

Awareness, Attachments, Acceptance

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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I can remember the exact moment when the idea of The Three A's – "Awareness. Attachments. Acceptance." – first came to me. It happened while I was while struggling with writing an early sermon during my days as an intern. Ever since I had studied Buddhism from a variety of teachers in California, I had been frustrated by the difficulty of remembering all eight parts of the Buddha's Eightfold Path, of distinguishing them from the Four Noble Truths, of articulating the Five Precepts.

Though all these Buddhist concepts made perfect sense to me, I couldn't help feeling there just were too many of them – and they seemed somehow too creedal for this dyed-in-the-wool Unitarian Universalist. I longed for something freer, something simpler, something that would be easy for me to memorize, while at the same time practical enough to be useful in my daily life. I had long been attracted to Buddhism, perhaps more so than any other of the world's religions, yet I had not found a personal adaptation of the Buddhist path that made sense for me – one that I could, with spiritual integrity, seek to put into practice in my life.

Then one day, there I was, late in the week, sitting on the floor, trying to center myself – suffering from writer's block, having spent the past hour or so unsuccessfully trying to put together the start of a sermon. I became aware that what I needed was awareness, and I began meditating on that word: "awareness." I recalled the passage in the Bhagavad Gita where Krishna tells Arjuna, "Seek refuge in the attitude of detachment, and you will amass a wealth of spiritual awareness."

Suddenly the word “attachment” popped into my head. One of my teachers in Berkeley had stressed the concept of attachment as it relates to Buddhism, and the idea had stuck with me, as not only the core of the Buddha’s teachings, and those of Hinduism, but also as the heart of my own personal, spiritual struggle.

I realized, as I sat there – now meditating on the word “attachment” – how very attached I was to the outcome of the whole sermon-writing process. I had a growing awareness of just how important it has always been to me – ever since childhood – that I do a good job, and do a good job every time. That I write a great reflection, and that everyone like it.

And then another line from the same passage in the Bhagavad Gita came to me: “There is no cause for worry, whether things go well or ill. Therefore, devote yourself to the disciplines of yoga.”

The next thing I knew, from I know not where, I had come up with the third “A” of my mantra: “Acceptance.” So I shifted my meditation to this new word, “acceptance” ... and I began to feel the same peace that comes over my mind and my body after a particularly good yoga practice. That sense that – like Mary Oliver in the poem we just read – whether or not I will ever see the geese again does not matter. What matters is that I saw them – and clearly.

By the end of this meditation, this effort to center myself, there, on the floor, in my office in Columbus – I had come back, full circle ... to awareness. I had become aware, in fact, that I had come up with something that might help me solve not only my struggle that week, but also solve the puzzle that had been confounding me ever since I had begun trying to incorporate Buddhism into my life. No more Four Noble Truths. No more Eightfold Path. No more Five Precepts. Instead, I now had the Three A’s: Awareness, Attachments, and Acceptance.

It was as if I had passed through a gate.

In the years since that day, I have wrestled with these concepts – concepts I now use as my own, three-part condensation of the teachings of the Buddha, made relevant for my life, for my situation. Each week now, when I sit at my computer, writing a reflection for Sunday, I sit beneath those three words: Awareness. Attachments. Acceptance. I try to follow the path they have

charted for me. I seek awareness. I seek to let go of attachment. I seek the peace that comes with acceptance.

Let me briefly walk you through this process this morning, with the caveat that it is, indeed, not only very personal, but also a process, an ongoing, lifelong journey – and one that by definition, will never reach its goal.

“Buddha,” of course, means “Enlightened One,” or perhaps more literally, “Awakened One.” The Buddha pointed out that most of us tend to go through our lives as if sleepwalking; he urged us to wake up, to become aware. Aware of our surroundings. Aware of our true place in the universe. Aware of our bodies, and our embodied-ness. Aware of our own private hopes and deepest dreams, our own secret demons, our own motivations and habits.

By cultivating this kind of awareness, he said, we can throw off our accustomed blinders, and see the world – and our lives – as if for the first time.

Now I’ve always prided myself on being a pretty self-aware individual. In college, I signed up for as many sociology and psychology electives as I could fit into the class schedule of a journalism major. As an adult, I’ve certainly had my share of therapists, I’ve taken part in plenty of reflection circles and dream analysis groups, spent endless hours – either alone, or with friends and colleagues – reflecting on the drives and motivations behind my actions, and those of others.

So when I suddenly yell at the driver who cuts me off in traffic, for example, I’m aware that my frustration is likely the result of, say, a completely unrelated remark someone made to me earlier in the day. When I agonize over which soccer team Patrick should join, or which summer camp he should attend, I’m mindful that I am, on some level, simply revisiting the pain of my own childhood, and trying – probably a bit too hard – to shield my son from similar, negative experiences.

And then there’s body awareness. Essential as an awareness of one’s mental machinery is, without an equal attention to the rhythms and changes in our bodies, we can quickly fall out of balance. This is particularly important for Unitarian Universalists, and indeed for most Westerners, because – often as

not – we tend to over-emphasize the intellect, to the neglect of the fact that we are living, breathing, embodied creatures.

Here, the practice of yoga has helped me immeasurably in my seemingly never-ending effort to maintain a healthy body/mind balance. For almost 20 years, I've been doing yoga, off and on – but it wasn't until I moved to Cincinnati and found something called Anusara Yoga that I was able to experience real growth from my yoga practice. Sure, there had always been the benefits of improved physical well-being and flexibility, but the deeper spiritual work, the heightened awareness of the alignment and functioning of my body, of the flow of my breath and my blood as they relate to the flow of Grace in the Universe – the awareness of these things has come only in the past couple of years, and – of course – has served only to make me aware of how much more there's yet to learn.

For you see, despite this clearer sense of body and mind awareness – or perhaps precisely because of it – I often find myself trapped in what Buddhists call the “Small Mind.” Simply put, although I feel I'm doing pretty good on my first “A” – awareness – my ongoing struggle is with the second: attachments.

I must confess that I am, by and large, a very self-absorbed, grasping person. I could list a thousand things I am attached to, a thousand objects or people or states of mind or agendas: The outcome of the ballgame. Getting the garbage disposal to work. Washing the car. What's for lunch today. Sleeping. My wife. My favorite TV show. Crisp, clear starry nights. My ability to balance in handstand, or to do my favorite yoga pose, bakasana. Breathing comfortably.

These are just some of the myriad attachments I cling to, despite my most heroic efforts to “let it be.” And then, of course, as every parent knows, there's the ultimate attachment – my child. Perhaps it's no coincidence that my challenge with attachments has merely magnified as I've reached middle age – for not only have my material possessions multiplied, but my family connections – my instinctive, blood-is-thicker-than-water, ties – these have deepened as well. Truth be told, in many ways, “attachment issues” have dominated my life ever since I became a father.

Yet, lately, I have a growing awareness of the fact that, as one of my former teachers says, “All our attachments are ultimately attachments to Self.” Even

the strongest attachment I have ever experienced – my emotional and spiritual attachment to my son – is, after all, nothing more than a complicated version of attachment to Self. To the me that I see reflected in him, at each stage of his life. To the immortality that he somehow offers me – at least for a generation.

At least for a generation. Because somewhere, at the back of every parent's mind, lies the terrifying knowledge that even our children, even our grandchildren, will eventually die. This is the bitterest pill of all to swallow.

Buddha taught that the cause of all human suffering is our longing after that which cannot be held. This *tanha*, as it is called in Sanskrit, sometimes is translated as “desire,” or “clinging” – or as I prefer, “attachment.” Each of us, over the course of a lifetime, or in any discrete moment of our lives, is caught up in a web of personal attachments, desperately seeking to numb ourselves to the unmistakable, unthinkable fact that it doesn't really matter – that nothing, in the end, belongs to us – not even ourselves ... not even our Selves.

Nothing, when all is said and done, is permanent, or perfect – or personal. This is the one, unalterable fact of life. This is the rule of the Universe. It is the truth that we spend, sometimes quite literally, all the energy of our lives, trying to deny.

And, ironically, as every great master has taught us, it is, at the very same time, the truth that can – if we could only find the courage to accept it – set us free. Free of all that we are attached to, all our attachments – which are, after all, doomed to be lost. Free of all our pain – which is, after all, destined to come to an end.

Buddha called it *nirvana*. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. Neither said it was some other-worldly state, some afterlife or parallel universe. Rather, they taught it was immediate and available – right here and now, for anyone who dares to undertake the most difficult spiritual journey of all – that leap of faith into the unknown, into the unknowable ... into nothingness itself.

Hospice worker Stephen Levine, himself a practicing Buddhist, puts it this way: “[The fact of our impending] death reminds us to pay attention. Indeed, there is much more [freedom] in letting go, than there is in holding fast.”

For me, this kind of freedom can only be achieved – can only be imagined, in truth – by cultivating that third and final “A”: Acceptance. Acceptance of the fact that we do not have control. Acceptance of the inevitability of loss, of death. Acceptance of the impermanence of all that we cling to, all to which we are so desperately attached.

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This, of course, is very esoteric stuff. It is certainly difficult, if well-nigh impossible, to stay focused on such thoughts for very long – what with bills to pay and dinner to prepare and children to put to bed and sermons to write. But, as I admitted earlier, this is the very heart and soul of my own personal struggle. I must sometimes wrestle with my inner demons of attachment, just in order to get through the day – just in order to get through the night.

And I know that in order to move beyond attachments, to give up my clinging and grasping at this world, to become truly free and experience what the Buddhists call “sunyata,” what Stephen Levine calls the “spaciousness” of existence – the path for me to follow is that of acceptance.

Sure, I experience momentary periods of acceptance – but my current spiritual work is to learn to extend these moments of acceptance, to (ironically) hold them – without holding on.

Here, again, I come back to yoga. When one is in a yoga posture – whether it’s the most physically demanding of poses, or the completely relaxed body posture that is, appropriately enough, known as “corpse pose” – the challenge is to move fully into a state of acceptance of where one is. To let go of pre-conceptions and judgments about how well one is doing, to put aside the “monkey mind” that is always writing a grocery list or rehashing the previous day’s staff meeting – to give up needs and desires and joys and sorrows – and just be aware. Be aware of your private attachments, whatever they may be ... and then let them go.

Awareness. Attachments. Acceptance. This has become my mantra, my personal spiritual discipline.

Whether it is through yoga, where balance and harmony between body and mind are a vehicle for enlightenment ... whether it’s in parenting – where

the delicate dance between nurturing and over-protection, Self and Other – makes for the deepest kind of soul work ... or whether it's in the experience we have just shared together – the writing and sharing of a Sunday reflection, where the interplay of process and product, speaker and listener, serves as a reminder of the interconnected web of which we are a part ... whatever the spiritual practice, may we each – in the words of the Buddha – “be lamps unto ourselves.”

And when we have found the truth that sets us free, may we have the courage to follow that path – always aware, always accepting that it is, after all, just a path.

So may it be. Amen.