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Brother Jamal Rahman at Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
“Spiritual Wisdom of Buddhism”

Okay, my dear friends, so, first of all, I'm so honored and delighted to be here with you. The topic is spiritual wisdom of Buddhism. You know, I love that insight: Interfaith is not about conversion. It is about completion. Becoming a more complete, developed human being. That wonderful late professor of comparative religion, Houston Smith, he would say you can look at your holy book from one particular angle, but if you look at it from different angles, you'll have a more complete understanding of your own holy book. So as a Muslim, I love studying other religions. You might say my major is Islam and my minor is Buddhism.

So let me start by talking about this remarkable story of the Buddha. By the way, his name was not Buddha. His name was Siddhartha Gautama. Buddha comes from the root for intelligence; the word Buddha means "the awakened one." You know, the Buddha was asked many times, "Are you a God? Are you a sage, a wizard?" And the Buddha always replied, "I am awake!"

So, what is the story of the Buddha? It's a story of our lives. He was a prince, the son of a king in northern India, living in the 6th century BC. He was very protected, very insulated. But in his 20s, he managed to—with the help of his charioteer, Charaka—go outside the city gates. And for the first time, because he was so protected, he saw a very old man. Another visit, he saw an old man who was very sick, suffering. A third sight: a corpse, a dead human being. And the fourth sight: he met a monk who was very peaceful in spite of all these difficulties and traumatic situations.

You know, there's a wonderful metaphor the Buddha says: Can you attain what is called equanimity? To be in the center of the wheel. The wheel goes up, the wheel goes down, but you're in the center of the wheel. So, the equanimity of the monk really struck—you might say splashed—in the Buddha's heart, but he had a question. Those sights of the old man, the suffering, and the corpse gave rise to a very deep question within him. What was the question? "Why would a mother want to give birth to a child who would inevitably become old, inevitably become sick, suffer, and inevitably die? What is the meaning of this? This is crazy making!"

And this question resonated so deeply in him, consumed him so fully. He took permission from his family, he left his kingdom, and he went in exploration of finding answers that would quench his thirst for this question. He spent 6 or 7 years exploring, meeting all these amazing sages, pundits, experts, gurus, and yogis. But he never found an answer or insights that would fulfill him. So, in a state of, we might say, dejection or depression, he sat under this Bodhi tree (which still exists). He just became very silent, saying, "I will not arise from this tree unless I get the answers to this question, to this great mystery."

It so happened a shepherd girl fed him. It is said for 40 days he just stayed in deep silence, and then the answers emerged. What were the answers? There are Four Noble Truths. Accept them and follow the Eightfold Path, and you'll become enlightened, you'll become freed; you'll

achieve moksha. Moksha means freedom. So this is the crux of the spiritual wisdom of Buddhism: Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

So let's go through them. What is the first noble truth? The first noble truth is: yes, my friends, there is suffering. It is inevitable. Let me accept that. Noble truth number two: Among the many causes of suffering, one cause is my attachment to that which is impermanent, transient, which changes. Wealth, titles, power. My attachment to that which is impermanent—not being able to let go of it—is a main cause of suffering. The third noble truth? Ah, good news! There's a way out. There is hope! You can become freed!

You know, I love the word hope. As a Muslim, I study the Quran. There are several verses in the Quran; one says it is God who sends down the rain when humankind has lost all hope and unfolds His grace. The earth was parched, but the waters of mercy came down and the earth became clothed in green. So, there is hope. And the fourth noble truth is: follow the Eightfold Path.

So I'm looking at the time on my left side, so I will not overdo it, as I usually do. What are the eight paths? The first one is what is called Right Understanding. I repeat: right, deep understanding. Let me give an example I've said before in my sermons with you. A true story of a Nobel Prize winner—I forget his name—who won the prize, and a young girl wrote him a very lovely letter lauding him and saying, "I want to be just like you when I grow up." And the Nobel Prize winner sent a letter back saying, "I beg you, I implore you, do not be like me. You know, I craved this title of the Nobel Prize. I won the Nobel Prize, but in the process, I have destroyed my health, my wife has divorced me, my children don't speak to me. All I really wanted was love. To be loved."

So here, the insight is what mystics would call: Can I make a differentiation, a discernment in my life between form and essence? You know that wonderful poetry by Rumi, who says, "No matter how many titles you acquire, Brother Jamal, how much money you accumulate, the thief will come from the unguarded side. Therefore, focus on that which can never be stolen." Love, compassion, graciousness, generosity, service. Form and essence.

Okay, carrying on going deeper into Right Understanding: there is suffering because it is a world of opposites. Every religion says that. High is defined by low, long by short. There are joys in life, there are also sorrows in life. You know that wonderful book, *The Book of Joy* by Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. A main thrust of the book is, yes, there is suffering, but the way we heal our suffering and reframe and transform our suffering shapes our character and sculpts the destiny of our life.

The critical point about suffering is—which is inevitable—is what Rumi emphasized again and again: "Brother Jamal, don't run towards suffering, just don't run away from it." In the East, they always give the example of the lotus flower. The beautiful lotus flower is considered a symbol of beauty. But take note, said the sages: it is rooted in the mud. It is the mud of daily existence that gives rise to this beauty. When we suffer, we also become aware—and this is very beautiful—in a heartfelt way about the suffering of others.

Okay, one last point about Right Understanding: to become aware of our thoughts. The famous words of the Buddha: "You are what you think. Brother Jamal, everything that you are arises with your thoughts. Speak and act with a pure mind, and happiness follows you like the wheel follows the oxen cart. Speak and act with an impure mind, and sorrow follows you like your shadow follows you." And he goes on to say, "Brother Jamal, your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your unguarded negative thoughts. But once mastered, no one can help you as much, not even your father or your mother." Therefore, watch your thoughts; be mindful of your thoughts.

Okay, all of this is under Right Understanding. I'll pause and just ponder on what I've said and just go deep with that. Am I connecting with what is higher understanding to become freed?

Okay, let me continue. I'm looking at the time. The second one in the Eightfold Path is Right Aspiration. Let me quickly give you the example of the fictional mullah. Remember that story? Everything is allegorical. He's on his donkey, rushing through the marketplace. And when his friends and family hail him, he says, "I'm too busy, I cannot stop." "And what are you so busy about?" they would shout. And he would shout back, "I am looking for my donkey!" And the caption is: Aren't we all? Chasing the donkey of titles, money, power, glory, forgetting that true happiness comes from having good relationships with family and friends. Many times we've mentioned that 85-year study from Harvard University and Brigham Young University: What constitutes happiness? Is it doing yoga, diet? All of this is critical, but number one was having reliable relationships.

Noble truth number three: Right Speech. Words have power. Their vibrations are packed with power; they can change your life. The story of a Zen monk and a Zen warrior who questioned him, saying that's an exaggeration, words don't have that much power. And what did the Zen monk say? "Oh, you Zen Warrior, that's because you're stupid. You're an idiot. You're an oaf. You are just focused on the sword; your brain is empty." And the Zen warrior became angrier and angrier, about to take out his sword and kill the Zen monk, and the Zen monk said, "Before you kill me... you said words don't have any power? See how angry you got?" The vibration of the words has a deep impact.

Right speech also means, as the Buddha emphasized: Please avoid gossip. Also, avoid listening to gossip. His famous words: "Dwelling on your brothers' or sisters' faults multiplies your own." I love the words of Rumi: "Veil the faults of others, so yours might be veiled." One more point about right speech: learn the art of right speech. Be flexible. A true story: Confucius had a disciple who was far more eloquent than Confucius. And people would ask, "Your disciple is far more eloquent than you are. Why does she want to study with you for years and years?" And Confucius answered, "Yes, she is far more eloquent than I am. But she does not know when to give a simple answer of yes or no. That is why she studies with me."

Moving on to the fourth path: Right Conduct. Can I become pure? The words of the Buddha: "Just as a silversmith sifts dust from silver, Brother Jamal, remove your impurities little by little." I love this insight: "If your key is crooked, it will not fit the lock of life; you will not be able to open the joys, the mystery, the beauty of life." So ask yourself, what are some wonderful qualities for me that deepen my right conduct? For me, I can think of two immediately: the

authentic need to be humble—"Pure is the one who has purified oneself of the notion of one's own purity"—and patience. "The patience shown by the rose to the thorn is what keeps it fragrant. The patience shown by the moon to the dark night is what keeps it radiant."

The fifth one is Right Livelihood. Brother Jamal, the livelihood you're engaged in, does this conform with your ethical values? You cannot say, "I'm working in an armaments factory, but I believe in world peace." Buddha had a wonderful insight: "The hand of the dyer is subdued by the color of the dye it works in." A very mystical saying is: "Earning a living is life's means, not an end." Don't become overly attached to money or titles. Again, the Buddha: "The rain could turn to gold, but this would not slake your thirst."

Sixth: Right Effort. In your life, are you making the right effort? I love that metaphor of a hamster in a cage, just running back and forth, thinking it's so active and productive, but it's just running without any fruitful production—as compared to a hen who is absolutely silent, just sitting on the egg. You might say doing nothing, but it's giving life to the egg.

You know, I love this true story of a Bedouin and the Prophet Muhammad. They were going to the mosque; he had a camel with him. And he said, "Should I tie the camel to the post, or just trust in God?" What did the Prophet Muhammad say? "First, tie the camel to the post, then trust in God." You've got to make your effort. Remember the story of that mullah always praying to win the lottery? Finally, in a vision, God says, "Mullah, you shall win the lottery, but do me a favor: Buy at least one ticket!" Like Ramakrishna said: "The grace of God is like a wind, always there, always blowing, but you've got to raise your sail to catch the wind."

The seventh one is Right Mindfulness. Can I be in the present moment? The problem is I am attached to regret of the past or anxiety about the future. I love the poetry by Hafiz, who says: "What do sad people have in common? They have built a shrine to the past and they keep going there again and again." And the mystics say: "This is winter now. Brother Jamal, this is winter; this is not post-fall or pre-spring. This is winter. Be present." The wonderful Zen saying: "When sitting, sit. When walking, walk. Above all, don't wobble." Thich Nhat Hanh said: "If you're not in the present moment, you're missing your appointment with life."

Last one: Right Meditation. This is a practice that the Buddha insisted on again and again. If you really want to be enlightened, you have to practice silence. It could be being in nature, walking. Rumi says our lives are like a fish out of water, thrashing and quivering on the banks. From time to time, we need to dive into those oceans of silence.

I love the Hindu story of the father and son. The son asks where a fruit tree comes from. The father says to cut the fruit, then cut the seed. Inside the seed, it's empty. "That art thou"—from that silence, from that nothingness, comes everythingness. The Buddha was once asked, "What do you gain from meditation?" And he said, "Nothing at all." When they were stunned, he said, "Let me tell you what I have lost: I have lost my anxiety, my fear of death, my attachment to things material." Silence is not the absence of sound; it is the absence of the little self. Silence is the language of God; everything else is a poor translation.

Time for me now to be silent. Thank you.