



UU Sangha

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Spring 2009

REPORTS FROM THE UUBF CONVOCATION 2009



Those of us who gathered together for the 3rd UU Buddhist Fellowship Convocation had a good time, enjoying the teachings of Shinzen Young, whose teachings are very compatible with a Unitarian Universalist Buddhist perspective. In addition we enjoyed the company of the about 60 of us, from UU sitting groups, primarily from the West coast, and some also from the East coast. This was the UUBF Board's effort to make a better connection between the UUBF and the West coast sitting groups. We clearly made a good connection, and are planning a future convocation on the West coast soon.

The over all tone of this gathering impressed me with the real need for the UUBF and for such UU sitting groups within our Unitarian Universalist congregations. Our worship together for me was an integration of Unitarian Universalism and Buddhist thought and worship. Convocations such as this one offer

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Not Knowing is Most Intimate: Thomas Huxley, Deep Agnosticism, Zen Buddhism & an Emergent Liberal Spirituality

By James Ishmael Ford

The monk Fayen visited Master Dizang who asked the young student of the way, "Where have you come from?" Fayen replied, "I wander from here to there on my pilgrimage." The master asked, "What is the point of your pilgrimage?" Fayen answered, "I don't know." Master Dizang replied, "Not knowing is most intimate."

Case 20, *The Book of Serenity*¹

Quite a number of westerners, particularly those of a secular perspective, look at Buddhism as the "good religion." They often see it as a humanistic tradition not bound up with the superstitions of Western faiths. There are many reasons for this, most, frankly, based in one form or another of misinformation. Sometimes we've almost got it, if not quite. For instance, near as I can tell we moderns have taken the fact that the Buddha himself wasn't particularly concerned with questions of deity or cosmology as evidence he had a generally skeptical attitude about these matters. I go along with that.

However, beyond this simple assertion some have also pointed to the *Agganna Sutta*,² which, uniquely among texts that claim to relate what the historic Buddha actually said, does have him making some cosmological assertions. In the *Agganna Sutta* if someone squints hard and tilts her head, it is just possible to see a form of Big Bang cosmology. And if

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Notes from the Editor

Greetings.

An interesting issue, this *UU Sangha*. Every bit of it is emphatically Unitarian Universalist and it brings new dimensions to the experience of Buddhism in a UU context. We hope you like it.

There is general agreement that Convocation 2009 was not just a success but a historic development that is building relationships among UU sanghas and sitting groups in the Pacific Northwest, on the West Coast, and nationally.

We spent some time talking about ways to grow Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism. We're already trying to help peer-led groups start up in UU congregations (stop by our booth in the Exhibit Hall for an informal workshop on this!) but we need to be more intentional and offer a wider spectrum of approaches and materials. We ought to be a resource for congregations, especially in integrating Buddhist and UU teachings rather than simply letting them co-exist. Developing materials that could be used in an annual lay-led service would help this along.

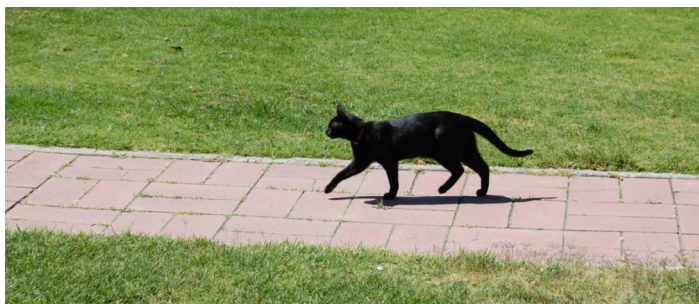
And we need to communicate more among ourselves. Regional convocations and an annual national convocation were favored, but our simple listserv should not be neglected. So please, go to the UUBF home page and try it out. And if you don't like the conversations going on, start some new ones.

It will be interesting to look back in ten or fifteen years and see what has come from this.

In our next issue, we'll celebrate the 15th anniversary of the *UU Sangha* and we'll look back at the people and programs that brought us to the present moment.

Gassho, Robert Ertman, Editor

One last impression of Convocation 2009: The cat in charge of the courtyard at Mission San Luis Rey.



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NOT KNOWING IS MOST INTIMATE

while continuing to squint, one stands on his head, it is just possible to discern a rough version of evolution. But you really, really have to want to find it, to do so. I don't. So, I've never felt that Buddhist thought anticipated anything especially relevant to contemporary science, in any particular given field.

That said, I do think there are some connecting points to evolutionary thought, Buddhist spiritual disciplines, and what I see as an emergent liberal spirituality. These are, I believe, really important connections, that speak to a spiritual style, how we as moderns, generally disaffected from our religious origins, might best consciously engage our interior lives, and to something more, to winning a pearl of great price. I want to explore what that might be in this essay. However, rather than Darwin, it is Thomas Huxley who provides a primary nexus point for this enterprise.

Many assert it was out of a public debate between Thomas Huxley and the Anglican bishop Samuel Wilberforce that the theory of evolution first began to find general acceptance, at least among the educated classes. The son of a destitute teacher, Huxley was only through enormous personal effort able to obtain his education as a physician. He began work as a surgeon with the Royal Navy, became a professor of natural history at several institutions and eventually became president of the Royal Society.

Huxley was a younger contemporary of Darwin's and from the beginning one of his fiercest supporters. It was Huxley who engaged in most of the debates of the day rather than his mentor and friend. Huxley would eventually describe himself as "Darwin's Bulldog."

My introduction to Huxley as anything more than a name associated closely with Charles Darwin or, to me rather more importantly at the time, as Aldous Huxley's grandfather, comes through the controversial contemporary Western Buddhist Stephen Batchelor, author of the seminal study *Buddhism Without*

Beliefs.³ I consider this book, in fact the entirety of Batchelor's work, of enormous importance for contemporary liberal spirituality. I personally embrace a considerable part of his perspective on my own spiritual journey. And, perhaps more important, I find it a powerful guide for a contemporary spirituality in an era marked by doubt and nearly as frequently suspicion of all authority claims.

Batchelor is one of the most interesting and I believe most important thinkers in that contemporary project of Buddhism in the West becoming Western Buddhism. First ordained in the Tibetan tradition by the Dalai Lama, after a decade as a Tibetan Buddhist monk during which time he began to establish himself as a scholar he transferred to the Korean Son (Zen) tradition where he spent another decade in formal training as well as continuing his scholarly endeavors. He left the monastery, married a former nun, and has gradually established himself as an important figure in the contemporary interpretation of Buddhism as a faith relevant to our faithless times.

And in this project Batchelor makes much of the term "agnostic" which Thomas Huxley coined in the late nineteenth century. In an essay titled "the Agnostic Buddhist" Batchelor writes how Huxley coined agnostic "as a joke. Huxley belonged to a small philosophical circle in London in which he increasingly felt out of place. While everybody else in the group could readily identify themselves as a Christian or a Rationalist or a Schopenhaurian, or whatever, he felt perplexed that no such term seemed applicable to him. So he decided to call himself an 'agnostic' in order that he too could 'have a tail like all the other foxes.'"⁴

Agnostic means without knowledge, or not knowing. However, not in the sense we commonly find today, "I don't know and I don't particularly care." Rather Huxley's agnosticism had a lot of heart about it. "Huxley even described his view as 'the agnostic faith,' thus giving it the kind of seriousness that one might otherwise expect only amongst religious people." He followed this way with great passion.

As Batchelor explained, Huxley “saw agnosticism as demanding as any moral, philosophical, or religious creed.”⁵ Well, maybe not creed. Actually he seemed to have much the same reservations about formal creeds many contemporary religious people do, particularly those who identify with the term “spiritual but not religious.” By this most who use the term seem to mean they see value in the spiritual realm but recoil at the prescriptions of formal religions. And this fit Huxley, who wasn’t seeking pat answers to the great questions. For him agnosticism was first and foremost, a method. The method he had in mind is broadly the same as that which underpins scientific inquiry. And for him this method led to a naturalistic, and what we might call today a humanistic, spirituality.

And he brings quite a gift to any modern seeking depth. Not knowing allows us to see things in new light, to discern much about the human heart. Also Huxley’s rigorous observations within the spirit of not knowing led to some basic principles. And these are principles that can inform us, and take us deep into the ways of wisdom.

Actually it appears whether God exists was not a primary concern of his, although that Huxley saw no particular reason to postulate a deity earned him enmity among some. As I see it, Huxley’s real challenge for most of us cut much closer to the bone.

He challenged how we see ourselves. He was adamant that human beings did not exist outside the flow of events and their intimate interrelatedness. He wrote, “In the whole universe there is nothing permanent, no eternal substance either of mind or of matter.”⁶ He felt any idea of an abiding self, an eternal individual “personality is a metaphysical fancy; and in very truth not only we, but all things in the worlds without end of the cosmic phantasmagoria, are such stuff as dreams are made of.”⁷ As we go forward I will suggest understanding this viscerally becomes a key to authentic wisdom.

Unitarian Universalist theologian and minister Forrest Church observed the work of religion flows out of our knowledge we are

alive and that we are going to die. I would add to that religion, spirituality addresses the hurt, fear and anxiety that seems to haunt the human condition. I find much of that hurt and fear in our lives arises out of a fundamental cognitive error. The error is that we are isolated beings not intimately wrapped up with the rest of creation.

Certainly, as I look at myself honestly, relentlessly, in the spirit of not knowing, frankly, I find it impossible to discern any part of me that isn’t formed by conditions ranging from my genetic makeup to my ongoing encounters with events and people. I am this because of that. And the “that” which makes “this,” changes in a heartbeat. Who I am changes sometimes slightly, sometimes dramatically with the very next addition of experience.

There are all sorts of reasons why we see ourselves as separate from each other. To me it seems obvious it is an unfortunate side effect of our amazing ability to divide the universe, to find the information that allows us to survive. And there certainly is a truth that in any given moment, we are in fact separate. You are you and I am I, at least in the moment. And at the very same time there is a larger sense in which we are totally wrapped up together in a very real web of mutuality. The intuition of the spiritual enterprise is that we can reconcile these apparent contradictions, our separateness in the moment, and our essential connectedness. This is sometimes called the nondual perspective

Through his commitment to not knowing, Huxley found the nondual perspective. While he was writing before the discovery of genes, like the Buddha, he got the principle that we are all moments in the great rush of time and space, verbs rather than nouns, notes in a symphony.

The spiritual enterprise as I see it, is to find how this is in fact our truth, yours and mine. It is discovered when we open our hearts and minds, as we embrace a way of deep agnosticism, of truly not knowing. Fascinatingly there is a Buddhist practice that appears to be

essentially the same as Huxley's fierce and engaged agnosticism. The major difference is that it is understood from the beginning to be a spiritual discipline. Susan Blackmore in her delightful book *Consciousness: An Introduction* reflects on the Zen practice of *shikantaza*, or just sitting, or as she calls it "open meditation."

Many make much of the posture in *shikantaza*. And I think posture is important. But vastly more important is what happens in the mind. And Blackmore touches on the essential.

"This technique is very direct and simple, but difficult to do. When thoughts and distractions arise, the task is to return to the present moment, but this is not easy when the present moment is full of pain in the legs, memories of unhappiness or anticipations of future pleasure. One solution is to meet all distractions with the attitude 'Let it come, let it be, let it go.' 'Let it come' means let the thought, or pain or worry or whatever, arise without trying to prevent it. Once it has come, don't do anything with it. Don't react, don't turn it around in the mind, and above all don't judge it as good or bad. Just let it be. If thoughts are let alone, they will go away on their own. Don't cling onto them. With practice, letting go becomes easier, and more stuff, appearing and disappearing without response. In mindful, alert awareness the differences between self and other, and the mind and its contents, disappear. This is known as nonduality."⁸

Then, being of that skeptical nature, of not knowing down to the bone, she asks the hard question. "Have these people really seen nonduality, directly, in their own experience?" From there, she asks the equally important question. "If they have, could we all see it? Might the psychologists, philosophers and neuroscientists working on the problem of consciousness see nonduality directly for themselves? If so, it seems possible that they might bring together two apparently totally different disciplines: the third-person discipline of science and the first-person discipline of self-transformation. If they did so, might they then

understand exactly what had happened in their own brains when all the illusions fell away and the distinction between first and third person was gone? This way the direct experience of nonduality might be integrated into a neuroscience that only knows, intellectually, that dualism must be false."⁹

In recent decades there has been a wealth of research into these questions. Blackmore's book provides a substantial overview of the range of consciousness studies together with some particular focus on these particular questions. Another important study is James Austin's survey *Zen and the Brain*.¹⁰ Each can be said to be inspired directly or indirectly by Huxley's agnosticism as an engaged spirituality.

This is something of a countercultural assertion and discipline. It is a call to attend closely. And it claims that if one does, one's perspective on the world will change. And that change is a fundamental challenge to the major worldviews dominant. It challenges mercantilism and all capitalisms. Frankly, it also challenges the various socialisms, as well. But if it is a pointing to who we really are, it is worth breaking from the patterns we've inherited and seeking what is both an ancient and newest new vision.

Deep agnosticism, not turning away, remaining present, heals many wounds. As to what this really looks like there's a story from Blackmore's book that may prove helpful. "John Wren-Lewis was a physics professor with decidedly anti-mystical views when in 1983, at the age of sixty, he was poisoned while traveling on a bus in Thailand. A would-be thief gave him some sweets laced with what was probably a mixture of morphine and cocaine, and the next thing he knew was waking up in a dilapidated and dirty hospital.

"At first he noticed nothing special, but gradually it dawned on him that it was as if he had emerged freshly made, completely with the memories that made up his personal self, from a radiant vast blackness beyond space and time. There was no sense at all of personal continuity. Moreover, the 'dazzling darkness' was still there. It seemed to be behind his head, continu-

ally re-creating his entire consciousness afresh, instant by instant, now! And now! And now! He even put his hand up to feel the back of his head only to find it perfectly normal. He felt only gratitude toward everything around him, all of which seemed perfectly right and as it should be.”¹¹

Now I’m very taken that Blackmore didn’t chose an example from the traditional spiritual literature. This wasn’t a thirty-year practitioner of an austere spiritual discipline. This was someone drugged and robbed. This experience is accessible to all of us because it is a natural part of how our brains naturally work. Meditation and other disciplines help, a lot. But in the last analysis all we need do is let go of our certainties. As the lady said, “It’s all in your head.” We, if you will, evolved to be able to do this. Why I don’t know. But that we can, that I’ve experienced. As have endless others.

By the bye, some sense of this experience never abandoned Wren-Lewis for the rest of his life. In his own words Wren-Lewis described the place of not knowing. “I feel as if the back of my head has been sawn off so that it is no longer the sixty-year-old John who looks out at the world, but the shining dark infinite void that in some extraordinary way is also, ‘I.’” Only don’t know.

This is where not knowing takes us, each following our own trajectory, each with our own moments, and all joined. For me I found it sitting in a Buddhist monastery, eating a thin cabbage soup. For you, perhaps playing with a child. For another, perhaps listening to Mozart. Another, perhaps just noticing that is possible for this moment only, to not have that drink. For another, well, who knows? The secret is only not knowing. As the master Dizang said, “Not knowing is most intimate.”

I suggest a deep agnosticism; truly engaging not knowing is the universal solvent. It will release us from our hurt and fears by showing us, not in some abstract cognitive therapy sort of way, but in the deepest, most visceral way, who we really are.

Open, wide as the sky. And at the very same time intimate, more intimate than any

word can ever convey. And the way to this wisdom is simple. Just don’t know. Only don’t know. That’s all it takes.

NOTES

¹ Hongzhi Zhengjue, ed, Congrong Lu, author’s adaptation from several translations

² Maurice Walsche, trs. The Long Discourse of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikaya, Chapter 27, beginning page 407

³ Stephen Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs, New York, Riverhead Books, 1997

⁴ <http://www.stephenbatchelor.org/online%20articles/agnostic%20buddhist.htm>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Thomas Henry Huxley, Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays, Whitefish, Kessinger Publishing, 2004: p 31

⁷ Ibid

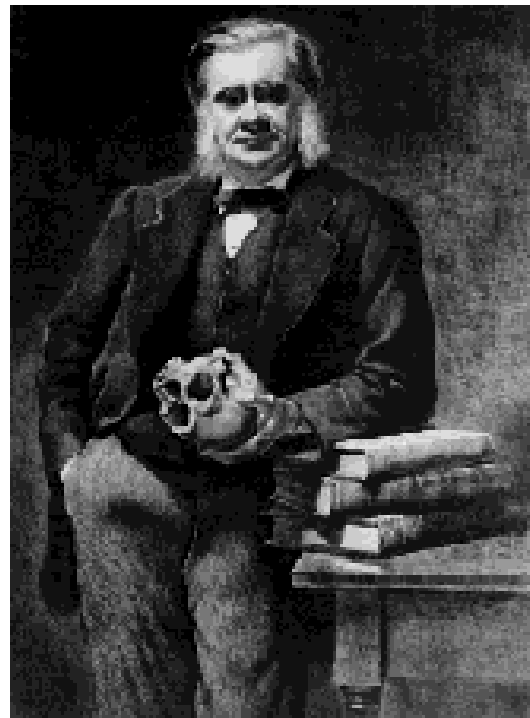
⁸ Susan Blackmore, Consciousness: An Introduction, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004: p. 389

⁹ Susan Blackmore: p. 414

¹⁰ James Austin, Zen and the Brain, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1998

¹¹ Ibid: p. 409

James Ishmael Ford currently serves as senior minister of the First Unitarian Church of Providence. He is also school abbot of the Boundless Way Zen Community. His most recent book is Zen Master Who? A Guide to the People and Stories of Zen.



T. H. Huxley, President of the Royal Society
Portrait by John Collier, 1883

The Maitreya Project Heart Shrine Relic Tour at UU Clearwater

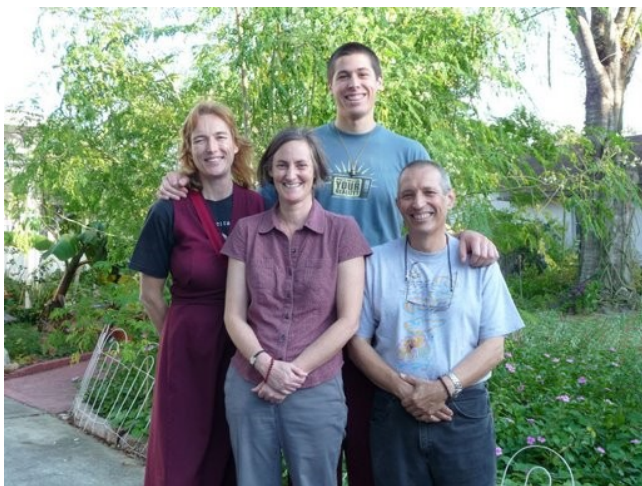
Oct. 31- Nov. 2, 2008

By Frank M. Tedesco, Ph.D.

The remains of great masters, precious reliquaries and impressive stupas are found throughout Asia, and I encountered many traveling the continent over fifteen years. However I have never experienced the palpable aura of sanctity emanating from dead remains than I felt associated with the massive collection of Buddhist relics found in the Maitreya Project Heart Shrine Relic Tour collection.

I learned of the mystical power of these relics when I visited LA in June of 2005 for an academic conference. While the sometimes brilliant talk of the colloquy has long faded from my memory, the visit to the interfaith temple of Shri Natha Devi Premananda in one of south central LA's most drug and crime-ridden ghettos would not fade.

(<http://www.eaglewingsofenlightenment.org/home.html>). I learned that when she hosted the Heart Shrine relics in her sanctuary, violent crime in her community sharply decreased and the tough neighborhood became peaceful for a while. Police helicopters actually stopped circling the streets for a few days. Murders



Relic Guardians Carmen, Christian and Elizabeth with UU organizer True Dharma Frank Tedesco, front yard with relic-blessed road kill, Largo, Florida Nov. 2008.

Photo by Serenity Tedesco

dropped. The visit was an eye, ear and heart opener. Whether it was the power of the relics themselves- mere fragments of bones and teeth and who knows what- or the power of concentrated devotion and mental focus of many believers, or an unlikely "coincidence" of auspicious events, there was something there that pulled me to explore the relic phenomena further. Shri Natha showed me a DVD about the Maitreya Project and the Relic Tour that is a fund-raising arm for the project. The seed of possibility, of doing something with the Heart Shrine relics or for the development project in India, was planted in my mind. By November 2008, the weekend before the election of President Obama, the collection of over a thousand Buddhist relics made its way in a van to the west coast of Florida to be hosted by the UUs of Clearwater there.

Thanks to the help of many dedicated UUC and Buddhist volunteers who worked long hours through the weekend and the spiritual support and administrative guidance of senior minister Rev. Abhi Janamanchi, the Relic Tour visit transpired without a hitch. Between 2,500 and 3,000 visitors passed through the eight-sided UUC sanctuary called the Octagon over the weekend.



Circumambulating the relics. Photo By Frank Tedesco

Local Tibetan Buddhist groups contributed prayer flags and decorative motifs that added to the ambience of the setting. The Relic Tour guardians brought remarkable energy and devotion to their mission and worked around

the clock to prepare the relic exhibition in fine taste, both visually and musically with an extraordinary selection of spiritual songs and instrumental renditions that created a meditative presence. Many visitors came and sat in the Octagon all day long just breathing in the tranquility and sense of sanctity permeating the display. A spirit of the “perfection of generosity” without expectation of effusive thanks was brought to the event by many participants.



Mid-day thong. Photo by Frank Tedesco

Lama Zopa, the head of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition and Spiritual Director of the Maitreya Project, has been receiving and collecting relics of the Buddha and Buddhist masters from Tibet and other parts of Asia in order to place them in the Heart Shrine of a monumental 500 foot bronze Maitreya Buddha statue that is to be constructed in Kusinagar, Uttar Pradesh, India. Kusinagar is the site of the simple village where the historic Shakyamuni passed into parinirvana. This multi-million dollar statue will actually be a functioning office building, an education and social services center dedicated to manifesting practical loving-kindness to the desperately poor Indian community in the region. Around this huge teaching Buddha of the future, the embodiment of loving-kindness, will be built schools and hospitals to serve all who may need their services. The Dalai Lama supports the vision of Lama Zopa. It is one way the Tibetan Buddhist refugee community can repay the Indian people in a way consonant

with the heritage of India.

The great Maitreya Project will attract seekers from around the world who are needy of a more purposeful life for themselves. A building project of this sort is not easy in the best of economic times, let alone today. Perhaps it is an outlandish, foolhardy idea, funded by antiquated notions of the power of relics, catering to superstition. Check it out thoroughly. And while you may scoff, and be objectively hard-nosed and skeptical, check out the quality of your heart as you thinking so. Are you planting seeds of loving-kindness for the future with your discriminations? I don't know. Bodhi, svaha.



The Relic Collection
Photo courtesy of the Maitreya Project

Saddharma (True Dharma) Frank Tedesco leads the UUBF at the UUs in Clearwater, Florida. After years of studying the dharma in stops and starts in different lineages, Frank completed a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies at Dongguk University in Seoul in 1998 with research focused on death, abortion and rebirth in Korean Buddhist tradition. Frank also leads a weekly meditation group at UU in Tarpon Springs and reports for a Korean Buddhist monthly. He has been asked to teach Buddhism and East Asian religions at the University of South Florida in Tampa in 2010. See www.maitreyaproject.org for more information about the Maitreya Project. You can hear Frank in a 56 minute radio interview about the

Relic Tour at UU Clearwater at this link: http://ourgreatesthour.mypodcast.com/2008/10/The_Maitreya_Buddha_Heart_Shrine_Relics-153562.html

A POSTSCRIPT FROM SADDHARMA

For the last few years I have been picking up all sorts of animals that have been killed on the local roads and bringing them home to my small xeriscaped property and burying them with spontaneous memorial prayers and mantras for auspicious rebirths. I have now buried dozens of animal friends- armadillos, raccoons, opossums, squirrels, turtles, ducks, sea gulls, crows, cats. I regret that I can't pick them all up. Some I bury roadside or seclude in the bushes near where they died with Om Mani Pema Hum...The Relic Guardians surprised me and brought the case of the entire relic collection to my home the morning after the exhibition closed. We carried the relic case over the entire property and the animal graves blessing them with mantras. They also brought the relics into my home and blessed the altar in the living room chapel. I keep photos of deceased friends and of people I have performed memorials for, as well as the remains our adopted calico cat Toby who died of cancer one year after her American Tibetan nun master and protector Ani Drolkar died of the same disease. I cremated her outdoors where she loved to play and sun herself.



Toby

(continued from page 1)

UUBF CONVOCATION 2009

us as UUs an opportunity to enrich our UU Buddhist sitting groups and our own private meditation practices, as well as deepen our lives as Unitarian Universalists.

One teaching out of the many given by Shinzen Young has stayed with me. This was his teaching on “Deep Knowing.” He taught that our minds want to avoid such mind states as doubt, not knowing, or muddleness. What we, as practitioners are invited to do, is to not avoid such mind states as confusion or doubt, but to accept such as not a problem. A state of equanimity is best. We can have a state of knowing and a state of not knowing, and accept both at the same time.

What I particularly enjoyed about this teaching was Shinzen Young’s linking this state of equanimity with spiritual teachers from other world religions. (familiar to us as UUs) He spoke of the Christian mystics, citing *The Cloud of Unknowing*, by an Augustinian English monk, as well Thomas Aquinas, who wrote that God *is a kind of not knowing*. Here in Buddhism and in Christianity there is a surrendering to not knowing in order to foster a deeper kind of knowing. Sensei Young also lifted up Schools of Philosophy such as the Sceptics several centuries before Christ who taught that one is just to observe phenomena. Sceptics taught that one is to have equanimity without doubt. The teaching from all of these spiritual paths is to develop a deep knowing of not knowing and knowing who one is, really. From such a state of deep knowing happiness can arise independent of conditions.

You can find out more about Shinzen Young by going to his website Shinzen.org. I hope that those of you who can will join us at our next convocation!

— Rev. Judith Wright, Pres. UUBF



After two UUBF Convocations at Garrison Institute in New York, I felt we had started to have somewhat of a format, even a rhythm, to expect from these gatherings. The decision

to hold Convo 2009 on the west coast was an invitation for a fresh perspective—Zen mind reinforced. There is one thing I find about traveling to any part of the world that is not New England, where my roots and ways are ever more deeply entrenched, and that is that I can't help but awaken to a very mindful state. I am one of those people who is always noticing, noticing, noticing..... It's a personal characteristic I must be ever watchful of, because often holding hands with Noticing is her sister, Judging! But in a new environment it makes the experience so much richer, sometimes even overwhelming. Thus, the setting for Convo 2009, the Mission San Luis Rey in sunny southern California, was about as far from the barely -out-of-winter experience on the banks of the Hudson River as I might find, with the exception of the monastic architectural feeling of the facility.

Besides the very different physical environment, the move to the west coast made the gathering accessible for UUBF practitioners that I had not had a chance to meet before. A few had been also at Garrison, and I appreciated the opportunity to learn how others are practicing in their own home sanghas, and of their challenges. The program and the schedule held us in a container that I appreciated, allowing me to focus on the sessions with Shinzen Young, on our mealtime conversations, and in our sitting together. I look forward to alternating Convo from east to west, maybe even eventually from north to south, and weaving our deepening UUBF connections.

— Rev. Catherine Senghas



Good folks, great atmosphere, good teacher, and time for meditation all made for a superb weekend. I enjoyed being surrounded by so many of my UU community that looked to the teachings of the Buddha for wisdom and guidance.

— John Holl, San Diego



UUBF and relaxation

My mind was challenged by a new way of considering my practice. Shinzen pointed out that all world religions have a mystical core. Buddha's breakthrough was defining with scientific precision the elements required to experience that mysticism. Throughout the weekend, Shinzen summarized the key elements of that scientific formula.

Physically, I was challenged as well, in sits longer than is my norm, as I breathed through and experienced the approaches summarized by Shinzen.

In counterpoint to that austerity, I swam laps in the saltwater pool under a deep blue sky – a gentle richness I appreciated, coming from the then chilly grey skies of Seattle. I embraced the breeze, doing t'ai chi in a grove of trees. I absorbed the grace of the gardens, art and architecture of the Mission. The memory I most savor, though, is discovering a sangha of other UUs across the country who have found meaningful spiritual practice in Buddhist meditation. We shared—and will continue to share—how to deepen our own personal practice, how to maintain a lay-led group; how to weave together UU and Buddhist practices.

I am grateful to those who gave your time and energy to create this weekend.

— Diane



UUBF Convocation was exactly what I needed – not only an exceptionally fine teacher and practice experience, but also a delightfully supportive bonding with “my” specific sangha: not just Buddhists, not just UUs, but UU Buddhists! This is a rare and wonderful presence, and I'm very grateful to UUBF to making it happen (and to all who attended, for sharing your practice and mine).

Before the Convocation, I had never heard of Shinzen Young. I really appreciated his scholarship, his careful responses, his deep listening and his obvious joy and satisfaction in his practice. He was masterful in relating to his audience, somehow finding just the right tone that wasn't too much for “newbies” nor too su-

perfidious for those whose practice is more mature. I'd go out of my way to work with him again; I'd particularly like to learn more about his focus on pain. His comments were detailed and complete – but mostly, I loved that he emphasized actual practice. I was afraid this would be too much talk, talk, talk, but we had equal time for silent meditation. Very rich. His gentle guidance into meditation was welcome. I particularly liked the simple, steady reminder, “elongate your spine... .”

I am still learning from many of his teachings. For example, “Mindfulness is an attentional relationship to sensory experience.” “The body thinks it wants to avoid pain and find pleasure – but what it really wants is to avoid suffering and find fulfillment... The mind thinks it wants the answer to this or that – but what it really wants is the answer to the question, who or what am I?” “The biggest pit-fall (in approaching practice) is worrying so much about the map, you never make the journey.”

Shinzen Young's handouts were also very helpful. Some examples: “Mindfulness practice trains your nervous system to know itself better and interfere with itself less.” “It should be obvious that in order to deeply understand who you are, you must experience yourself as you are. Clarity could be looked upon as the ability to experience something just as it is. Equanimity could be looked upon as the willingness to experience something just as it is.” His “nutshells” for mindfulness practice (“FIT” and the “five ways”) were very useful and unique approaches. And I'm intrigued with his “home retreat” practice program.

Maybe the most valuable for me, though, was the opportunity to connect with other UUBF members from the Pacific Northwest. It encouraged us to begin shaping a UUBF network in our area, to encourage more sharing and less isolation, as well as to support congregational education about Buddhist wisdom as a UU spiritual practice.

I will probably not travel to the east coast for future UUBF Convocations, but I would certainly look forward to attending west

coast events in the future. And I'd bring friends!

— Janine Larsen, Woodinville, WA



Nothing profound to say except that I found our convocation a very satisfying experience and was delighted to have Shinzen Young there as our teacher. The setting was lovely and the fellow meditators most helpful and mellow. I am grateful for all the planning that went into it, I hope to be at the next one, and am more committed to my Buddhist practice and leading my Sangha than ever.

Please keep up the great work,
— Rev. Ellen



I thought it was wonderful and found it very rewarding. With loving-friendliness,
— Hugh



Shinzen Young, sitting very still:
“The entire practice is in the posture.”
Pinhole photograph by the editor.



UU Buddhist Fellowship

unitarianuniversalist
CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP
freely following jesus



UU Mystics in Community



Exhibit Booth Talks

(in booth #928 near the UUA Book Store)

The UU Buddhist Fellowship, the UU Christian Fellowship and the UU Mystics have arranged a meeting area in their shared booth space to present these informal workshops:

Christian Voices in Unitarian Universalism

Thursday 1:00 – 2:15pm

Based on the book by Skinner House, edited by UUCF President Rev. Kathleen Rolenz, different UU Christians will talk about freely following Jesus as their spiritual path and how Unitarian Universalism has helped.

100,000 Vajrasattva Mantras Later

Thursday 2:45 – 4:00pm

The Rev. Judith Wright will present slides and speak about her 5 month sabbatical journey in Nepal, January-June 2008. She stayed for this entire time in a Tibetan-Buddhist monastery/nunnery (Kopan) doing spiritual practices and teaching the nuns.

UU Mystics Community Gathering

Thursday 4:30 – 5:30pm

An informal gathering of members, friends, and all who share an interest in direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder. Our trustees will be on hand to discuss our purpose, objectives, activities, and our contribution to the spiritual life of UU congregations.

Mystical Naturalism

Friday 1:00 – 2:15pm

Mystical naturalism means that basic religious truths can be found in nature, through observation and experience, and recognizes that some of that experience is beyond our natural abilities to understand. The universe is unknowable in its entirety and mystical naturalism respects the mystery of the wonder and wisdom that is there for all of us in times of need or out of the blue. Led by the Rev. Susan Manker-Seale.

UU Christian Spiritual Practices

Friday 2:45 – 4:00pm

What spiritual practices and disciplines from our own UU Christian history, and from other Christian traditions, do UUs follow, and how can they grow the soul of all regardless of theological orientation?

Emerging Small Groups the Jesus Way

Saturday 1:00 – 2:15pm

Planting and nurturing and multiplying small groups of UU Christians and Jesus-followers in your church or, with other progressive Christians, in your wider area, and how the lessons from the Emergent Church movement can help.

Sharing Mystical Experience

Saturday 2:45 – 4:00pm

Many of us have had them, but not as many have found a place to share our mystical experiences with others of open mind and heart. These experiences can take on the shape of our religious backgrounds, but the commonalities are deep and connect us to one another. Led by the Rev. Susan Manker-Seale.

Fostering a UU Mindfulness Practice Group

Saturday 4:30 – 5:30pm

This workshop will help you foster your own lay-led, peer-led, UU Mindfulness Practice Group. The MPG model emphasizes practice and does not require teachers or adherence to any particular approach to Buddhism. Led by Robert Ertman.

Engaging Our Theological Diversity

Sunday 1:00 – 2:15pm

A panel of representatives from UU Christians, UU Buddhists, and UU Mystics will discuss some of the themes from the 2005 report from the Commission on Appraisal. How are we informed and transformed by our theologies? How do we engage our theological diversity within the UUA? How can our theological interest groups further enrich UU congregational life? Attendees will be welcome to participate in the discussion.

Vesak-Month, Year 2553 Two Buddha's Birthdays In Tampa Bay, Florida

By Frank M. Tedesco, Ph.D.

Florida UUs were treated to two innovative Vesak or Buddha's Birthday celebrations this spring. Both events took place at Unitarian Universalist churches in the Tampa Bay area in late June.

Clearwater

About 80 people attended the celebration honoring the infant Buddha at the Unitarian Universalists of Clearwater on May 23rd. Clearwater UU Buddhist Fellowship members created a facsimile of Lumbini Grove in the center of the octagonal sanctuary. Using what was available in the church lobby, UUBF Clearwater members convert gathered decorative trees and shrubs to create a makeshift hollow of sal trees where Queen Maya raised her right arm to grasp a branch to steady herself and miraculously gave birth to Siddhartha. Offerings of flowers, potted plants, orchids and amateur ikebana surrounded the baby Buddha statue to create a sacred atmosphere.



Photo by Frank Tedesco

The meeting was opened by a Native American flute and drum music played by UU musicians Cathy Costa and Barry Skeete. They created a meditative mood with their natural sound that set the tone for the evening. Dharma

Teacher True Dharma Frank Tedesco introduced the meaning of Vesak, the month celebrating the birth, enlightenment and parinirvana of Shakyamuni. The three events occurred on the same day according to Theravada and Tibetan traditions. This talk was followed a local Sri Lankan monk chanting Pali scriptures and a group of Vietnamese believers led by their bhiksuni abbess chanting in their native tongue. These prayers were followed by toning with a crystal bowl and UU Clearwater Elly Kelly Baker who led a rendition of a peace invocation in the style of Thich Nhat Hanh. Lay representatives of the Clear Water Zen Center of the American Rinzai Zen lineage of Philip Kapleau dressed in long grey robes chanted the Heart Sutra in English using a traditional Japanese drum rhythm. The ceremony's grand finale, of course, was the bathing of the baby Buddha by all assembled. This solemn ritual was accompanied by the chanting of Om Mani Pema Hum mantra by American Tibetan Drikung Kagyu Buddhist. Thanks to the generous contribution of seven large trays of rice and vegetable dishes freely offered by an anonymous Taiwanese bodhisattva, all attendees were able to feast after the ceremony. Leftover rice was given to anyone who wanted to take home a doggy bag. Later that evening a visitor contacted by us by email to offer the UUBF Clearwater sangha a Bodhi Tree sapling cloned from a prized specimen in the Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota. The Buddhadharma will become more rooted in Clearwater when we find the right spot for this large banyan fig tree!

Tarpon Springs

The following weekend a rather different Buddha's Birthday celebration took place at the UU Church of Tarpon Springs, about twenty five miles from UU Clearwater. The UU Tarpon Springs Church is designated a Florida historic building and is the oldest UU church in state of Florida, organized in 1885. The church houses the famous collection of oil paintings of the American artist George Inness, Jr., two of which formerly hung in the Louvre Museum in Paris. The triptych painting behind the infant

Buddha statue is entitled *The Twenty-Third Psalm*, painted in 1922.



Photo by Serenity Tedesco

Buddha's Birthday Sunday was a very happy event. Between sixty and seventy people attended this historic first Buddha's Birthday service at Tarpon Springs, including a core group of twelve to fifteen who regularly attend a meditation and dharma study class every Saturday morning. Most church members ladled pure water over the Korean baby Buddha for the first time. From their patience waiting on line and the expressions on their faces you could tell that they took the cleansing and purification ritual very seriously. We played the very gentle and beautiful Chant of Metta CD by the Imee Ooi, the famous Malaysian Chinese Buddhist singer, during the bathing ceremony. After the service everyone gathered in the church dining hall to share in a birthday cake for the Buddha and homemade vegetarian delights, including vegan oatmeal cookies. One visitor to the church that morning was a professor of geology from Texas who's renowned for battling creationists and other Biblical fundamentalists as an expert witness in the courts. He praised the Buddha's scientific attitude to investigating the truth as expressed in the Kalama Sutta. He also admired the Dalai Lama's inquisitive spirit in collaborating with neuroscientists in investigating the relationship between the mind and brain in meditation. It was stimulating conversation about the Buddhist attitude

to truth and making new friends. Members of the Tarpon Springs UU Meditation Group hope to acquire wire frames and paper petals to make Korean style lotus lanterns for next year's celebration! Drop by the church for a tour and meditation the next time you visit Florida!



The Tarpon Springs UU Meditation Group meets Saturday morning from 10-12 noon for sitting and walking meditation. We read Buddhist texts together, watch Buddhist films and enjoy organic peppermint tea purchased from a Native American elder. Peaceful pets are most welcome to sit with us!

Photo by Jennifer Torres



A Letter From a Prisoner in Oklahoma

Dear Editor:

Kudos to Junko Davis for her entertaining and informative article, "A Pilgrim's Glimpse of the Birthplace of Soto Zen, in *UU Sangha's* Late Winter 2009 issue.

The big glossies may have more pages of enameled stock, but they don't have any better journalistic quality than that exhibited by Ms. Davis in this article. I eagerly await more articles of this caliber. (And someday I hope to contribute an article to your publication.)

Cordially,
John (CLF member)



The Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship Convocation 2009 with Shinzen Young at the historic Mission San Luis Rey, Oceanside, California.

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**Order your recording of Shinzen Young
teaching at UUBF Convocation 2009!
See the details on page 15.**