

Life Beckons

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 24, 2022

There was once a farmer whose horse ran away. His neighbors offered him sympathy for his loss and commiserated with him that evening of his misfortune. “What bad luck!” they exclaimed. The farmer replied, “maybe yes, maybe no.” The following day, his horse returned, and brought with it six wild horses. His neighbors returned, this time celebrating his good fortune. The farmer replied, “maybe yes, maybe no.” The next morning, the farmer’s son rode one of the wild horses through the farm. He was thrown off the horse and his leg was broken. The neighbors returned exclaiming, “what misfortune!” The farmer again replied, “maybe yes, maybe no.” The day after that, conscription officers came to the farmer’s village to seize the young men to join the army. Since the farmer’s son’s leg was broken, the son was rejected. Again, the neighbors rallied around him “what good fortune!” The farmer replied, “maybe yes, maybe no.”¹

In his seeming indifference, I believe this Taoist tale is one of a man awoken to life. I observe an understanding of the cyclical nature of life, and an ability not to label events as “good” or “bad,” but simply as events. Through whatever he endured, he prevailed.

We are each immersed in worldviews shaped and molded and understood by the culture we have been raised in, or the various cultures we have experienced in our lifetime. We may understand suffering and joy, all life events, and their consequences, through the lens of our upbringing and our formative years. This can lead to a single narrative, a way of feeling stuck. I invite us this morning to examine two worldviews, two religions, two ways of living, that we may be unfamiliar with: Taoism, and Buddhism. In doing so, I offer an invitation for each of us to awaken. To awaken to the true wonder of our lives – ways to engage with ourselves and the world around us. Ways to cultivate strength.

¹ *Tao: The Watercourse Way* by Alan Watts pg. 31

Author Alan Watts describes Taoism as a “navigation” through life, not a “warfare.” We are not fighting that which we assume may cause harm, but accepting it, living with it. We can understand these events as cycles, as constant reminders of “birth and decay.”² Just as we observe the seasons of nature, so, too, is it with our own lives. Nature does not fight the winter and the death that the cold air brings but uses it as a time for incubation for the flowers and animal life that is yet to come. I invite us not to trap our bodies and minds in any one event we experience, any immediate emotion that feels overwhelming, but to accept, appreciate, and honor the cycles. Pain ultimately, if given time and space, returns to joy. Loneliness will find its opposite, companionship. Life ultimately cycles to death, nonbeing cycles to being to nonbeing again. Small and large life events alternate “without beginning or end,” and we are saved by monotony as “remembering alternates with forgetting”³ We can celebrate and find solace in this unceasing cycle of life.

Taoism understands polarity as two forces: *yin* and *yang*. And believers understand life to be an art that balances the two. There cannot be one without the other – this is to be honored.⁴ Watts writes, “being comes from nonbeing as sound from silence and light from space.” They generate one another and they support one another.⁵ “How,” he asks, “would you know that you are alive unless you had once been dead?”⁶ How can we fully cherish life if we have not experienced the death of another, aware of our own mortality? How can we know the joy of true love if we have not felt isolated and lonely? How can we fully welcome tears of joy if we have not experienced tears of despair? One cannot exist without the other. Pain is not to be avoided, but to be expected as part of life – a part of life that allows for its opposite, a part of life from which fullness arises. I wonder, can we reframe this from a “good” and “bad” dichotomy, just as the farmer did, and instead acknowledge these polarities as simply, and yet profoundly, life events? Can we learn to appreciate each? Watts writes that, in the predominant culture of this country, we often try to have the good without the bad. Health

² *Tao: The Watercourse Way* by Alan Watts pg. 20-21

³ *Ibid* pg. 31

⁴ *Ibid* pg. 21

⁵ *Ibid* pg. 23

⁶ *Ibid* pg. 25

without illness, prosperity without economic hardship, joy without pain. Taoists understand that this way of navigating life is simply not possible.⁷

I wonder about another piece of Taoism – an attitude that author Alan Watts attributes to Chinese culture, “an attitude of respectful trust towards nature and human nature - despite wars, revolutions, mass executions, starvation, floods, droughts, and all manner of horrors.” To me, especially in this time of acute awareness of warfare in our world, these are provocative thoughts. An inherent “respectful trust” in life, no matter what. He elaborates on this claim, stating that, “if you cannot trust nature or other people, you cannot trust yourself.” In not having this inherent trust in the world, we cannot trust ourselves. We would be, in the words of Watts, “simply paralyzed.”⁸ To me this lends itself to the interdependence of all life, an interdependence that Taoism finds important as well. How we engage with the world around us, how we interpret each event and react to each situation, will not only ripple out to others in our web but will also return to us and our core, our views of others affecting our views of ourselves. To navigate life freely, we need to trust in all that surrounds us.

So, we can understand the importance in balancing *yin* and *yang*, one pole not existing without the other. We can accept this cyclical nature of life, our own interdependence, and our need for trust. I introduce us next to the beliefs and understandings of Buddhism – awakening to life through an acceptance of and an understanding of and a transformation of suffering.

Sometimes, we are not even aware of our suffering. Something is wrong, but what? We want to escape, but what are we escaping from? We try to deny it, and yet it is still there. The Buddha said, and I paraphrase, “to suffer and not know that we are suffering is more painful than the burden endured by a mule carrying an unimaginably heavy load.” So, what can we do? We can pause and recognize. Pause, center, breathe in mindfulness, and acknowledge and

⁷ *Tao: The Watercourse Way* by Alan Watts pg. 20

⁸ *Ibid* pg. 32

accept that we may indeed be suffering. Is it physical? Physiological? Psychological? Whatever of the three, it is an unimaginably heavy load. Recognition is the first step.⁹

There are ways we engage with our suffering, both that which we were previously unaware of and that which is painfully identifiable. Buddhists call for the wounds of our hearts to be the “object of our meditation,” the focus of our attention. We must be acutely aware of our own suffering, showing our wounds to ourselves. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “our suffering is us.” It is an integral piece of who we are. And yet what is more profound is how he elaborates on this first statement, “we need to treat it with kindness and nonviolence. We need to embrace our fear, hatred, anguish, and anger.”¹⁰ To me, I wonder of thanking that which causes suffering. Thank you fear for keeping me safe. Thank you hatred for showing me how I disagree with another. Thank you anguish for showing me the full extent of my pain. Thank you anger for identifying what I find to be immoral. In this way, we don’t run from our pain. We can instead “recognize, acknowledge, and identify it.” And this takes courage. And this takes tenderness. I invite you to pause for a moment. What are you suffering with right now? I read to you the words of Thich Nhat Hahn, “My dear suffering, I know you are there. I am here for you, and I will take care of you.”¹¹ We can acknowledge our suffering, care for it, and love it.

Much of what we feel – good and bad – comes from what we are ingesting. When we are mindful and look inside of ourselves, we see what nutrients we have inside and how we continue to feed it. Thich Nhat Hanh understands nutrients as edible foods, yes, and “sense impressions, intention, and consciousness.”¹² We can feed ourselves that which cultivates hatred and violence, or we can provide nutrients to compassion, kindness, understanding, and determination. If we are mindful, we know that viewing a certain thing or hearing a certain thing may lead to anxiety or anger and that viewing or hearing other things leads to compassion or peace.¹³ Feed and fuel that which calms and nourishes your core and all the goodness you

⁹ *The Heart of Buddha’s Teaching* by Thich Nhat Hanh pg. 28

¹⁰ Ibid pg. 29

¹¹ Ibid pg. 29

¹² Ibid pg. 31

¹³ Ibid pg. 33

hold within – whether through poetry, music, self-compassion, or laughter. Even mindful breathing can help with this because it draws us to the beauties of the present moment. We can pause and look around and see the joy and wonder in even being alive. Immersed in this simple joy, even mundane tasks can become enjoyable – we can be happy as we walk, as we sit, as we eat.¹⁴ Even right now – pause, and breathe. Is your mind calm? Are your senses receiving nourishing input? Is the seat below you comfortable? This is awakening to being alive. Thich Naht Hanh calls us to engage with three other questions as well, “What nourishes me? What nourishes joy in others? Do I nourish joy in myself and others enough?”¹⁵ Let us treasure happiness!

We may search for things which we think will bring happiness but instead fuel the opposite. “Position, revenge, wealth, fame, or possessions,” – these things don’t in and of themselves bring happiness. What do we nourish if we are focused on revenge? But Thich Nhat Hanh notes that there are wonders that are always available. I try to find this too. What is always there?¹⁶ The sky, the trees, a smile, a time to pause and simply be. We always have access to this. Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “When you are suffering, look deeply at your situation and find the conditions for happiness that are already there, readily available.”¹⁷ So, what happiness do we hold within? Is it love for a partner, passion for a hobby, a dedication to prayer or meditation, an artistic outlet, or deeply felt compassion for others? There is goodness in each of us and there is goodness when we recognize our suffering. We are called to engage deeply with that which offers peace and joy. In doing so, even the most mundane of daily activities become a miracle. What is the greatest miracle? Simply that we are alive.¹⁸

And so I think of these Taoist and Buddhist ideas that can help awaken me in my own life. I have shared before my struggles with anxiety. To me, anxiety takes the form of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Some of what we discussed today I have already been blessed with, and

¹⁴ *The Heart of Buddha's Teaching* by Thich Nhat Hanh pg. 37

¹⁵ Ibid pg. 41

¹⁶ Ibid pg. 35

¹⁷ Ibid pg. 41

¹⁸ Ibid pg. 42

some will awaken me further. What is OCD to me? Obsessive thoughts, general anxiety, a need to count, a need to check things repeatedly. It is also a source of strength and compassion and understanding. I take solace in this understanding that what I experience with this diagnosis is not necessarily good or bad, but that my experiences are simply a part of life. I wonder what the polarity is? With immense anxiety, I understand and appreciate with great relief the feeling of calm. I can truly appreciate a mind not racing with what I've done wrong but instead focused on what I am doing in this moment. I can appreciate a body not tightened with anxiety but loose and limber. I could not appreciate one without the experience of the other. These things are miracles to me. I can appreciate that anxiety is my body trying to protect me, and thank it for this protection, and let it go. I know about that heavy load the ox was carrying – for years I suffered having no idea what was wrong. But I know now, and I am lightened, and I can engage with this suffering. I have the potential for happiness and I can embrace this. I can love and care for my symptoms and my suffering. Even when so immersed in anxiety I faced panic each week, my conditions for happiness were always there. The love of my family and friends. My own compassion. My sense of humor. And while I was feeding my Obsessive Compulsive Disorder with that which only works to bring more harm – frustration, self-criticism, judgment – I can feed myself with that which brings joy – I can feed myself understanding, peace, self-love, self-compassion. In healing I appreciate the simple miracles all around me. That moment when I can pause and simply be, and those times of calm, of relaxed laughter, and of a profound gratitude to even be alive. I have such potential for happiness, and I can grasp this each and every day.

Life beckons to me. Life is calling for me to awaken, and to stay awake. Each one of us receives this call. I invite you to grasp it and cherish it and create for yourself the very best life you can. I have faith in each one of you to heed this call. You can heal, you can thrive, you can welcome life with open arms. Engage with the wisdom of the centuries and find those blessings within yourself.

May it be so, and Amen.

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith April 2022

