

From Spirit to Spirit

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 5, 2023

A story of great importance in Buddhism is the Buddha's experience of enlightenment. Siddhartha Gautama, the young Buddha, a youth of privilege held within the sheltered confines of a great palace, escaped to the outside world and met, for the first time, deep suffering. After confronting and acquiring this novel understanding of the human experience, he renounced his life of privilege and left home to discover the truth of suffering and its cessation. After years of traversing the lands of North India looking for the truth, it is said that this great seeker sat beneath a Bodhi Tree, where, deep in meditation, he achieved enlightenment, a profound awakening. It is said that when he acquired enlightenment, he had a vision of lotus flowers in various stages of growth, some of them held in early life floating just beneath the surface of the water, some as buds poking their way out of the pool or pond, some in the beginning stages of opening their petals, and others in full bloom. The lotus flower becomes a metaphor, an image of spiritual growth held alongside a foundational element of Buddhism – generosity. Closed and below the surface we are solely concerned with ourselves, protective of who we are, reflecting on nothing but that which feeds our own livelihood. We slowly mature, peeking through the water, blooming and blossoming, beginning to reach beyond ourselves, outwards to the wellbeing of others. The unfolding petals are reflective of the start of a new life of spiritual growth and deepening – of generosity. This generosity, teaches the Buddha, is the first step in a life of faith. We are led to a life that blossoms, not so much in the physical act of giving and of sharing, but in that deeply held conviction of wanting to give, of inherently desiring to share one's tangible and intangible gifts with others. This impulse to give – not out of obligation, guilt, pity or for accolades, but from kindness and authenticity – this is regarded as the first expression of a life of faith; the initial mindset that guides us on our spiritual journeys. Generous living becomes a spiritual practice. An intentional act that simultaneously takes us beyond our small and simple lives while connecting us to our sacred and that still, small voice within.¹

¹ <http://ratnaghosa.fwbo.net/danatwo.html>

Last month we reflected on heritage. What were we provided? What gifts and ills are passed from one generation to the next? We are offered life – life that we have the opportunity to shape and mold as we hold on to the good and release or transform the bad. Not all of what we have inherited have we earned; often there are layers of privilege granted simply by birth. So may we give of that which we may not have fairly received as a step toward equity. As we consider all that came before which led to all that is, we are called as a people of faith to deeply reflect upon what of this we want to genuinely and authentically bring to the world. What from our history can we choose to bless the world with?

Generosity is held in the tangible. We share food, resources, shelter to those in need; offering basic goods to the least of these, the marginalized, those who through no fault of their own suffer on the bottom rungs of society. Those who need. And yet generosity stems beyond material goods as we offer that which we hold deep within – tending to spiritual needs, to the needs of the soul, the mind, easing that universal suffering we each inevitably face. We offer compassion, kindness, joy, wisdom, gifts one does not need monetary means to share. As a people of faith, we are embraced by the love of the finite and the infinite. As a people of faith, we are called to share this love and share the blessings of that which we hold sacred with the world. We bring our values and our covenants and our convictions to those we encounter spreading our commitment to equity, worthiness, and interdependence. As a people of faith, we offer love – agape love – that selfless, universal love, not in hopes of receiving anything in return, but simply because we heed the whispers of our spirits and souls.

True generosity is giving while expecting nothing in return. True generosity ties us together in interdependence and mutuality as we connect from spirit to spirit to spirit in acts of selfless giving, reverberating throughout our web of life, strengthening the bonds that tie all of humanity together through selfless, universal love. True generosity is not simply sharing what we have in excess, but that which requires sacrifice. True generosity is not charity, is not a

separation of us versus them, of solitary acts that can be done with and finished, but that which continuously flows. We are called to be consistently generous with what you have because someone on the other end, for one reason or another, cannot partake in all the richness that has been granted upon the world. Generosity – giving simply because we want to give – is, as the Buddha teaches, the first step of a spiritual life; a life of true faith.

I hold with me a treasured memory through which I experienced life-giving generosity, an abundance of generosity of faith. When I was in my first year of seminary, we were assigned to volunteer among those deemed the least of these, fostering intentional and reciprocal relationships of spirituality, care, and love. I served at a coalition to house the unhoused. My engagement led to deep, meaningful bonds with those filled with true suffering, struggling to survive. Together we took ample time to speak of their own journeys of faith and spirituality, their life-giving encounters with or feelings of abandonment from their sacred. As I made my way to my car at the end of my last day with these new beloveds, I heard a man call my name. I turned around, and a marbled composition notebook was quickly placed in my hands. I offered thanks, words of love and farewell, and continued to my car. Once inside I opened the journal and was met with that which touched my heart and connected me to my sacred and all I held within – pages of this man's favorite scripture – words of divine love, faith, and meaning making that helped guide him through his life of continuous trials and tribulations. Words of faith that saved him, that he thought could help save me. This notebook is among my most treasured of gifts, a simple and profound token of a deeply wounded man whose generosity of faith served to change me. We are, each one of us, filled with an abundance of gifts to share.

Generosity is held as a sacred tenet not only within Buddhism but within many of the world's faith traditions. In reflecting on Islam, I offer the words of the Prophet Muhammad, "The best of my people will enter paradise not because of their achievements, but because of the Mercy of God and their being satisfied with little for themselves and their extreme generosity toward

others."² We need not be in agreement of what happens after death to share in these sentiments. Even if our heaven is here on earth, it is shaped by our generosity. We may think it is the wealthy, the beautiful, the monetarily successful who live with ultimate reward in this life or the next. We may think it is with those who can give much simply because they have a lot as truly generous. And yet those are not the prerequisites for a life or an eternity of meaning, joy, and faith. It is, in fact, those who are satisfied with a little for themselves giving, not of that which is held in excess, but of the heart. Who give freely of the tangible and the intangible through daily spiritual practices, offering what they have held deep within and the material goods they can part with. Those who give simply because they want to give and foster a deep faith as an unintended consequence. I hold this in alignment with an African proverb, "You can share even if you have a little."³ In the throes of poverty, depression, or instability, we still have gifts to offer the world. We have wisdom, compassion, and strength. We have faith, love, and kindness. In sharing what we have, we progress from a scarcity mindset to one of abundance.

I want to return, in this moment, to Buddhism. The Buddha is said to have spoken the words, "If you knew, as I do, the power of giving, you would not let a single meal pass without sharing some of it" – for, as the enlightened one noted, no spiritual life is possible without a generous heart. Each meal shared is a meal centered in love and in faith. Generosity is the antidote of suffering – the suffering the Buddha found in his awakening of selfishness, clinging, and attachment. Practices of generosity offer a release of what Buddhists understand to be our innate, inherent self-centeredness because it is the quality of letting go and relinquishing. We foster delight in our intention to give, in the action of giving, and in the memory of having given. We simply, freely, and faithfully let go and share with the world.⁴ I want to touch on Hinduism in this moment as well. We share in the beauty of that which we have offered, for, in the words of Gandhi, "The fragrance remains in the hand that gives the rose."⁵

²www.spiritualityandpractice.com

³ibid

⁴ Beth Roth from stillwatersanghamn.wordpress.com

⁵ www.spiritualityandpractice.com

Christianity, too, teaches of the importance of generosity. A true act of sharing does not stem from guilt or from pity. The spiritual practice of genuine generosity comes from our hearts, our spirits, that which is fearless and free. We offer a sacred willingness to share in abundance all of that which we have been given, treating friends, acquaintances, and strangers alike as one would treat intimate family. We are called, in each of our days, to think, speak, and act as generous creatures. Jesus is quoted, "Give and gifts will be given to you... for whatever measure you deal out to others will be dealt out to you in return." (Luke 6:38) Spiritual guide Anthony de Mello likens this quote as a devotee's relationship with God. In my understanding this is held true for any understanding of the sacred. How we treat the least of these is how we treat our God. Likewise, if we are miserly and calculating with those who are in need, how can we expect the sacred to be generous with us?⁶ We can only be divinely given that which we offer our finite siblings; even nature loses her beauty if we do not freely give.

So may we be guided in each of our days through a spiritual practice of generosity, a tenet of faith traditions around the world, connecting through values Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims alike. May we share hope and gratitude, love and kindness. May we give of the tangible and through that act promote equity and justice. May we share with the world, not out of guilt or pity or obligation but of love and kindness and compassion. And may we, in doing so, connect with our inherent goodness and worthiness held within. May we find our place in the wider world, reaching far beyond our small and simple lives. May our faith forever flourish as we are guided by love, giving freely of our hearts and our spirits. May we be divinely guided on our spiritual journeys, likened to the lotus, blooming, blossoming, sharing beauty in abundance.

May it be so, and Amen

⁶ www.spiritualityandpractice.com