

## **With, Between & Beyond Hyphens: Ruminations of a UU Buddhist**

by Rev. James Ishmael Ford

The other day I received a copy of a paper from a seminarian based upon interviews with me and with several Unitarian Universalists who study Zen with me. I was intrigued by her take on the work we've been doing. As I'm an ordained Soto Zen priest authorized as a spiritual director within two Zen lineages as well as a serving UU parish minister, people often don't know what to make of me. She understood how I am a Unitarian Universalist, proudly so. And I am a Zen Buddhist. Sometimes there's a hyphen, sometimes not. Sometimes I speak from my life as a UU. Sometimes I speak from my life of Zen practice. And sometimes there is another place, which I think is even more important, and to which I'll come to in a moment.

First, something about Boundless Way Zen. While there is no test for participating and we count among us a number of straight-ahead Buddhists, a couple of Christians, and several who are uncomfortable with brand names, the majority of us live as both Unitarian Universalists and Buddhists of the Zen flavor. We're something new in the spiritual realm.

Most of us are deeply moved by the insights into the human mind and condition that Buddhism provides. In particular we have found the disciplines of the Zen school a path of awakening. And, at the same time, most of us see Unitarian Universalism as the great way of manifesting that awakening. We see it in our Sunday gatherings for worship. We see it in our commitment to life-span religious education. And we see it most of all in how we share a commitment to an active and engaged life. For most of us Zen Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism go together like peanut butter and jelly.

What I believe the Boundless Way Zen project reveals is a culture of awakening that is a faithful expression of the intuitions about who we are and what we might be that have been developing within the western liberal religious way for at least the last hundred and fifty years or so. Increasingly people on the liberal way have felt the deep value of the individual, in potential, at the very least. And at the same time we've intuited how we are somehow tied up together so tightly, through genes and history, that it seems the individual only exists within and from community. At various times in our history we've emphasized one aspect of this twined intuition or the other.

Today we're beginning to understand how they are connected. And we're finding it through the psychological insights of eastern religious traditions, particularly Buddhism, and Buddhist methods of introspection. But our western liberal religious way is not a tradition of withdrawal. The proof of our spiritual pudding is always how it is manifested in the world.

So, what I see happening at Boundless Way, and which I know is happening across the continent in other UU Buddhist gatherings, is a meeting that sometimes challenges, sometimes melds, sometimes clashes, and which always takes us closer and closer to our true heritage, manifesting a faith in the possible. As a UU Buddhist, I find myself in the thick of an amazing project, something no less than the healing of our hurt and bruised world. I'm so grateful for these traditions that come together in service of human liberation and the healing of the planet. (*James Ford serves as senior minister of the First Unitarian Society in Newton (MA) and as head teacher of Boundless Way Zen, a network of Zen practice groups in eastern Massachusetts.*)