

## **The Fruits of Karma**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD August 24, 2025**

During my sabbatical this past spring, I immersed myself in the blessed and holy teachings of the Buddha. I traveled from temple to temple spanning from the east coast to the southwest. When he was available, my husband Eric sat in reverence with me. My eager ears overflowed with chants and teachings, prayers and guided meditations. At other times I sat in prolonged and palpable silence born of sacred intention, dedication, and faith, sometimes lasting for days. Often golden statues of the Buddha and an intricate display of other enlightened beings stood behind offerings of food and fragrant flowers left by those who worshipped him, offering the sweet aroma of sugar and nectar. In these sacred spaces I cultivated deep understandings of the importance of intention, of mindfulness, of patience, of peace, of karma. My spirit, body and mind became filled with insights that changed my ways of interacting with the daily world. Eventually, when Eric and I encountered any sort of emotional upset or distress, we would turn to each other, and reflect on the sentiment, “What would a Buddhist do?”

I must admit, sometimes once evening arrives and the sun sinks below the horizon, I am not my best self. Especially if work has been particularly difficult or I encountered conflict. Maybe my body was tense with anxiety. On such evenings, more likely than not, I am at home with my beloved husband. Unfortunately, as I believe may be true for many of us, I become impatient or annoyed, lashing out for no reason. One evening, in the midst of frustration, I paused, and offered, what would a Buddhist do? Any of us can be overwhelmingly impatient in traffic, jealous of a partner or friend, frustrated at a meeting that did not go our way, or are unjustifiably angry. What would a Buddhist do? And so, I invite you on a journey with me to discover just that.

Let us begin with an understanding of karma. Karma is a foundational teaching in the Buddhist tradition affecting life moment to moment. It is the Buddhist response to the aged old theological question: why do bad things happen to good people? Our experiences, whether

good or bad, are a direct result of cause and effect. We daily inherit our past actions, whether from this life or a previous life. If our minds are at peace and our bodies relaxed, this is because we have cultivated this peace. If impatience saturates our bones and we feel anger bubbling within, we have cultivated this anger. This teaching encourages the value of intention, for our actions today, whether that of compassion or of jealousy, will serve as seeds for future joy or sorrow. Each time I offer my dear husband frustration or annoyance, I am cultivating bad karma. Any time impatience, jealousy, or pride leads to our harsh thoughts or words, we cultivate bad karma. And yet Buddhism teaches, we can purify this bad karma, cultivating not future angst, but future joy. The process is called the Four Opponent Powers of Purification.

The first step in this profound teaching and process is the Power of Regret. Whom among us has not felt regret? Recall a moment you were not your best self, when you harmed another whether with intention or not. Our bodies feel this regret - sinking in our stomach, a breaking in our chest. I think it's safe to say – we have all experienced this. And yet, what is regret, truly? Regret is a sincere acknowledgment and awareness of harm done. It serves as a catalyst towards authentic change and healing. There are also emotions that we mistake for regret. Perhaps an all-encompassing obsession of the mind. Regret is not the weight of shame or profound guilt. These emotions simply lead to more suffering. Instead, this practice is about acknowledging healthy and sincere regret as the first step in engaging in any meaningful practice of repair.

The second step is called the Power of Reliance. At this point we can begin to pivot from emotions of dismay and turn toward hope and peace. We are blessed to be able to rely upon sacred beings, upon holy teachings, and upon beloved community. One core element of the Buddhist faith is referred to as The Three Jewels. This encompasses the Buddha, the Dharma, or teachings, and the Sangha, which is the Buddhist community. Buddhists regularly rely on the Buddha, embraced and venerated for discovering and teaching the path to liberation. Or the Dharma: the core teachings of the faith. Numerous teachings that offer blessed and beautiful ways to live and thrive in this one life among many.

I want to elaborate for a moment and offer one core teaching: that of the Four Noble Truths. This is the profound understanding that there is suffering in this world, that there is a cause to this suffering, that there is an end to suffering, and that Buddhism teaches the path to end all suffering. The Buddha teaches, for example, to refrain from harsh words, from harmful thoughts, from unwholesome actions, or from livelihoods that cause harm. We suffer, inevitably, but if we follow the path, we can reach enlightenment. Some who are unfamiliar with Buddhism interpret this focus on suffering as negative and pessimistic and reject the teachings. Yet it is truly an empowering message that all suffering can be overcome, and that each of us can cultivate love, compassion, peace, and healing. This is what Buddhists draw strength from.

The Third Jewel is the Sangha, the expansive community of all Buddhists. Whether monastic or laity, Buddhists support one another on the path towards liberation, acknowledging and celebrating their interconnectedness. This includes those in the same vicinity, meditating, chanting, or eating together. Likewise, those from afar, practicing the same ancient teachings. The community thrives in strengthening and inspiring one another.

What does the power of reliance mean to Unitarian Universalists? We depend not solely upon the Buddha but acknowledge him as but one prophet respected and revered alongside many. Unlike other faiths, we have that blessed opportunity to weave and craft our own life-giving theologies of love and hope. We rely upon our own understanding of the holy, serving as a guide for a blessed and fulfilled life. For if there is one great tenet of our faith, it is that of love, as our Unitarian and Universalist forbearers professed. I rely upon God, perhaps you upon Goddess, or nature, or Allah. We have an entity, entities, or divine essence that provides strength and hope and perseverance, not punishment or condemnation. We can recline under the stars or meditate on loving kindness and receive the strength we need to right our wrongs.

We also have our own Dharma, or teachings, which serve to guide us in living loving, intentional, and ethical lives. We are interconnected; my freedom is not realized until all are free. My love or hate ripples out in actions small and large to affect all others. We each have inherent worthiness and we must treat one another as such – across political divides or interpersonal disagreements. It is agape love. We observe every individual through the lenses of love and equity and as such we work for justice and radical welcome. Our Unitarian ancestors professed universal goodness and so we, too, are held in that goodness. Our Universalist ancestors taught universal salvation and so we, too, are forgiven. May we rely upon these tenets.

We have our own Sangha, or community, here, in this very room. We are held together in a web of interlocking values and beliefs. We share faith and radical welcome while discerning divinity with a group of like-hearted individuals. We join in sorrow and joy, as well as in song and lament. We can rely upon this community in a sacred way that we cannot rely upon any other. We are held together by the spirit of life, by an unceasing love both sacred and profane, offered unconditionally to one another and to all we hold divine. Remember this: We need one another.

After the power of regret and the power of reliance comes the Power of the Opponent Force. Any unwholesome thought or action can be countered with a wholesome one. Buddhist teachings profess that we are to purposefully and intentionally engage in virtuous actions that lead to good karma. Dedicated practitioners sit in silent meditation, offer verbal recitations of mantras, or simply engage in life with loving motivations and wholesome intention, each action born of love and compassion. I ask you all, is this not a blessed and holy way to live? If we are intentional in our thought process, we can circumvent that bad karma that sows seeds of hardship and cultivate, instead, the good. Intention is one of the most important tenets of Buddhism.

Perhaps we have acted with pride. We find ourselves bound in arrogance, closing our minds to learning, change, and growth. We put others down as they suffer hardship while cherishing our own accomplishments, quickly accumulating negative karma. So, we ask ourselves, what serves as the opposite of pride? What is the opponent force? Respect and humility. We humbly challenge our own assumptions. We look at the hierarchies we have established in our minds, those of wealth or respect, and realize that no one person is more important or worthy than any other. Everyone is deserving of appreciation.

Or we act with jealousy. We feel displeasure when we encounter other's joy or wellbeing, thinking it should be our own. We desperately want what others have, never happy with our own possessions or accolades. In doing so we unintentionally harm ourselves with the emotions that inevitably arise when in the company of another person. So, we ask, what is the opponent force of jealousy? Rejoicing! We become truly grateful that others we encounter have good qualities, celebrating in their joy or compassion or creativity. We enhance the happiness of ourselves and others and create positive karma.

The last step towards creating positive karma from negative karma is the Power of Promise – the promise not to repeat the harmful and unwholesome action. This may sound daunting and entirely unrealistic. I'll never get angry again? Or jealous? I'll never get impatient while sitting in traffic? One of my teachers helped make this concept more achievable. Just offer a reasonable amount of time and truly commit yourself to that. I began with the story of my irritation at Eric – poised in frustration, momentarily slipping away from compassion. It's not that I'll never get annoyed again, but a promise that for the next week I'll be extra aware of impatience or stress or anger and work to intentionally counter that with patience, acceptance, and compassion. We can offer ourselves goals: I will not get impatient at a red light for another hour. I will not act upon snap judgements for a week. I will release jealousy for the rest of the day. As we continue this practice, the intervals become longer, until we are able to rid ourselves of these compulsions entirely.

And so may we heal. May we thrive and may we flourish. We will all, inevitably, arise from an inner space of impatience or anger, feeling jealousy or irritation deep in our bones. We will know bad karma, we will act with bad karma, and we will receive the fruits of bad karma. And yet in this moment may we celebrate the power of intention by engaging in those spiritual practices that will serve to cultivate, instead, a profound and lasting sense of wellbeing, as our minds become calm, gratitude fills our being, patience becomes a daily practice, and our future is imbued with hope. May we find true inner joy that radiates out to the world around us, each of us becoming beacons of love and compassion; emanating a peace held deep within. Set forth from this space knowing that perfection is unachievable, but that repair is possible. That mistakes are inevitable, but reconciliation is achievable.

I cherish the time at the Buddhist retreats. To be immersed in palpable silence or sacred chanting, learning of karma, intention, and the Four Noble Truths. During that time my life incrementally changed, blooming and blossoming into something more sacred and more beautiful. I learned about sowing the seeds of good karma, and this is what I pass on to you. As we embrace these practices of purification, may we each know and feel what it truly means to live a life of good and blessed karma.

May it be so, and Amen