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FLORENCE D. AMAMOTO

Called to Compassion over the Course of a Life: A Buddhist Perspective

If you had asked me before I came to Gustavus Adolphus College, I'm not sure I would have said that Buddhism had a notion of vocation, especially if vocation is defined in the traditional Christian sense of answering God's call, given that Buddhism is non-theistic. However, Gustavus has allowed me to explore my religion more deeply, and has thus led me to a different conclusion. What follows is a short introduction to Buddhism and some reflections on how vocation might be defined within Buddhism.

Buddhism 101

Buddhism grew out of the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, or the historical Buddha, who was born in fourth century BCE in what is now Nepal, and lived and preached in what is now northern India. Siddhartha was the son of the leader of the Sakya clan. Legend has it that his father was told by a seer that his son would be either a great ruler or a great spiritual figure. You don't have to guess which his father preferred, and he raised his son in luxury and shielded him from the outside world. However, as a young man, Siddhartha, on various walks through his town, saw an old man, a sick man, and a dying man. Leaving his wife and son, he sought spiritual enlightenment with a group of ascetics. After seven years, he realized this life of extreme physical deprivation had not gotten him

closer to understanding the suffering he had seen, so he gave up the ascetic life. But he continued to meditate, which ultimately led him to the understanding he had long sought. He started preaching the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, which lays out his understanding of the causes of human suffering and the way to end it. The Four Noble Truths are: life is suffering; suffering is caused by ignorance and desire; there is a way to end this suffering; the way is the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path consists of right view, resolve, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. One could argue that a Buddhist is "called" to pursue enlightenment, which is defined as wisdom and compassion.

Enlightenment, in fact, was precisely the goal of early followers of the Buddha, who formed monastic communities and tried to emulate his life. Later, schools developed that put more emphasis on what they saw as the spirit of the Buddha's teachings and emphasized compassion. The ideal compassionate one is a Bodhisattva, a person who has attained enlightenment but stays involved with the world to help others.



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My form of Buddhism, Jodo Shin Shu Buddhism, was founded by a Japanese monk (or ex-monk) Shinran Shonin in the thirteenth century. Theologically, Shinran's beliefs were similar to those of Martin Luther. Shinran believed that he could not reach moral perfection through his own efforts—this was his break with monastic Buddhism. He emphasized instead that we were surrounded by the love and compassion of the universe, personified by Amida Buddha, a non-incarnate Buddha who had vowed to save all sentient beings. This was Buddhism for the masses, the 90 percent of the population who were uneducated and poor. Jodo Shin Shu Buddhism remains the main form of Buddhism practiced in Japan today. It was also the Buddhism of the Japanese immigrants to the United States in the early twentieth century. Included here were my grandparents, whose American-born children helped found the Buddhist temple that I grew up in.

Buddhism does not depend on a particular practice. For instance, my form of Buddhism does not have a sitting meditation practice like Zen. In fact, the Sunday services I attended as a child were modeled on Protestant services by the Buddhist Churches of America, which saw the temples as being places to pass on Japanese religious and cultural traditions, but also to help immigrants assimilate into American society. In my form of Buddhism, the emphasis is on living a life of faith and gratitude—themes shared with the Christian tradition, of course. And yet, until I came to Gustavus, I hadn't thought of my tradition in terms of vocation.

Buddhism and Vocation

As noted above, the Buddha's teaching grew out of his desire to understand and end human suffering. However, Buddha as a title means "the awakened one" or "the enlightened One." The historical Buddha was a man who came to a profound understanding of reality, and passed that understanding on to others. What he realized was that our suffering came from our ignorance, from not seeing reality (for instance, that life is change), as well as from our desires and ego. He also taught that everyone has the capability to become a Buddha. While he taught his followers his insights to help them on their path to enlightenment, he also told them not to take anything on

another's authority—even his—but rather to test what he taught against their own experiences and understanding. In that way, I think Buddhists are called to a life-long search for knowledge and a deeper understanding of life and the world.

In turn, such a deeper understanding of the world and of the human condition, true enlightenment, inevitably leads us to compassion because we see all the suffering around us. I would argue that, although Buddhism does not have an idea of a "caller" God, there is an idea of calling and a caller in Buddhism—we are called to respond to the needs we see around us; we are called by the world. In my form of Buddhism, as in many of the Mahayana schools, there is an emphasis on compassion and selfless giving. It emphasizes that we are constantly surrounded by the love and compassion that exists in the universe. We are called to live a life of gratitude in recognition of this, and to be the conduit of that love and compassion to the world.

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In order to be that conduit for compassion, however, we need more than knowledge. Buddhism teaches we need mindfulness and egolessness. Mindfulness may be obvious; we need to be alert and alive to the moment and to the needs in that particular situation. A good teacher is always alert to capitalize on "the teachable moment," and her instruction will depend on what any particular student needs in that specific moment. One of the Buddha's insights was that we are profoundly interdependent—that I am who I am and indeed can live only because my life is intertwined with everything else. My life depends not just on my parents who brought me into the world, but also on everything from the people who grow my food to the very air I breathe. Increased global ties and environmental

degradation only make being mindful of this insight more important. Valuing mindfulness reminds us that it is important to challenge our students to see as deeply as they can into the interconnections and complexities of the world, so they can see their stake in the world and respond to the call as skillfully as possible.

I think that the Buddhist emphasis on egolessness and the rejection of desire are difficult for Americans, given their emphasis on individualism, self, drive, and success. Part of the problem, I think, is a misunderstanding of what these Buddhist concepts mean. We Americans tend to associate ego with the self and desire with ambition, progress, and success. If we get rid of desire and ego, students often think, wouldn't we become passive? Then where would we be? We need ambition and desire, they argue. And wouldn't being egoless and rejecting desire leave us with no personality, a passive blob?

Buddhism, in fact, argues just the opposite. To help students understand that egolessness can make us more ourselves, I usually ask my students: "When are you more yourself—when you are at a party with a group of strangers or when you are with your best friends?" The reason you are more yourself with your friends is because you are not concerned about how you appear, are not seeking to protect your ego, your sense of self. Ridding ourselves of this ego-concern frees us, allowing us to be more of ourselves, to be more creative and open, to be more vulnerable, and to take more risks. But it also allows us to respond more helpfully to the situations around us. Science has shown that we cannot really multi-task. The less we are taken up with thinking about ourselves, the more internal space we have to hear and see others and their needs more clearly.

Furthermore, in Buddhism, eliminating desire does not mean not caring or not acting. As I noted earlier, we are called to respond to the needs we see around us, to incarnate love in the world. The Buddha knew that no matter how helpful we want to be or how wisely we act, we will not always get what we want. Many of today's pressing problems, such as climate change and inequality, are massive and full of enormous obstacles. It will take people with persistence and resilience, people who act out of vision, faith, and conviction to bend the arc of history. Overcoming desire in the Buddhist sense

does not mean not caring, but rather letting go of seeing particular outcomes within a particular timeframe so that one can go on with the fight. The Dalai Lama's continuing resistance to China is one example. Closer to home I am reminded of a story a white activist friend told me about what a black activist once said to her: "You know, the problem with you white people is that you give up too fast when you don't get the result you want. We know this is going to take a long time."

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Ultimately, I think Buddhism calls me to become as knowledgeable about life and the world as I can be, but also to become as aware, compassionate, and selfless as I can be. I think I know more now than I did when I was 20 or 40. I hope I am a better conduit for the compassion of the universe—not only wiser but also less concerned about myself, more open, more able to hear and see the needs of others more clearly. Like many things that are simple to say, this is hard to do. It is a life-long journey.

Concluding Reflections

My experiences at Gustavus underscore how encountering religious differences can help us think more deeply about our own religious teachings, faith, and values. Teaching at a Lutheran college prompted me to get more interested in exploring my own religion. It also prompted me to think about vocation—both personal and institutional. My participation in Vocation of a Lutheran College conferences, in national conversations about the vocation of church-related colleges, and in the development of Gustavus's proposal for the Lilly Foundation's Program for

the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) grant, also allowed me to deepen my knowledge of Lutheran ideas of vocation. This, in turn, prompted me to develop the ideas about Buddhism and vocation I've shared here. I also think that my presence and those from other religious traditions (such as the chair of the committee for our PTEV proposal, who was Jewish) has forced Lutherans at Gustavus to think more deeply about Lutheran ideas of vocation. Because of our religious diversity—but also Lutheranism's valuing of dialogue—our PTEV committee was able to hammer out language and programs that would be welcoming for students of all religious affiliations—and none.

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The vocation of any college is to provide an excellent education for students and to provide them with tools they need to live healthy and productive lives. Church-related colleges also aspire to produce students who will live lives of leadership and service. This emphasis on values and service is some of the “value added” elements offered by our small, liberal arts, Lutheran schools. We need to be more vocal about the way our values grow out of our Lutheran heritage. And yet, our understanding of that heritage and its application in today's world is enriched by having it in conversation with other religious traditions just as our students' education is enriched by real conversations and interactions with people different from them. The country and our colleges are becoming more diverse, and the world is becoming more interconnected—and, unfortunately, more polarized. We owe it to our students to prepare them for this world. We owe it to the world to prepare leaders who have cultural competence; a vision for a better, more equal and peaceful world; and the skills to be the bridge-builders our world so desperately needs.