

## Why Are You a Buddhist?

By Carol Valentine

As my mind started to narrow down the possible topics for today's dharma talk, I thought of the book Ocean by Rev. Ken Tanaka. It is a well written and easy to read book about Buddhism. It is one of my favorite books on Buddhism because it helps me to understand why I am a Buddhist . . . hence the name of this dharma talk.

Why are you a Buddhist? Why are we Buddhist? There are probably as many reasons as there are people sitting here right now.

Most of the people here were born to a Buddhist family, or at least, one Buddhist parent. Maybe your parents brought you to church every Sunday, or maybe they dropped you off at church every Sunday. Either way, did you ever think about why you were attending church as a young person and maybe more importantly, why you are still here? Did you ever question the teachings? Remember, Buddha said it's ok to ask questions. Did you ever question church attendance? Did you every make your own personal decision to stay and BE a Buddhist? I'm always curious about other people's reasons for their decisions about church, if there are reasons. I remember a story Rev. Okamoto, at Denver Buddhist Temple, told about making a decision regarding his church attendance in the LA area as a teenager. He said his parents gave him a choice between attending the local Christian church or attending the Buddhist Temple and he chose the Buddhist Temple because, in his words, "the girls at the Buddhist Temple were cuter." Knowing him, that was probably a truthful response and also a fateful response since he ended up serving as a Buddhist minister for over 30 years. What's your story?

My story, as you probably all know, is that I was not born to a Buddhist family. I was raised in a Christian home. In my home, church had a part but a very small part of our lives. We really didn't attend church although I was taught to be a good person. I know in high school my brother & I were dropped off and picked up for church and I attended mostly because I had a crush on my brother's best friend who attended the church too. I remember asking my dad once why he didn't go to church and his response was "I live a good life, I treat people well, regardless of whether I go to church or not." Once when we were camping he looked around and told me "This is my cathedral." I have come to realize that he meant that his "faith" was in his heart. I think his attitude has stayed with me.

Obviously, Wayne had something to do with me coming to look at Buddhism almost 30 years ago. Even though it was all new to me, it felt that I was coming home, that I had found what I needed for my heart. I was drawn to Buddhism because of the simplicity of the teachings, the openness of the religion and the peace it brought to me during a time of turmoil.

The ideas of simplicity, openness and peace are what Rev. Ken Tanaka has talked about in his book Ocean. He talks about 4 very important insights about Buddhism which are appealing to him, and probably to many other people.

I use the letters VOPP to remember those ideas.

**V = Voluntary:** ". . . it's not a 'sin' to turn away from the Dharma or teaching. We make efforts to share the teachings and our experiences, but if people are not interested we simply wait for them to become interested. When the time is right, they will seek answers to their questions." (Rev. Ken Tanaka)

We are always here, available to everyone who walks in our doors. We should be there for them, whether they stay with us or not.

**O = Open:** Buddhism is open-minded about other religions and sects. Buddhists think there are 84,000 ways to enlightenment.”

“ . . . although Buddhists would like others to take an interest in the Dharma, they just don't think it's right to *force* people to take interest.”

“ . . . we don't think people are doomed to be punished if they walk other paths.” (Rev. Ken Tanaka)

As Buddhists, we do not go door to door trying to convert people, we don't make people feel bad if they are not a Buddhist. Quite honestly, what makes Buddhism so attractive and so appealing to so many people is also what makes it elusive and perhaps one of the best kept secrets in the world.

**P = Personal:** “ . . . there is much value given to personal understanding. “

“We do not accept the Dharma blindly. We test how it works in our everyday lives.”

“ . . . [Buddha] did not mean to imply that we can do whatever we please because there is no standard. No, the standard is the Dharma.” (Rev. Ken Tanaka)

In Buddhism there are no commandments, no one watching you to be sure you are not breaking any rules. The 8-Fold Path helps know how to live a good life. You are your only judge; karma, the results of your own actions, will take care of judgment.

**P = Peaceful:** “Throughout history, Buddhists have taught not to be violent towards others just because they believed differently.”

“ . . . Buddhism has exhibited, relatively speaking, a high degree of peace that many observers, including non-Buddhists, regard as the hallmark of the tradition.” (Rev. Ken Tanaka)

In trying to understand and maybe make sense of what is happening in the Middle East right now I learned something about the groups call the Sunni and the Shia. I discovered that they are both sects/divisions of Islam fighting with each other. It seems unimaginable; it would be like our church attacking the Soto Zen Temple in Hanapepe. Can you imagine? That is not a part of Buddhism, thank goodness. Buddhism has not been hijacked by extremists, as other religions have. How can you turn peaceful words to anger and hate? Not possible.

Knowing what we know, why are any of us Buddhists? Is it habit or choice? For me, I have chosen Buddhism. I know that Buddhism feeds my heart and brings me peace. There are many others in our community drawn to Buddhism, for many reasons. We need to reach out to them, to welcome them and embrace their differences as Buddha would have done. We are all searching for peace and compassion in this crazy world. Let us all be the guides.

My final question is: Why are you a Buddhist?