

The Sacred Ordinary

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD March 8, 2026

Last spring, I had the blessed opportunity to pause in my tangible tasks and tend to my intellect and spirit throughout my sabbatical. Interwoven with an immersion in Quakerism, with my consistent engagement with the beauty and awe of the natural world, I engrossed myself in the practices and teachings of Buddhism. I sat in chairs, eyes closed, feet planted firmly on the ground noticing the air inhaled and exhaled through my nostrils, noticing but not engaging with physical sensations or thoughts, noticing the business of the mind. These routines cultivated a basic tenet of Buddhism – mindfulness. These practices – this intentional engagement with insights of the Buddha and other venerable teachers passed down through millennia altered my outlook on life. Breathing, walking, silence – the mundane became sanctified, the ordinary became extraordinary.

We are immersed in a society that values speed, efficiency, and multitasking. The mundane is boring - doing the dishes, mowing the lawn. Our attention is fragmented from dings, notifications, scrolling, advertisements. We get distracted as our minds race from one task to the next, ruminating on the past or anxious about the future. We foster judgement of ourselves and others. We focus on the inevitable worries and potential mistakes of our daily lives. We pass through life not cognizant of our surroundings, not engaged with the web that connects us to the world around us. Our actions lack intention, our reactive emotions of anger or impatience rule our lives. There is a healing salve for these afflictions – mindfulness. So may we pause, center, and breathe.

How do we practice this life-altering mindfulness? We take a moment to focus on the breath, noticing the sensation of air coming in and out of our nostrils. We pause in a body scan, noticing our legs, our backs, our faces, attentive to sensations of itching or discomfort, but not reacting, not trying to change them by scratching or stretching. We observe our thoughts in this as well – not ruminating or trying to cure anxiety or frustration – but simply acknowledging them. Not

judging them. We are fully present in each mundane and blessed task – noting the wind as we rake the leaves, the scent of soap as we wash our hair, the warmth of water as we do the dishes. We do not need to be on sabbatical to experience these changes. We need to simply pause, for ten minutes incorporated into any busy, hectic, or mundane day. And this is not a simple task. I falter as well. But let us be inspired by the sentiments of the Buddha, whose teachings offer that we do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, but concentrate the mind on the present moment.

Meditation is successful even when our thoughts wander, as they will, as long as we bring them back to the breath. Each time I meditate, my mind jumps between work and mistakes I have made and plans for tomorrow, etc. etc. etc. Yet, each time I simply take note and return to the breath – to the sensation on my nostrils, I am cultivating mindfulness. These thoughts that arise in our minds are impermanent. The practice is akin to clouds in the sky. The eggshell blue sky resting gently above us represents the calm mind, peaceful, and at ease. Clouds come and go, as impermanent as thoughts. Note this crucial understanding: the practice of meditation is not to stop our thoughts. The practice of meditation is the intention of returning.

Through Tuesday Dharma talks I attended, I learned of the philosophy of meditation. Meditation is this: setting intention. An intention to cultivate peace. To connect to the present moment. And meditation is this: dedicating the practice to a venerable teacher, sharing all that we have cultivated with the awakened teachers who span throughout time and space. And meditation is this: creating calm within our bodies that will ripple throughout communities, creating peace and tranquility, not simply for ourselves, but for every blessed being that is, was, and ever will be. Meditation goes beyond a simple acknowledgement of “this is what I am doing right now.” It makes each moment sacred.

Join me in exploring a typical day. We are late for work, sitting in our car fuming over a red light. Later in the day frustration fills our minds and takes over our interactions with friends or coworkers as we lash out. We come back home and ruminate on these things we wish we had

not done for an hour. Does any of this feel familiar? Let us reinterpret through the lens of mindfulness. What if a red light is an invitation to take our mind off the task of driving and simply breathe. What if when frustration overwhelms us, we can simply pause and acknowledge emotion without reacting. What if instead of ruminating we accept the day as it was. These are mindful moments. These are days without judgment, without reaction, without rumination.

Thich Nhat Hanh is a teacher of mindful walking. In his instructions, he offers phrases akin to this: “Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet.”¹ I experienced this at my various retreats. Walking with intention. Each slowly taken step – each pause between each step – is in and of itself a moment of embodied meditation. It is feeling the gravel crunching beneath your sneakers. Noticing the wind that gently kisses your face. Calmly engaging with the sites that surround you – whether rows of trees or whitewashed walls. Often, I closed my eyes. What is walking without sight? If we kiss the earth with the souls of our feet, even walking overwhelms us with true beauty and awe. We cannot walk or wheel our way down the city streets with such mindful intention that our slow movement encumbers our ability to move with the crowd. But we can still note with appreciation – whether walking or navigating with a wheelchair – that there is solid ground beneath us, that there are myriad sites surrounding us, that there is a scent of flowers or food. We can still be present and open to whatever it is we encounter in any particular moment, opening ourselves to beauty.

Venerable teachers impart wisdom upon students by sharing with them koans. Koans teach through short paradoxical anecdotes or questions that are meant to spark insight and reflection. Koans are intended to move beyond an intellectual understanding of the spiritual and instead cultivate direct insights. Zhaozhou Congshen, a Chan Buddhist master in the seven and eight hundreds, offers this:

¹ *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* by Thich Nhat Hanh

A novice monk asked Joshu in all earnestness, “I have just entered this monastery. I ask you, Master, teach me.” Joshu asked his student, “Have you eaten your rice this morning?” The monk answered, “Yes, I have.” Joshu responded, “Wash your bowl.” At that moment, the monk was enlightened.²

The instruction alludes to the sacredness of everyday tasks. It goes beyond simply noticing but inviting faith and spirituality into our daily lives – into driving and eating and watching tv. What if cleaning a bowl, just as the novice did, became sacred? Each task becomes a form of meditation. A time to pause in simple recognition of what is and breathe. May I feel the warm dishwater rinse over my hands, may I inhale the fresh scent of soap. Each task can teach us an intentional awareness of our actions that we carry forth into our days. We can experience gratitude for the opportunity to engage with each task and notice the wonder and awe of the right here, right now. Each moment is a holy moment. Each task is a sacred task. When we are attentive, we cultivate wisdom. When we are aware, we foster insight. Woven throughout each task is spirituality. Faith and monotony are one in the same.

I lift up a koan from Zen master Yunmen Wenyan. Wenyan taught, “I do not ask you about before the fifteenth day. Try to say something about after the fifteenth day. Every day is a good day.”³ For context, the fifteenth day is the arrival of the full moon which serves to symbolize enlightenment. Yet what is of note here is the phrase, “Every day is a good day.” We experience this life fully, just as it is, without trying to change it. This koan does not deny that we suffer and that there will be days imbued with sorrow, grief, and anger. But it is this – facing this sorrow without resistance; accepting it just as it is. We are awakened to the fullness of life. I think of my stepfather’s memorial service. Yes, we grieved and lamented. Yes, his absence was palpable. Yes, the goodbye was difficult, to say the least. Yet, I know that many of my family members, as well myself, faced it with acceptance. Death acknowledges the inherent finitude of each life, which makes each day all the more blessed. It acknowledges the

² *The Gateless Gate Wash Your Bowl*“

³ The Blue Cliff Record “Every Day is a Good Day”

sacredness, this eternal and unavoidable cycle of life to death to life again, flowing in our web of life throughout millennia. Death is a return to the damp, brown earth and ancient, far away stars.

I furthermore include the sentiments of Thich Nhat Hanh, that each moment is imbued with joy and happiness, if only we remain attentive enough to notice it. No matter the sorrow, honeysuckles offer their sweet aroma. No matter the frustration, the sweet, tart taste of lush strawberries still lingers on our tongues. No matter the anger, children still laugh and play. Thich Nhat Hanh further offers, “Breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I smile. Dwelling in the present moment, I know this is a wonderful moment.”⁴ This moment – right here, right now – wonderful.

Mindfulness also – and this is key – it also changes our relationships with ourselves; with our internal engagement to just who we are. First, we label thoughts as thoughts, feelings as feelings. Imagine a teenager comes home after curfew and gives you attitude. Instead of engaging with anger and lashing out, we simply note, “anger is present.” Our responses become grounded and intentional, which releases us from the inevitable regret of rash actions. We simply note emotions when they arrive. And this is hard! So much of what we encounter fosters understandable or even expected aggravation or impatience. And yet, it is a way to be gentle with ourselves. Ordained Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön offers that practices of mindfulness allow us to see these emotions – to see and notice aggression, jealousy, or any other distress of the mind – but not act upon it. We simply notice.⁵

Chödrön further offers, quote, “Meditation is not about trying to throw ourselves away and become something better. It’s about befriending who we already are.”⁶ So much of this is compassion, cultivated for both ourselves and for others. We are blessed beings, each of us. The intent of mindfulness is not to alter our faults nor change who we are, but to engage with

⁴ *Being Peace* by Thich Naht Hanh

⁵ *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* by Pema Chodron

⁶ *Ibid*

our emotions and instincts with kindness. Instead of rejecting our anger or our insecurities we simply accept and welcome these unpleasant emotions which are essentially inevitable in any finite, human life. Ultimately, this practice creates an inner peace and wisdom which ripple beyond our own insular selves to affect others in our midst. We fully face who we are at any particular moment and meet that blessed being with compassion and curiosity instead of judgement and anger.

And so it is this. Mindfulness is not limited nor confined to our practices of seated breathing meditation, the air on our nostrils, our feet planted on the ground. It weaves its way into each moment of our finite lives. Imagine if washing the dishes became a prayer. If mowing the lawn became a practice of meditation. It is the sacred ordinary that we cultivate. Breathe and breathe and breathe. I invite you to leave this sacred and holy space welcoming mindfulness this afternoon. Pause to smell the scent of a flower. Meet your mind with compassion. Engage with your car ride home with gentle intention. Note the ground beneath your body. But a few simple, small intentions ripple far beyond each action towards cultivating a truly compassionate, purposeful, and meaningful life. So cultivate the sacred ordinary, the holy mundane. Blessed be the breath, the senses, the calm and compassionate mind. Blessed be these fleeting moments of these short and forever finite days.

May it be so, and Amen.