. Then it will be the joyful task of your church community, your friends and your family to help you put that invitation into practice.

Each of us possesses a light. Let us uncover it, let it shine. Let us attend to keeping it uncovered and shining in whatever ways we need to. Because the truly good works of the world are done by letting our light shine, let us have confidence that spiritual development comes first, then good works. But don’t be distracted on your way to spiritual development by Buddhas in the road, wherever you encounter them: Ram Bamjan, the Buddha, Jesus, Thoreau, don’t worship them. Rather, reverently use their examples to light your own way. If you meet the Buddha on the road, don’t buy dumplings or tea and stand there gawking. Keep on your own path and use your own light to find the good you can do in the world. Then do it.