
Opinion

My Take: Buddha is a teacher, not a god

By Karen Rowland

Posted Apr 25, 2019 at 5:02 PM

Having been raised in a secular family, I found church-goers to be intriguing. They always had friends and welcoming places to go together. Over the years, I attended Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian and Mormon services in an effort to achieve that sense of belonging. But sooner or later, each one demanded that I suspend my critical-thinking skills — skills that were encouraged in my secular home.

My parents emphasized the hypocrisies of religion over its rhetoric. As I watched my religious friends, one after another, awash in guilt for minor and arbitrary indiscretions they would easily forgive in others, I wondered what sort of a god would instill such guilt. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that religion was not for me.

Then I was invited to my first Buddhist meeting. It was a meaningful experience to meet a diverse group of people who were focused on personal sharing and growth rather than on rote responses and irrelevant rituals. They were open about their struggles and eager to share how Buddhism had changed their lives. I was amazed at their courage, determination and compassion. And it was refreshing that critical-thinking skills were encouraged in this Buddhist group.

Buddhism, one of the first well-documented humanistic religions, is non-theistic. Buddha was a human being, whose teachings we study, without worshiping him. In Buddhism I found a religion that did not require belief in anything supernatural or blind obedience to a set of laws and mandates that had no relationship to my life.

The only faith Buddhism requires of me is faith in myself. It calls me to embrace radical self-responsibility, which involves understanding the nature of my own self, thoughts and motivations. Once understood, I am empowered to master my own destiny. I soon discovered that the wisdom, courage, and guidance the religious sought from their deity, I had within myself. Buddhism challenges me to own and use my power, not to project it. And it reminds me that I am the protagonist in my own life story, a story I can write and rewrite however I choose.

In my 20 years as a Buddhist, my faith has guided me through several deaths, illnesses and many conflicts. Buddhism is relentlessly positive — it sees the brightest light in the depth of darkness. When my son was 18, he developed a brain tumor, and for several months we didn't know whether he would live. Faith in my own inner resources gave me the determination to face every possible diagnosis, help the family cope, and surround myself with people who supported me. He is alive and successful today, but no matter what might have happened, I would always be grateful for that chance to prove my faith, not in an external deity, but in the wisdom and deep knowing within me.

Yes, Buddhism is a religion centered on the Self, but one suffused with humility because every other person is on a personalized journey through their life as well. We are all part of the interconnected web of life — if I help and encourage another, we both feel the consequences. I am grateful that Buddhism has given me the tools to live an authentic, radically self-responsible life in the company of my Buddhist community of support.

The Holland Openly Secular Alliance (HOSA) is building community among the humanists, agnostics, non-theists, and “Nones” in the Holland area. I attend its gatherings and events because HOSA shares my values. At their Saturday, April 27, meeting I will present, in more depth, the secular journey that led me to Buddhism and the Buddhist teachings that assist me to live a good life. You're welcome to join in the conversation at 451 Columbia Ave. in Holland from 7-9 p.m.

— Karen is an amateur ornithologist who lives along the lakeshore.