

Through Loving Kindness

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 19, 2025

Imagine a flower garden. Deep red roses. Rows of yellow and pink tulips, bright sunflowers reaching towards the sky. Scents of nectar and honey filling the air. Bees buzz, spreading pollen, keeping the flowers flourishing. And, yes, weeds, competing for the same resources like water and sunlight, overriding the awe of multi-colored flowers with harmful, life-taking intentions. This serves as a metaphor for a Buddhist teaching. All of these plants, whether those of beauty or those of harm, arose from seeds.

Let us imagine our minds as a garden. What seeds are we cultivating in our minds? Seeds of compassion and empathy, or seeds of impatience and jealousy? They are all there. We can choose to nurture and tend to those thoughts that are life-giving as they become a source of good in the world, or we can do the opposite. We can decide to feed and water the seeds of love and justice, or the seeds of greed and hate and power through our actions and thoughts and speech. Whatever thrives will slowly become the guiding force in our lives.

Today we focus on cultivating seeds of compassion, a key teaching of the Buddhist faith. In order to truly understand compassion, we need to understand suffering. Buddhism articulates suffering in its own, unique way. Much of our suffering stems from change. We resist it. We are attached to things as they are. Whatever good we experience may be tinted with anxiety because we know it will not last. The transient nature of life is so hard for us to accept. We see this as our bodies transition from youth to middle age to old age to death; in the process we face pain and illness. People die, relationships end, injuries become debilitating. The Buddha taught that each and every being will face life-altering suffering. Think of chronic illness or addiction or profound loss. I invite us to heal by focusing on compassion. Compassion towards ourselves, and compassion for every other living, breathing being.

What is compassion, truly? Buddhism teaches us this: It is that strong and purposeful desire to alleviate pain and suffering of the broken among us – not only those within our proximity, but each living, breathing being. It arises when we intentionally become proximate to suffering, truly feeling it within ourselves and others.¹ I did this intentionally as a chaplain, proximate to those facing hunger, addiction, illness. The unhoused, the destitute, the dying. And it affected me as I imagine it affects many of us. And that is a key teaching. We feel and palpably know the suffering of others, and we work through intention and faith and ritual and the spoken word to heal all of those inhabit this broken and beautiful world. And that is a key tenet of Buddhism – we work to heal each and every blessed being - beloveds, enemies, and each one of the billions of strangers that we will never even meet.

How do we change if we cultivate inner compassion? There is compassion for those we deeply love, yes, even if there is a momentary lapse of goodwill, it is nearly inherent. Yet most people we encounter will not be those of whom we love. Most will be strangers. And some will be those who have caused us deep harm. I think of my own experience as a young adult in New Jersey. In my innocence, I ended up with a partner who caused me great pain. Ultimately, the relationship ended. For months afterwards I felt resentment, and I became angry as my whole attitude towards life shifted. And yet I realized I was suffering as a result; I was no longer myself. And so, I attempted to feel goodwill. It was difficult, but my natural joy and love of life returned. If we react to others by fostering animosity or disdain to hurt or anger, it only serves to harm us. Inwardly, and with great intention, we water the seeds of goodness and understanding, we cultivate healing within ourselves. And it can take so much time and we might fight against anger at every turn. But it helps us cultivate much needed, authentic, genuine inner peace and joy.

Often, as I reflected earlier, Buddhists focus on having compassion for all beings, and this is often done via ritual. When they gather at the temple, Buddhists use prayer and meditation and chanting for the benefit of all sentient beings – echoed in the words and the thoughts that

¹ *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom* by Joseph Goldstein pg. 147

are evoked. In many of the meditation classes that I have attended, with eyes closed and hands in my lap, I have been prompted to dedicate any peace and wellbeing I cultivate during the practice towards the benefit of all sentient beings. At many temples, once or twice a month, Buddhists join to offer meditations for world peace, acknowledging war and famine and profound poverty, engaging in traditional Buddhist practices to help those of all countries to heal. This practice is two-fold. One, joining in communal prayer for those of any nation. Two, creating inner peace within our own minds, relieving animosity and harm, which will then ripple out to create greater peace in the larger world. It is a reminder that the world suffers and offers a practice to heal via the tenets of the Buddhist faith. It is the practice of habituating the mind towards kindness and love. A wise teacher once told me, “Every moment of mindfulness is a moment of compassion.”

So, what happens when we embody this compassion? I offer two examples. First, Thich Nhat Hanh offers that when we truly look at the one who causes us harm, even detrimental harm, we can look to see a deep and profound suffering within them.² Again I think of my past partner in New Jersey. In all of his harm, I knew his actions stemmed from suffering; he had a very difficult childhood. And this mind shift towards compassion is difficult – for what we feel is often painful. Yet, if we can, seeing this suffering within them becomes a great gift. Once we are in touch with their suffering, our “enmity and bitterness”³ towards this aching soul begins to vanish. We cultivate compassion. We may begin to long for this person who caused us great harm to suffer less. We cannot fully understand all of the pain and hardship they carry within, and how they are affected day by day. When you do engage with those who have caused harm, I invite you to lean into this suffering. Maybe meditate on the mantra: May he suffer less. May he know happiness. May he know joy.

I offer a second example. In Buddhism, it is not only tending to the suffering of the person who is, but to the person who has been. We have each had innumerable past lives. To make sense

² *Essential Writings* by Thich Nhat Hanh pg. 102

³ *ibid*

of this, many Buddhists ascribe to the idea of multiple universes. So, we have countless universes and a finite number of beings to be reincarnated. As such, we encounter the same beings over and over and over again. And, yes, in this life a being may be treating you with disdain. They may offer anger or misuse power or become selfish by chasing greed, but at one point they were also your loving mother. They were a partner who helped you feel joy for the first time. A child whom you loved unconditionally. In offering compassion to one who does you harm, you offer compassion to that same being who offered life-altering love. This can be difficult for the person we are currently interacting with may offer anger or frustration. They may be difficult and aggravating. But we remind ourselves, at one point they also offered us unconditional love.

Buddhist author and teacher Joseph Goldstein offers that when we focus within ourselves with the mindset of compassion, we cannot help but recognize the striking similarities found in the human condition.⁴ When we engage with our own desire to be happy, we cannot help but to see this desire in others. When we engage with our own fear or our own aversions or our own insecurities, we cannot help but see fear and aversion and insecurity in others. Every person we meet on the street, dog walkers and businesswomen and giggling children, they experience what we experience. And yet it is often human nature to create barriers between ourselves and others, perhaps of nationality or age or race. Us and them. And yet when we engage with our own minds through mindfulness and compassion, when we see the similarities all around us, we cannot help but dissolve these imagined dividers, and we realize more than ever that we are one.

I end our reflection this morning with a story. Dr. Tenzin Choedrak, a physician to the Dalai Lama, was imprisoned and tortured for over seventeen years. In retrospect, he reflected on how he survived both in body and in spirit; still maintaining a compassionate heart throughout overwhelming adversity. Dr. Choedrak saw each of his torturers as human beings, just as himself. He saw that each one of them had faced adverse conditions, as all of us do. Through

⁴ *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening* by Joseph Goldstein

their unwholesome actions, they were acquiring tremendous karma that would result in their own future suffering. All actions bring consequences. This mindset saved him. Not as a vehicle for revenge, but as a vehicle for compassion. Beyond all the horrors he witnessed and experienced, beyond evil and pain, he maintained a boundless loving kindness for all.⁵ What about this resonates? Any harmful act that one performs will be reciprocated via the law of karma – all actions bring consequences. We can have sympathy for those who cause us harm, for they will feel great pain in the future. Right now they may be wealthy or powerful or influential. But, by taking advantage of their wealth or power, by causing others suffering, they may return to a life imbued with hardship and trauma. We offer not revenge, but compassion. It is the equanimity cultivated via mindfulness that allows such a profound goodwill in the midst of such great horror. Are we at the level of Dr. Choedrak? I would venture to guess, maybe not yet. I know I am not. But what is growth without aspiration?

So, go forth and embody these teachings - Buddhist practices that shaped followers for millennia. May we manifest the teachings of one wise and beloved prophet among many. Hate and animosity only lead to suffering. Water those seeds of goodwill and love so that your beauty may radiate and you meet with the world with compassion; you meet yourself with compassion. Starve those seeds which produce suffering so that one embodies a blessed and beautiful life. May we practice that which is not easy - for it is this dedication towards compassion that ultimately saves us and shapes our future – shaping our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. This is what heals us. That guides us in love. Make every aching and blessed being the recipient of things good and loving so that we heal the world one individual at a time. May we engage in this world imbued with both beauty and hate; with individuals who suffer and act with rage alongside those who flourish in body and in spirit. For this is what leads to a blessed and beautiful life. This is what heals us so we may offer true understanding and empathy to all sentient beings, so that each living and breathing being may flourish. What seeds have we planted in the gardens of our lives? May we tend to the flowers of goodness, love, kindness, and yes, compassion.

⁵ *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening* by Joseph Goldstein pgs. 363-365

May it be so, and Amen.