

To Be Present for the Simple Things

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, Dec. 6, 2020

Years ago, before I entered seminary, I joined other Unitarian Universalists at a retreat center tucked away in the remote corners of New York State. This group of Unitarian Universalists I was with stayed in simple lodgings located at the entrance of acres of beautiful land; paths carved out amongst an abundance of trees. On that day the air was heavy, the spring foliage budding and green, and the grey sky was filled with ominous clouds. I followed one of these meandering paths and came across a clearing. In the center of this clearing, a labyrinth - a circular maze leading to nothing but the center of the circle. The labyrinth was sculpted by red bricks and lined with soft sand. I took off my shoes and, surrounded by a damp mist, entered that sacred space, following that path leading to nothing but the center of this intricate maze. The world around me paused in sacred stillness, my mind paused likewise. I slipped into a mindfulness meditation, intentional about the placement of my feet and the speed at which I walked. Noticing the cool air and my damp hair and clothing. Inhaling the scent of wet grass. I connected with my heart, my soul, my true self. Time slipped away from me in this practice of intention, stillness, and mindfulness. My soul was at peace.

The Buddha was asked, "What do you and your disciples' practice?" and he replied, "We sit, we walk, and we eat." This confused the questioner. Doesn't everyone do this? Everyone sits, eats, and moves around the world, the Buddha explained. What made these actions different from the throngs of people sitting, moving, and eating all over this great planet was the practice of mindfulness. Of stillness. Of intention. Of noticing these actions and being fully present for each one of them. To be fully present, always, in the present moment.¹

¹ *Thich Nhat Hanh Essential Writings* pg 147

There are miracles around us every minute, if only we notice! The miracle of the gentle noise of a songbird, the miracle of soft grass bending delicately beneath our footprints, the first sip of our morning coffee, slightly bitter and yet welcomed as we rub the sleep out of our eyes. We need simply be present, and intentional in interacting with the simple things. Just like that connection I felt at the labyrinth, these practices connect us to our true selves. Practices that connect us in sacred ways to the present moment.

“To lose the present is to lose life,”² wrote Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Mindfulness is a key teaching of Buddhism, and a common teaching of this well-known and beloved monk. This understanding that we need each be present in every moment is a teaching that has guided the way Buddhists have navigated this world for thousands of years. “To lose the present is to lose life.”³ The past has already happened and the future is not yet upon us.

This – here – where we are right now, together virtually, each from our own homes, connecting not in body but in spirit, this moment is a miracle! This present moment, this distant yet holy connection we are sharing, is a miracle. I offer us a poem, one suggested by Thich Nhat Hanh to ground us in the beauty of the present moment:

Breathing in, I calm my body

Breathing out, I smile

Dwelling in the present moment

I know this is a wonderful moment⁴

² *Thich Nhat Hanh Essential Writings* pg 39

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid* pg 25

Buddhists practice this sacred art of mindfulness – of being truly present in each and every moment. Part of being still and attentive to the present moment is being attentive to ourselves; our true selves, our inner being. When we pause and do this sacred inventory, when we search deep, we will inevitably find both good and bad, both flowers and compost. Each one of us. And that is ok! That is what being human is – flowers and compost. What Buddhism teaches – what Thich Nhat Hanh teaches – is mindfulness that transforms compost to flowers – to transform anger or depression into green buds that flourish as love and understanding – this happens through this intentional practice of stillness, of awareness, of mindfulness. Stemming from a practice of presence.⁵

And there is this metaphor – this idea of seeds. In order to bloom and to blossom, seeds need attention. Seeds need water, soil rich with nutrients, sunlight traveling to the budding shoot from millions of miles away. Just as this cultivates rhododendrons, so too does this cultivate thickets of weeds. So it is with the seeds of our minds, the seeds of our inner being. Each moment that we spend focusing on that which brings us joy, on that which brings us peace, on that which brings us beauty, that time we spend serves to cultivate the rhododendrons of our subconscious, allowing those precious flowers to blossom and bloom. These seeds become stronger and more abundant. Likewise, when we focus on hate or fear or other ugly or painful emotions, those seeds are cultivated just the same, squeezing those rhododendrons out to be replaced by thickets of weeds. It's not only being in the present moment but being intentional about what we focus on in that present moment; watering those beautiful, peaceful seeds of a rhododendron and eliminating those thoughts that nourish the seeds of hate or anger.⁶

To be present with the simple things. What about our emotions? That which fills our mind! And often when we focus on thoughts or feelings or emotions, Thich Nhat Hanh teaches us, we may focus on

⁵ *Thich Nhat Hanh Essential Writings* pg 82

⁶ *Ibid* pg 83

suffering! We often give space and attention to that which causes suffering – this hurts our very hearts! We focus on worries or thoughts of pain. We may notice suffering, but we also need to notice that which brings us peace and joy. We notice the pain of a toothache. Do we notice the lack of pain when that toothache is not present? The miracle here is that even when suffering is present, all that is needed to bring us joy and happiness and peace is here as well! It is here. It is always here, in the striking blue sky filled with cotton-ball clouds, in that gentle warmth felt from that star so many millions of miles away. We simply need to be reminded. We simply need to be present.⁷

Simple practices of mindfulness, the Buddhist monk teaches us, helps eliminate that which harms us.⁸ Mindfulness serves to transform the pain held deep within. Through transforming the pain – that within our mind which is negative – we can cultivate a powerful sense of understanding. Through transforming the negative we will cultivate compassion.⁹ Having a true sense of understanding, having a true sense of compassion, these emotions can only truly come from experiences of suffering. Conversely, while mindfulness quiets those negative thoughts, mindfulness enhances the positive. When we are intentional about finding in our minds that which is beautiful, the beauty is revealed and enhanced, we relish in the peace and the joy. We water those seeds of peace and love. These simple practices of mindfulness transform our consciousness.

We have an opportunity to be intentional. Whichever seeds we choose to nurture will strengthen, grow, develop. We can water those seeds of joy and find more happiness in our lives, both within our own minds and surrounding us. If we notice harmful emotions, we can intentionally transform them into emotions of understanding and compassion, of peace and kindness. When we find inside us depression,

⁷ *Thich Nhat Hanh Essential Writings* pg 22- 24

⁸ *Ibid* pg 55

⁹ *Ibid* pg 83

anxiety, hate, anger – that compost we talked about earlier – we can mindfully transform this into delicate blossoms of love, peace, and happiness within us.¹⁰

We read a poem earlier, when Thich Nhat Hanh noticed that earth “as red as a child’s lips.” The monk wrote, “Suddenly I am aware of each step I make.” When we notice we become aware of those simple miracles all around us.¹¹ Being present to the simple things. Allowing this to guide how we navigate our daily lives and to cultivate that inner resilience, peace, and happiness. The miracle of a summer thunderstorm, hot air thick with humidity playing host to a downpour of water. The miracle of a smile, or the twinkle in a child’s eye. This awareness – this constant presence – feeds the good and starves the bad.

We talked earlier about suffering, and how our mind often focuses on this. It needs to be understood that suffering is inherent in life and suffering is necessary in life. It’s how we approach this suffering that affects us and our lives, how we deal with the inevitable pain that accompanies life. Suffering, when approached with mindfulness, leads to inner growth. Without suffering, neither can we have peace. Neither can we have joy. Thich Nhat Hanh pleads with us that we do not run away from suffering! Instead, he asks us to embrace it. To cherish it. When one looks at one’s own pain deeply, with intention, with a true sense of understanding, the wounds in our hearts begin to heal. The compost produces buds that become flowers. Suffering can liberate us.¹² We all need to suffer. This is part of life. We need not shy away from this but embrace. We need approach with mindfulness – with a focus on the present, allowing our situations to become seeds of understanding and compassion; flourishing into flowers of hope, love, and happiness.

¹⁰ *Thich Nhat Hanh Essential Writings* pg 86

¹¹ *Ibid* pg 19

¹² *Ibid* pg 121

And just as we as individuals have suffered, so have those around us! Those who hurt us – they are suffering too. And just as we need to be intentional in how we address our own suffering, so do we need to be intentional about how we address the suffering of others. Those who have caused us pain – they have and are suffering as well. In order to truly understand how and why a person does what they do, we need to slip into their skin and know their thoughts and experiences. To understand others we need to recognize their suffering – we need to go inside them and understand their suffering. By truly understanding another’s suffering, we can understand the person. If we pause, if we focus on mindfulness, if we are fully in the present moment, we can understand. We can foster compassion, and we can foster love. Until we do this, our love will be contingent on how another person acts or what they do. We need to practice this until we approach any other person who is suffering with compassion.¹³

These practices are made real in the Buddhist meditation practice of loving kindness, a practice which begins by loving oneself and ends with an intention to love those who we do not like; those we disagree with. This is mindfulness, stillness, focused on love; centered in love. Love that cultivates those flowers of joy and happiness within us and allows us to truly see other people as suffering beings.

I think about all of this as I ponder that retreat I was on years ago, the one where I connected with my true self, my inner being, at the labyrinth. Surrounded by trees, covered in that wet mist, bare feet slowly and deliberately moving forward on that soft sand. In that moment I was cultivating rhododendrons in my mind. Pausing to intentionally be in that space, and intentionally move through it, my mind filled with peace and calm and love for all of those in my life, and a love for myself. A centering, pure feeling of calm. A sacred stillness. I found that within myself. And, just as I was leaving, as if by fate, someone I knew entered the clearing. A man with whom I had had some difficult

¹³ *Thich Nhat Hanh Essential Writings* pgs 99 – 101

interactions. A man I regularly avoided. And yet after that practice of mindfulness, I saw him as a suffering person. I knew some of his history and knew he had struggled. I saw in his actions not malice or cruelty, but an expression of his own suffering. I know I have acted out when suffering! This peace I have cultivated connected me to him. We ended up talking and spending several hours in those woods together. That walk through that labyrinth nourished the flowers in my mind which nourished my interaction with the world around me. I noticed those miracles all around me – from the sand in between my toes to the presence of this acquaintance.

We all sit, we all eat. We all move, whether by walking or otherwise. We all perform these basic practices. But we don't all do them mindfully. We may not all actually know what we're doing, we may not experience the present moment, it may simply pass us by like a fallen leaf in the breeze. And yet "To lose the present is to lose life," as Thich Nhat Hanh writes.¹⁴ The present moment is all we have! Be there for life. Embrace the stillness of now. Calm the mind and cultivate wildflowers. Be present for suffering – but do not let it consume you. Know that suffering is what ultimately brings peace and beauty. And know that others are suffering as well. That is so be present for the simple things – for those miracles all around us. May you be present. May you be mindful. May you cultivate seeds of joy and compassion. May the rhododendrons of your mind flourish.

May it be so, and Amen

¹⁴ *Thich Nhat Hanh Essential Writings* pg 39