

Tending the Seeds

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD January 30, 2022

A great Buddhist master taught his disciples a practice in meditation and intention. He provided two bowls each, and several handfuls of black and white stones. The master instructed his disciples to place a black stone in a bowl whenever they had a bad thought, and a white stone in the other bowl whenever they had a good thought. Initially, the disciples filled their bowls with the black stones while the white stones remained scarce. Over the course of months, with a practice of awareness and a focus on thoughts that healed instead of thoughts that harmed, there was visible progress. Slowly, the black stones were chosen less as the white stones increased. Eventually, there were no black stones, and the bowls with the white stones were overflowing. Through a practice of awareness and intention, good thoughts multiplied, and in the consciousness of the disciples, bad thoughts faded. (DS pg 41)

This story highlights crucial elements in the Buddhist faith: Making a meaningful, purposeful life; body and mind connected through regular practices of mindfulness, of being, of feeding the good thoughts and ignoring the bad. Each world religion serves as an answer to a universal problem – in Christianity, this problem is sin. In Islam, this problem is ignorance. At the crux of Buddhist teachings is a response to the problem of suffering. The response? Intention.

Many Buddhists and students of Buddhism understand intention as a seed. Seeds are planted deep within the ground just as intentions are buried deep inside our very being – both good and bad. In the depths of our minds, we hold intentions of love and compassion and joy just as we hold within intentions of jealousy, fear and anger. Cloaked in the shadows of our minds just as seeds are planted deep and evade the sunlight, these dark places serve as fertile ground for the seeds to grow. (LWI 4) As a student of Buddhism, Deepak Chopra reflected that what we focus our intentions on will thrive, while that which is ignored will disappear. This choice brings conscious change (4). Just as a gardener positions their seeds with ample sunlight and waters

them with care, so too may we tend the seeds in our minds, cultivating beauty and goodness while that which causes suffering fades. Black stones disappear as white stones multiply.

These sentiments tie into the Buddhist understanding of Karma – a deep appreciation of cause and effect. Tibetan Buddhist Master Ringu Tulku describes Karma, again with this metaphor of a garden: “a sweet seed will result in a sweet fruit, and a bitter seed will result in a bitter fruit” – a “similar cause will yield a similar result.”(27) We are a result of all the decisions we have made from the time of birth until the present moment – each decision shaping us as who we are today. I think of our Story for All Ages, an act of violence resulting in the loss of a fortune. Or of a child practicing kindness, ultimately cultivating beautiful friendships.¹ Or even something simple, an intentional cup of morning coffee, those ten minutes of peace cultivating a day grounded in calm. In Buddhist beliefs, we are also the result of actions we took in our lives before. (DS 27-28) If our past actions were virtuous, our life will likewise be good. If our past actions were focused on anger or jealousy, our current state reflects this as well.

And while karma helps us understand who we are, it can also serve as a guide towards crafting and shaping our future by the actions we take today. Where can we set our intentions to create a promise that tomorrow will yield sweet fruit? We can purposefully reject acts of anger or jealousy and initiate, instead, a practice of loving kindness, bringing our best selves to the world around us.

And still, this is an answer to that problem of suffering. Buddhists have four truths to acknowledge and understand suffering – what those of this faith call the Four Noble Truths. These ideas serve to provide wisdom to all of us. The first truth is to acknowledge the presence of suffering – suffering inevitably exists in this world, tied together intimately with change, which is an inescapable part of life. (DS 23) Next, one must acknowledge that there are causes to suffering, followed by the third truth: well-being is possible. This series of truths is completed with the truth of the path: there is a noble path that alleviates suffering – an

¹ “How Kindness Leads to Great Joy” Traditional Buddhist story adapted by Vicki Merriam

eightfold path that guides us in mindful, purposeful living.²

In this series of eight practices, each serves as a building block for the next, providing fertile soil for the next fruit to blossom. And yet while set sequentially, each practice overlaps and interconnects with each other in meaningful and powerful ways. Woven throughout this path are layers and webs of intentional living. Each successive step brings us closer to our role in this interdependent web of which we are each a part; each step brings us further and further from suffering.

And this begins with cultivating right view. Without this, the path to evading suffering cannot begin to be laid. It's the beginning of a garden. Right view is the practice of distinguishing wholesome seeds from unwholesome seeds. It begins with an inspection of the mind, delving deep into our own consciousness. Within us, we hold seeds of loyalty, and we hold seeds of betrayal. They are both there. In engaging with our minds, we create an environment where one can thrive while its counterpart withers and recedes. This is not only knowing those seeds but knowing ourselves. Knowing what we each hold within us, distinguishing between good and bad, and nurturing all that we want to thrive.³ If done properly this strips away facades while engaging deeply with reality. (DS) How we view and interact with the world is a reflection on how we view and interact with ourselves, how we engage our own minds. I think about my own struggles with anxiety. I water that unwholesome seed when I seek persistent reassurance from those around me, when I question each decision I make – the plant's angry and resilient stalk growing with great speed. And yet – I can make that choice to instead water the seed of calm, finding reassurance and forgiveness from within myself, not beyond, cultivating the blossoms of calmness by caring for it with fertilizer of self-worth.

And this flows seamlessly into the subsequent practice of right thinking. As the Buddha wrote in the Dhammapada, "All that we are is the result of what we have thought." Pain follows evil,

² *Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings* edited by Robert Ellsberg pg. 30

³ *Ibid* pg. 51

happiness follows pureness. Thich Nhat Hanh, when reflecting on right thought, writes of Bodhichitta – our ‘mind of love.’ He reflects, a mind of love allows us to understand ourselves in a truly caring way and in doing so allows us to bring happiness to all that is around us, offering compassion for all sentient beings – a loving mind serves as a motivation for mindful living.⁴ In reflecting, again, on anxiety, I see a mind of love as one that has compassion for this form of suffering and one that accepts it, which allows me to care for and understand myself, and in doing so bring compassion to the world around me. Ringu Tulku reflects, “Our thoughts determine whether we act in a right or wrong way, as well as what type of person we become.” (41). Right thought allows us to live in alignment with our deepest values, and, in doing so, treat ourselves and all of those around us with kindness and compassion. This serves as a stepping stone for all else. When we live each moment with integrity, we act on those thoughts that are in alignment with all we hold true. (LWI 12)

Right view and right thought are followed by right mindfulness, which I see as intricately interwoven with each and every one of the practices for right living, mindfulness as the fundamental element of Buddhism. We are called to be present to the cherry blossoms lining the Tidal Basin in DC just as we are called to be present to our own thoughts of anger or compassion. Thich Nhat Hanh writes of “appropriate” attention when we are fully immersed in the present moment, and “inappropriate” attention when anything in our mind pulls us away from the here and now.⁵ With the intention to be present, right living arises from within. In being present, all the other branches of the Noble Path can be cultivated. (DS 43) I reflect on the beauty of a sunset fully noticed, sky shifting from blue to orange to black, air cooling as the heat subsides. In the same way, I reflect on being fully present with a moment of joy – embracing that special emotion and holding on tight to whatever pleasant event caused this. Fully present in nature, fully present in our own mind, intentionally tending to that which is good.

⁴ *Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings* edited by Robert Ellsberg pg. 62

⁵ *Ibid* 64

Following mindfulness is right speech, where our thinking can express itself aloud.⁶ What is within now has the chance to move without as we bring our true selves to the world around us.⁷ I share words of intention from Thich Nhat Hanh:

“Words can travel thousands of miles
May my words create mutual understanding and love.
May they be as beautiful as gems,
As lovely as flowers” (92)

What seeds of the spoken or written language can we water and tend to? I hope we can begin to see these overlaps that develop as each practice is realized and fully lived. Yes, we need to understand our mind before we can speak words as beautiful as gems, but do our words not in effect then change the understanding of our minds? We center in this complexity through practices of mindfulness.

And in conjunction with speech is action – again immersed in this Buddhist philosophy of mindfulness and intention – the most essential element of right action being the practice of nonviolence towards both ourselves and all of those around us (TNH 94). There is such a wealth of ways we can practice right action. Thich Nhat Hanh encourages each of his students to “protect life, practice generosity, behave responsibly, and consume mindfully.” (98). This is reflective of the duality we spoke of earlier when reflecting on right view – everything is intimately connected with its opposite. We can replace ill-will with goodwill, suffering with generosity and kindness. Whichever seed we water in our mind directly impacts how we interact with the world around us, and with intention we can follow the path to wisdom and alleviate suffering. (<https://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/on-right-intention-and-right-action/>)

⁶ *Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings* edited by Robert Ellsberg pg. 84

⁷ *Ibid* 86

And these five steps are followed by three more that serve to bring the intention within to the world around us. All of these practices culminate in right livelihood – finding a way to make a living - choosing our vocation - without transgressing our truest ideals.

Our understanding of our thoughts ultimately lays the foundation for how we survive on this planet we all call home. Through mindfulness and intention, suffering is eliminated. Through a mind of love, we bring nonviolence to the world around us. We ignore seeds of harm and tend to seeds of joy and love. We understand ourselves and our place in this world and strive to do no harm. When we examine our bowls of black and white stones, we can slowly watch that pile of white grow. I end with an intention of Thich Nhat Hanh:

Waking up this morning, I smile.

Twenty-four brand new hours are before me.

I vow to live fully in each moment

And to look at all beings with eyes of compassion. (102)

Let each of our lives be one of intention.

May it be so, and Amen.