

Buddhist Service
The Unitarian Church of Montpelier
March 28, 2010

Reading: Please Call Me by my True Names, by Thich Nhat Hanh

Read by Susan Calza

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow –
even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest, to
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.

I am a mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am a frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.
And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands.
And I am the man who has to pay
his “debt of blood” to my people
dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.

My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up
and the door of my heart
could be left open,
the door of compassion.

Reflections on Buddhism

Priscilla Fox

I first encountered Buddhism at the age of 13. This is kind of a strange story, but it feels significant because it has stayed with me all these years. My 8th grade class was learning about world religions, in a middle school way of course. I'm sure we must have studied about Hinduism, Islam, and probably Confucianism, but I don't remember what we learned about any of these. Then we were told that Buddhists believe that everything in the world, or the universe, is one. **All is one.** At that moment I thought, Yes! They've got it right!

Many years later I heard the joke about the Buddhist monk who goes into a sandwich shop. What does he say to the person behind the counter? Make me one with everything.

Of course, Buddhism is much more complex and nuanced than a belief in the oneness of everything. It is vast – the study of its history and scholarship, not to mention the practice of meditation, would take many lifetimes to master. In my time today, I want to give you a very brief snapshot of the Buddha's life, and then share some of my thoughts about Buddhism and its place in the world today.

Siddhartha Gautama was the son of a local king in Kapilavastu, in what is now extreme southern Nepal near the Indian border, around the fifth century BCE. As a child and young man he lived a life of luxury within the walls of the family palace. According to tradition, one time upon leaving the palace he encountered for the first time in his life a decrepit old man, a severely ill man, and a corpse being carried to the funeral pyre by mourners. The experience brought him face to face with human suffering for the first time, and had a profound effect on him. He determined to discover the truth about suffering and overcoming suffering. Although Siddhartha married and had a child, around the age of 29 he left his home and began a 6 year quest for awakening. He mastered several systems of meditation, but they did not answer the problem of human suffering. Then, in the company of five other wandering ascetics, he turned to the practice of severe austerities, in effect starving himself. Over time his body became extremely weak, but he still felt that he had not found what he was searching for. So he left the company of the ascetics in the hills of India, and went down into a small village, where he collapsed on the road. A young girl named Sujata gave him rice milk and restored his strength. Shortly after this, he seated himself under a pipal tree, henceforth to be known as "the tree of awakening" or Bodhi Tree. He vowed to remain there until he had attained complete awakening. Forty-nine days later, he achieved Enlightenment. He spent the rest of his long life walking throughout northern India, gathering disciples and teaching.

Several aspects of Buddhism seem most important to me. In its most pure form, it is non-theistic. Buddha was a human being who attained Enlightenment, not a supernatural being of any kind, and that appeals to me very much.

Although some people think that Buddhism incorporates a depressing world view because it speaks of suffering, I find it to be the most joyful world view imaginable. It teaches

that **all of us** have Buddha nature within ourselves. The Dalai Lama defines this as, quote, “the notion that the natural capacity for perfectibility lies within each of us.” End quote. Far from having original sin, we have original pre-enlightenment. The way to perfect happiness is within each of us. A key to realizing this happiness is learning to dwell in the present moment.

Another of the core teachings of Buddhism is compassion for all living beings. Students of the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh go even further and aspire to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals – in other words, the entire earth, living and non-living. The Dalai Lama has written that the alleviation of suffering is our principal task on this earth. He speaks of the transformability of consciousness: the idea that the cultivation of loving-kindness can over a period of time diminish the force of hate and other negative thoughts in the mind. Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of learning to water the seeds of compassion within ourselves so that we may transform our point of view and our very lives. I believe that these capabilities are real and would go so far as to say that I have experienced, to some degree, this positive effect on consciousness through meditation.

But what if we don't transform very fast or don't seem to transform at all? That's ok too. We have to start with loving kindness toward ourselves. As Pema Chodron, an American Buddhist nun, says: Thinking that by meditating we are somehow going to improve is – quote - “a subtle aggression against who we really are . . . Meditation practice isn't about trying to throw ourselves away and become something better. It's about befriending who we are already. The ground of practice is you or me or whoever we are right now, just as we are. That's what we come to know with tremendous curiosity and interest.” End quote. In this statement we can hear echoes of the Dalai Lama's words about the Buddha nature that is within all of us.

Today, there are Buddhists all over the world, helping to alleviate suffering in ways large and small. Thich Nhat Hanh calls this “engaged Buddhism,” and it's another reason why I am so drawn to this practice. Many wonderful stories appear in Buddhist publications, and I want to share one I read in a recent issue of Tricycle magazine. It's about a woman named Cheri Maples, who at the time of the story was a police officer in Madison, Wisconsin. She responded to a domestic violence call where a divorced father was holding his young daughter hostage, refusing to return her to his ex-wife after a weekend visit. When Officer Maples interceded, he threatened her. Ordinarily, she would have just handcuffed the man and taken him to jail. But she had just attended her first retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh, and as she said, the experience had “broken open her heart.” She persuaded the father to release his daughter and then, instead of arresting him, spoke to him from her heart. Within minutes, he was in tears. She was quoted in the article as saying, “I violated every tenet of my tactical training in that scenario.” But the best part of the story is what happened a few days later, when she ran into the man in a local shop. He swept her up in a bear hug and exclaimed, “Thank you for saving my life!” Since then, officer Maples has introduced meditation and mindfulness practice to police officers, judges, prosecuting and defense attorneys, and correctional and parole officers. She believes that you can never end violence with violence, and that punishment isn't the right philosophy to build a criminal justice system around. Thich Nhat Hanh himself has led mindfulness retreats for law

enforcement personnel. The quote from Martin Luther King in today's order of service, that only love can drive out hate, expresses a core Buddhist belief.

Perhaps the most basic thing that has drawn me to Buddhism is its quest to understand the fundamental nature of reality. I don't know why, but all my life I have wondered about the ultimate questions: What is the nature of the universe? What is consciousness? Ultimately, what is reality? Science, especially physics, attempts to find answers to these questions, and over the years I've read and been fascinated by many popular books on physics for non-scientists. In recent years, some leading Buddhists have held a series of meetings with cutting-edge scientists, and some very interesting connections have been made. I'm in the middle of reading a book now that deals with just these issues, called *The Quantum and the Lotus*. This book is a dialogue between Matthieu Ricard, a French man trained as a scientist who has been a Buddhist monk for many years, and Trinh Xuan Thuan, an astrophysicist who was born a Buddhist in Vietnam. I want to read one fairly lengthy quote, because I think it captures the essence of Buddhism in its relation to science. Matthieu Ricard, the monk, says:

“Buddhist research is . . . based on insights perceived through direct life experience, and is not bound by rigid dogma. It is ready to accept any vision of reality that is perceived as authentic. One of its main goals is precisely to bridge the gap between the way things really are and the way they seem to be. The Buddha often put his disciples on their guard against the dangers of blind faith. He said, ‘Investigate the validity of my teachings as you would examine the purity of gold, rubbing it against a stone, hammering it, melting it. Do not accept my words simply out of respect for me. Accept them when you see that they are true.’” End quote.

Matthieu Ricard also says that “Buddhism stands ready to revise its beliefs at any moment if they are proved to be wrong,” but he notes that Buddhism does not “expect that the results it has built up over 2500 years of contemplative science will suddenly be invalidated.” Personally, I am extremely excited by the idea that some of the very latest theories in physics, grounded in relativity and the quantum nature of reality, have been anticipated and perhaps even deeply *understood* by enlightened Buddhists down through the centuries.

I would like to close with a sentence attributed to historian Arnold Toynbee: “The coming of Buddhism to the West may well prove to be the most important event of the Twentieth Century.” My own fervent hope is that the values of Buddhism – compassion, alleviation of suffering, and especially seeing ourselves as fundamentally not separate from others – will gradually transform Western ways of thinking and move us toward the peaceful world that we all long for.

Meditation

Jim Abrams

In Buddhism, the key to enlightenment, to the relief of one's suffering life time after life time, is accomplished through the practice of meditation.

There are a large number of meditation techniques, but they all have the same goal and they all have common elements that are essential to meditation of any kind.

Rather than to simply talk about meditation, I would like to invite you to experience a simple meditation for a few minutes. It is one of several meditation techniques that utilize one's breath. What I would like you to do, when we begin the exercise, is to simply count your breath. You begin by saying in your mind a one when your breath goes in and a one when the same breath goes out. On the next inhalation, simply say a two in your mind and a two when it goes out. Continue counting your breath until you reach 15, then reverse direction and count each breath going back down to one, 14 – 14, 13-13 and so forth.

So that you don't inadvertently hyperventilate, which by the way is not dangerous, I suggest that you don't breathe to your counting, but to simply breathe naturally and while you do count each breath.

This meditation is usually done with the eyes closed, but not always. You can choose whatever is most comfortable to you.

If you would like, you may now close your eyes and turn your attention inward and begin counting.

Take a few moments to come back to the room we're sitting in.

Did you find that it was hard to keep your mind from wandering from the task you I gave you and you gave yourself? I imagine that some of you may **even have gotten** so distracted that you forgot altogether, for a while, what it was you were trying to do.

Plato likened the mind to a ship on which the sailors had mutinied and locked the captain and the navigator below. Each sailor feels themselves to be perfectly free to steer the ship. First one sailor steers for a while in one direction and then another while the ship travels in erratic and random directions. Did it seem a bit like that to you as your attention was hijacked by thoughts of one kind or another over the very short time you were simply counting?

Taming the mind's tendency to wander or be hijacked by thoughts is one of the foundational goals of meditation. In the practice of meditation, there are a number of techniques one can use to strengthen your mind's ability to resistance the allure of distracting thoughts and sensations.

Why do people meditate?

On one level the simple answer is to reach enlightenment: freedom from the negative emotional states of everyday life, access to wisdom not attainable through learning or intelligence, and the capacity to live in enduring serenity and joy while feeling at the same time deep compassion for the suffering of others - the ache of the awakened heart.

But for most meditators, enlightenment is a very long ways off. So what can we gain in the next year, in the next 10 years, or in our remaining time on earth through the practice of meditation? At its simplest we can expect to gain a greater sense of calm. Dr. Herbert Benson a researcher in physiology at the Harvard Medical School discovered that certain meditation techniques can elicit an integrated body response which is the opposite of the flight or fight response, the biochemical reaction that is responsible for anxiety and the feeling of stress which permeates so much of our culture. In research literature and the popular media Dr. Benson has called it the *relaxation response*.

What else do practitioners hope for in addition to a greater sense of calm? The answer varies from person to person. Some hope to feel more centered, content and confident with life as it is. Some hope to be more of a gift to others through attaining deeper compassion and loving kindness. Others would say they are seeking more awareness, patience and wisdom in the moment, to do what life asks.

For me? I wish for these things too. But if I can have only one achievement, it would be to establish such strong habits of practice and deep desire to continue learning, that my efforts will form strong Karmic bonds, bonds that will act like a magnet in my future lives, drawing me again to the teachings and the path to enlightenment.

Meditation on Loving Kindness
Brenda Bean

Loving-kindness is a specific meditation practice that can be used to develop both concentration and the quality of kindness. The following instructions are adapted from “A Path with Heart” by Jack Kornfield (Bantam Books, 1993).

Kornfield suggests repeating the following phrases over and over for 15-20 minutes once or twice daily in a quiet place for several months. *[Don't worry; we are just going to do it for a few minutes now!]*

1). “Sit in a comfortable fashion. Let your body relax and be at rest. As best you can, let your mind be quiet, letting go of plans and preoccupations.” *[Remember a time when you felt really loved by someone kind.]* “Then begin to recite inwardly the following phrases directed to yourself. You begin with yourself because without loving yourself it is almost impossible to love others.” *[We will recite the following for one minute.]*

May I be filled with loving-kindness;
may I be well;
may I be peaceful and at ease;
may I be happy.

2). *[After you have developed a felt sense of loving-kindness toward yourself]* “you can gradually expand the focus of your loving-kindness to include others. After yourself, choose a benefactor, someone in your life who has truly cared for you. Picture this person and carefully recite the same phrases *“[for one minute]:*

May he/she be filled with loving-kindness;
may he/she be well;
may he/she be peaceful and at ease;
may he/she be happy.

3). “After this, you can gradually begin to include others: friends, community members, neighbours, people everywhere, animals, the whole earth, and all beings.” *[Now recite for another minute:]*

May they be filled with loving-kindness;
may they be well;
may they be peaceful and at ease;
may they be happy.

4). “Now you can even experiment with including the most difficult people in your life, wishing that they, too, be filled with loving-kindness and peace. *[Recite for one minute:]*

May he/she be filled with loving-kindness;
may he/she be well;
may he/she be peaceful and at ease;
may he/she be happy.

“With some practice, a steady sense of loving-kindness can develop and in the course of 15 or 20 minutes you will be able to include many beings in your meditation, moving from yourself, to a benefactor and loved ones, to all beings everywhere.”

Reading: The Glove in the Subway (excerpt)

From *A Small Heaven: A Meditation Manual*, by Jane Ranney Rzepka

Read by Judy Harden

".....[Picture] a subway platform during the morning rush hour at Grand Central Terminal. A train pulls in: a woman gets off. Before the doors close, the woman realizes that she is holding only one of hergloves. She looks back into the train and spots the matching one on the seat. It is obviously too late to dash back in to retrieve it, so she flings her arm out and, the doors about to close, tosses her glove onto the seat alongside its mate. The doors shut, and the train pulls away....."

To me, Buddhism teaches us to be like this woman, to be willing to say Yes to what life is asking of us.