

**An address: How can we seek wisdom from all the sources?  
By Revd Dr Ralph Catts, October 2021**

Unitarian Universalists claim 6 sources of wisdom including: *Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life,*

I ask how can we as Unitarians claim to seek meaning from all wisdom sources, let alone from the other five sources listed in the UUA literature<sup>1</sup>?

To introduce this topic, I offer a reading from the Tao which points out that water seeks the lowest point. This message seeks to encourage an unselfish vision as a framework for ethical practice. The author, Lao Tzu uses the example of water, one of the basic elements of nature, which exists in abundance. Because it's such an important part of nature, Lao Tzu considers that water cannot do wrong. It shows what is natural. The verse encourages us to follow its example<sup>2</sup>.

*"A person of universal nature is like water;  
and benefits all things  
But does not contend with them.*

*One unprotestingly takes the lowest position;  
Thus, one is close to the universal truth.*

*One of universal virtue chooses to live  
In a suitable environment (a house built on the ground).*

*One attunes their mind to become profound.  
One's speech is sincere.  
One's rule brings about order.  
One's work is efficient.  
One's actions are opportune.*

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/sources>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.egreenway.com/taoism/ttclz8.htm> Translated by [Hua-Ching Ni](#), 1979, Chapter 8.  
Modified to use gender neutral language by Ralph Catts

*One of deep virtue does not contend with people:  
Thus, such a person is above reproach."*

The essence of water is its yielding. It flows downwards, as if constantly aspiring to be the lowest of all, and it does so with a minimum of force, rounding obstacles instead of striking at them, caressing its surroundings instead of tearing at them. In other chapters water is acknowledged as both a creative and a destructive force.

I also offer the story behind one paragraph from a Buddhist wisdom text that reports the sayings of the Buddha. Verse 348 is 'Free thyself from the past, free thyself from the future'.

### The Story of Uggasena<sup>3</sup>

*Once, a wandering theatrical troupe consisting of five hundred dancers and some acrobats came to Rajagaha and performed on the grounds of the palace of King Bimbisara for seven days. There, a young dancer who was the daughter of an acrobat sang and danced on top of a long bamboo pole. Uggasena, the young son of a rich man, fell desperately in love with this dancer and his parents could not stop him from marrying her. He married the young dancer and followed the troupe. As he was not a dancer nor an acrobat, he was not of much use to the party. So, as the party moved from place to place, he had to help carry boxes, and to drive the carts.*

*In course of time, a son was born to Uggasena and his wife, the dancer. To this child, the dancer would often sing a song which ran thus: "O you, son of the man who keeps watch over the carts; the man who carries boxes and bundles! O, you, son of the ignorant one who can do nothing!"*

*Uggasena heard the song; he knew that his wife was referring to him and he was very much hurt and depressed. So he went to his father-in-law, the acrobat, and requested him to teach him acrobatics. After a year's training, Uggasena became a skilful acrobat.*

*Then, Uggasena went back to Rajagaha, and it was proclaimed that Uggasena would publicly demonstrate his skill in seven days' time. On the seventh day, a long pole was put up and Uggasena stood on top of it. At a signal given from*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=348>



Pause and consider just how much wisdom is potentially contained across the many faith traditions included in this image. Add to these diverse sources, the exponential growth in scientific knowledge in our global scientific culture.

We have heard very short extracts from two wisdom traditions. How can we as Unitarians claim to seek meaning from all wisdom sources, when we have so little time to acquire any level of understanding of each wisdom source?

One part of the answer is, to be found in our fellowships ethos statement which is to seek and find. In this we differentiate ourselves from most religions who proclaim a truth that followers must accept. But the task need not be as overwhelming as it looks, if we seek the essence of the wisdom in each tradition, rather than trying to understand the detail of the canon of each faith. I do not mean this to imply a superficial reading, and nor do I advocate picking a line here or there that we can take out of context. That is why I presented the two readings within a context. The reasoning behind my focus on seeking the principles behind the words is because this is what I believe addresses the human condition across diverse cultural and historical contexts.

We do not seek inspiration from the Dhammapada in order to adopt the Buddhist faith, just as for many of us, we do not seek inspiration from Mark's Gospel in order to adopt traditional Christian dogma. Rather we seek meaning and inspiration from the teachings of Jesus, the man who introduced to Jewish traditions the power of love for one's neighbour.

Each religious tradition has evolved in the context in which people lived their lives. It includes their sense of safety, from aggressive neighbours, from predators and from the natural environment, their culture, their technologies, and their understanding of the laws of nature. However, in each of the world's religious traditions, there are common themes and elements.

Each wisdom text is bound by the culture from which it is derived, and also from the time when it emerged. For example, the Jewish texts in the old testament reflect the periods of subjugation by the Babylonians, and the Q'uron reflects the place of jihad in the defence of the communities that followed the teachings of Mohammod.

It is the principles that inspired great wisdom traditions that endure, not the application of the principles to a particular time and place.

When we say that we draw upon all wisdom traditions, it does not mean that we adopt all the beliefs that the followers of that tradition uphold. Rather we seek to draw inspiration for how we live today.

The symbolism in the Tao of the strength and power in water which seeks the lowest level, speaks of humility.

From the Tao we can also draw awareness that the true Tao cannot be expressed in words, just as our capacity to comprehend the spirit of life that dwells within us is diminished even by saying the words 'spirit of life'. Spiritual awareness cannot be fully explained in words, but can be experienced in meditation, and can be inspired by music.

From the wisdom of the Buddha we can identify the 4 Noble Truths about suffering. How can we use this advice in our materialistic world? It means being grateful for what we have and not to feel envy or resentment for what others might have, but also to express rightful anger for those who are treated unfairly, and to stand against exploitation. This can inspire our desire to collectively care for the weak and vulnerable among us. Our support for the Uluru statement is one example of how we can respond to suffering.

Both the printing press and the emergence of universities in the Middle Ages led to the opportunity for more people to gain new insights. The digital revolution now makes that possible for almost all human beings. We live at an extraordinary time in human existence. The access to information via the web allows us to draw upon wisdom sources that would otherwise be unavailable to us. And yet, very few will make the time in their life to seek the wisdom that can set them free. According to the Buddha it was thus 2,500 years ago. He observed that most people remain in a perpetual state of ignorance about the power of the spirit that dwells within.

Do not be daunted by the challenge of Unitarianism. Seek the principles that underpin each wisdom tradition and then apply those principles to your current situation. And join with others who are also seekers of wisdom.

Among our Unitarian Universalist communities there are individuals who have made a significant effort to understand particular wisdom traditions. I have Unitarian friends who bring insights from the Sufi tradition, and from Christian teachings. I and others have had the opportunity to study with Buddhist monks. In 6 years of such opportunities, and in subsequent reading, I have developed an understanding of the sources of suffering, and I adopted and

adapted some Buddhist meditation techniques. I can bring these to share with you. By drawing upon the rich vein of experience of fellow seekers for meaning I can draw upon the six sources of wisdom, without necessarily being personally well read or have detailed experience in all.

I have heard some say of Unitarians, 'oh they are the people who can believe what they like'. The implication is that it is an easy option. The truth is that being a Unitarian is a challenging approach to faith – indeed one of constantly questioning. Because we are not told what to believe, and encouraged to seek meaning in our lives from many sources of wisdom, ours is a challenging path to spiritual awareness.