“The Four Noble Truths: When Things Fall Apart”

Wesak Sunday, May 11, 2014
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READINGS

I begin with a few teachings from several Buddhist teachers – everything you need to know, which of course is true and not true.

(1) Pema Chodron, American Buddhist nun, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*

Right now we are creating our state of mind for tomorrow, not to mention this afternoon, next week, next year, and all the years of our lives…. Everything that occurs in our confused mind we can regard as the path. Everything is workable…. This is a very encouraging teaching, because it says that the source of wisdom is whatever is happening to us right at this very instant. (144-45)

Pema Chodron writes much that helps me, and sometimes irritates me, as well as challenges me. Things like, “Chaos is our home, so relax.” “Fear? Engage it.” “Goals? Over-rated.”

(2) The Dalai Lama also encourages us, simply directly, to “appreciate what we have.” Not complicated … except to follow the wisdom.

(3) Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen monk and peace activist, writes, “Our appointment is in the present moment.”

He reminds us, “You know a smile can relax hundreds of muscles in your face. Wearing a smile on your face is a sign that you are master of yourself.”

Finally, from *The Sun My Heart*, Thich Nhat Hanh

I have a friend who is an artist. He has been away from home for nearly 40 years. He told me that every time he misses his mother, all he has to do is look at his hand and he feels better. His mother, a traditional Vietnamese woman, could read only a few Chinese characters and has never studied Western philosophy or science. Before he left Vietnam, she held his hand and told him, “Whenever you miss me, look into your hand my child. You will see me immediately.” For nearly 40 years, he has looked into his hand many times.
The presence of his mother is not just genetic.

Her spirit, her hopes, and her life are also present in him. I know that my friend practices meditation, but I do not know whether he has chosen the subject, "Looking into your Hand" as a kung-an. This subject can take him far in his practice. From his hand, he can penetrate deeply into the reality of beginningless and endless time. He will be able to see that thousands of generations before him and thousands of generations after him are all him. From time immemorial until the present moment, his life has never been interrupted and his hand is still there, a beginningless and endless reality. He can recognize his "true face" 500 million years ago and 500 million years from now. He exists not only in the evolutionary tree branching along the axis of time, but also in the network of interdependent relations. As a result, each cell in his body is just as free from birth and death as he is....

On earth, many people have been killed struggling for peace, for human rights, for freedom and social justice, but no one can destroy them. They still exist ... do you think that Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, Lambrakis, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. are "dead people?" No, they are still here. We are they. We carry them in each cell of our bodies.

Four Noble Truths: When Things Fall Apart
Rev. Bruce Southworth

I have a note to myself from twenty-plus years ago. In conversation with my five-year-old son, the date was just like today's. Somehow, it came up that I was speaking about Buddhism. His response was immediate, direct, absolutely astonished, with seeming profound disbelief with a hint of criticism:

"On Mother's Day?!

In my mind, these two,
- our celebration of the spirit and wisdom of Buddhism and
- honoring of Mother's Day,
are not antithetical at all.

To begin, I want to share part of a story out of the life of a colleague (Denise Tracey) who is writing about her four-and-a-half year-old daughter.

It was the first time both of us parents would have to be away since we brought Clarke home. Her best and favorite babysitter was to come to stay for four days so that Mom could go to a... [minister's conference] and
so that Dad could go to work in California. I called at the agreed upon time, and no one was home. I called later – still no answer.

I called again, the babysitter blurted, "I'm so sorry, she's really hurt!" "What happened?" I yelled. Upon which the babysitter started crying, "I didn't mean it, I'm so sorry, it wasn't my fault."

"Just tell me what has happened."

Through the tears, the babysitter's voice warbled, "She fell off the slide and cut her head."

The child got on the phone and said, "Mom, I cut my head. I have blood on my face." We agreed that they would call a neighbor who would evaluate and I'd call back in five minutes.

I felt I needed a mother, and instead had to be one. My heartbeat quickened.…..

I called, the neighbor said, "We're going to the hospital. Please call and give permission for treatment."

"I'll meet you there in an hour," I replied.

The drive took an eternity. Messages filled my head. "You never should have left her. What kind of Mother are you? If she's seriously hurt, it will be all your fault!" The miles crawled by. I bargained with God. "If she's alright I'll lose twenty pounds. I'll never yell at her again. I'll control my grouchiness."

At the hospital, there was a line at the emergency room admitting desk. I could hear my daughter. I kept saying, "Excuse me." The desk attendant kept saying, "You'll have to wait your turn." Finally I said, "My daughter was brought in by a neighbor; please let me see her or I am going to climb over this desk to get to her." "Yes madam," came the reply.

Poor child. They strapped her to a body board, shaved part of her hair and numbed her. The screaming child said, "I want to go home. I don't like it here."

"Count to ten and it will be over," the nurse said. Dutifully she did. Again and again. After five times she said, "This isn't working."

"Count to fifteen," came the reply. She did, several times. Finally, she said to the nurse, "I don't believe you anymore."

Only seven stitches. We celebrated with chocolate frozen yogurt, sprinkled with M&M's. "I don't want to go back there," she announced.

That night she slept in my bed, a restless and feverish sleep. I held her, comforted her, and cried at how horribly frightening it would be to lose her. She is imprinted on my soul, patterned in my heart and rooted in my being…. I cannot imagine a world without her bright smile, ceaseless
chatter and boundless energy. I have never felt such love, nor such fear. She is my life and breath.

Before today, I knew I loved her but the mere threat of harm made me vulnerable to a world naked with possibility. Oh, I will still release her and encourage her to be independent, but never with the same blithe naiveté as before.

I have a new prayer that I must repeat:

My child,
I give you into the tender care of the Universe
knowing full well the dangers
and praying for your continued safety.
Life and love are fragile
and oh, how I do not wish to learn this lesson any more vividly than I already have…
Keep my child safe from harm.

Having made four emergency room visits with my children – three resulting in stitches, I know something of what my colleague feels. I cannot imagine the heartache and wounds of those who suffer with a child having died.

It is exactly this kind of love by adults for a child, and it is not limited to parents – this kind of love that the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh declares is an opening to enlightenment, to being Awake, to Compassion – compassion not just for one's own but for all living things. He writes,

There are times while watching… children that we think about the future. We know that life is filled with worries, fears, hopes, and disappointments, and we worry for them and anxiously think about the struggles before them. It is at that very moment that we enter into our children. It is easy to find our way into them because we know they are our own blood. (The Sun My Heart, 71-72)

It is an intimation of connectedness, of self-transcendence, of the interpenetration of all things, what our Unitarian Universalist principles call the interdependent web of all existence.

Buddhists speak of non-duality… or of Interbeing. Interbeing is what Thich Nhat Hanh calls it, and he reminds us that the pages of paper we hold come from sunlight that nourished the trees; from water from the clouds, streams and oceans; from the carbon from the early products of the Big Bang…. From the stars and from so many human hands along the way....
UU Minister and Buddhist priest James Ishmael Ford, who spoke here a few years ago, declares: “It is my belief that the sense of oneness is the secret….” (134)

To repeat: “the sense of oneness is the secret.”

The sense of unity generates good will, which empowers us to act with compassion…. He avows the power of agnosticism… deep unknowing… not knowing… the power of just being present. (126)

“We are unique and different, and we are one with the web.”(126)

The title of James Ishmael Ford’s most recent book is If You’re Lucky, Your Heart Will Break. His memoir is wonderful, and his Buddhist teachings are annoying, and the title is obviously stupid, yet… not. His modest, unfolding bold wisdom returns to

• to being present, connected, at one – focused –
• to embracing a deep connection between clarity and cloudiness.

His Unitarian Universalist faith is anchored in reason, truth-seeking, compassion and justice… individual watchfulness and evergreen growth, all of which complement Buddhist teachings of mindfulness, compassion, not knowing, and connection.

Buddhism with its over 500 million adherents around the world has evolved over 2500 years in many different schools or sects, but in most, there is a practice of meditation. These practices help to awaken us to Life, to forego petty attachments, selfishness, greed… those things unworthy of us… and to see ourselves as part of a larger stream of life. A mother’s love can expand, and that is a powerful claim and reality of Buddhist practice.

Quickly, the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths:

1. This world is full of suffering, but we need not be overwhelmed by it.
2. Our ego attachments and private selves are seductive and surely can be destructive, but are not ultimate.
3. We can learn to see eternity in the transient events and become awake to the world, to Life, and to Creativity, overcoming these attachments.
4. And the bottom line, the main thing, the Big Thing is compassionate living, mindfulness and freedom (through the Eight-fold Path).

**An Exercise in Mindfulness**

The meditation of Mindfulness that Thich Nhat Hanh teaches is one that illumines my life.

This morning, as we celebrate and seek to taste some of the living waters from Buddhist tradition, I ask you for a moment to engage with me in an exercise of
mindfulness. I ask you to sharpen your alertness and to pay attention to the moment and your surroundings here.

First, you might take a deep breath – breathing in and breathing out. One more time: breathe in and breathe out. And, now if you have something in your hands, feel it against your skin. Feel the paper of the order of service or whatever you are touching. Perhaps it is the rough or smooth texture of the cloth of your clothing. You might try touching the wooden armrests or the back of the pew chair in front of you.

Look at the wood grain and feel the texture, the bumps, the swirls, the ridges, the smooth finish, the gloss of polished wood, or the dull dirt of wood needing polishing, the slight friction between finger and surface. Can you imagine the great oaks from which these were hewn?

Concentrate on the sensations you receive: perhaps the weight of your body in the pew chair, or the slouch in your posture, or your breathing again.

Or, if you are more visually gifted or inclined, look at the different things in front of you, paying attention to the different colors of objects, to the banners perhaps, or to the different faces of the choir members, the flowers, or the contrast between my hair and whatever you see behind me – dark, red/orange bricks or marble. Can you imagine the cool, rough surface of those bricks? Can you imagine how they might taste? Can you imagine the red earth from which they come and the furnaces that baked them?

If you rub your hands together, they are apt to be warm at least if you rub them a little. Is your skin rough or smooth?

The idea is to sit in mindfulness – letting your eyes and ears and sense of touch experience directly what is here, letting your mind focus on the immediacy of the moment.

This kind of mindfulness is what Thich Nhat Hanh calls the Miracle of Mindfulness. (Beacon Press) He describes it as a form of meditation that you can experience simply while walking down the street. While many benefit from the discipline of a sitting meditation that focuses on breathing or mantras, the mindfulness of the moment is one that calms me down. As one of our hymns suggests, it helps me to live before I die.

At different seasons of my life, I am more or less faithful in washing the dishes to wash the dishes rather than washing the dishes only to have clean dishes.

Last month I offered a sermon on Appreciative Awareness, being Caretakers of Wonder, which included this matter of living in the present moment. It is the spirit that informs Buddhism.
Legend has it that as Gautama the Enlightened One, the Buddha, was nearing the end of his long life, he wondered who might continue his teachings faithfully. (I should add that Gautama was called "the Buddha" because he was "Awake.") Twenty-five hundred years ago, he picked his successor Mahakashyapa in this way: with his disciples gathered around him, without saying a word, Gautama held up a flower, a lotus blossom. Mahakashyapa seeing it, truly seeing it, smiled and awakened.

Heartaches?

Practices of mindfulness and meditation help with the reality of pain that accompanies our days. Pema Chodron’s writings, which a member here many years ago first introduced me to, speak about breathing in the pain, hurt, anger, fear, and wounds of others – and your own – and then breathing out peace... calm... compassion.

I have found this practice helps me... not so different from centering prayers... holding others in your heart... holding them there, deeply, truly...with care.

She adds, “Be grateful to everyone”.... Every situation – everything has a spiritual lesson, a teaching that arises in many traditions.

Chodron also counsels curiosity as a path to connections with others – even strained relationships.... Rather than shut out the other as we use all our walls and defenses, be curious. Reach out. And that too can make a difference. When, or if, there is no reciprocal response, let go of your disappointment... keep breathing... being curious.... Be here now. (See P. Chodron, Start Where You Are, 134)

When things seem to be falling apart, disconnected... Buddhist wisdom again reminds us of infinite connections and says,

Practice until you recognize your presence in everyone else on the bus, in the subway, in the concentration camp, working in the fields, in a leaf, in a caterpillar, in a dewdrop, in a ray of sunshine. Meditate until you see yourself in a speck of dust and in the most distant galaxy. (The Sun My Heart, Hanh, p. 120-1)

There are many paths and the essential thing again is to “be a lamp unto yourself.” Be confident and hold to the truth within yourself.

One of the things that occurs to me on this Mother's Day is that Gautama had a most unusual childhood. His parents sought to protect him and to shield him. He was not allowed to see poverty, to meet any one wrinkled with age, or to learn about death. His parents – well intentioned – somehow believed that such an upbringing was best, so controlled, so manipulated.

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Finally, as a young man, Gautama rebelled and became determined to find his own life. He sought to understand these facts of life and how suffering might be transformed. His own practice was meditation, but his most profound teaching was to trust yourself, your own experience. Be alert to it. Awaken to yourself by whatever path.

Do not be distracted by selfishness, or grudges, or hurts. Live now.

I am sure he let go of his anger against his mother and father who did what they thought best.

On a day like this, do you try to let go of any hurts that your mother may bring or once brought your way? Of arising from your father? Do you reach out even when it may be hard?

For many of us, do you forgive your mother for having died and left you, and do you forgive yourself for all you wish you might have done but could not do at the time?

Can we honor the humanity of those who did their best for us, even when the best was less that what we might have hoped?

How goes it this day? And, if all is well, then rejoice!

So much can be said about Buddhism, and I can refer you to previous sermons or books. But it is not in words or doctrine that we live more fully. It is in living in each moment that we might awaken and see suffering as transient.

Suffering is transient. This too shall pass.

Rituals of mindfulness, meditation, or prayer... such practices are simply tools toward living with peace ... even joy at times... without crippling attachments... seeking and finding moments of non-duality... living the secret of oneness.

Enlightenment comes through simple things: A bell, a poem, a story, the music of a flute, sitting in silence, walking in wonder, taking time for mindfulness, offering a smile.

In the spirit of mindfulness, Alice Walker, who has a Buddhist flavor, says, “Helped are those who find something in Creation to admire each and every hour. Their days will overflow with beauty and the darkest dungeon will offer gifts.”

How does it come? Mahakashyapa looked upon the flower being held before him and he seeing it, truly seeing it, smiled and awakened.

May this music bless us once again and help us to open our souls, remembering we own nothing and are to share everything, and thus may we bless one another and the world throughout our days.
MEDITATION: BELL RINGING:

Body, speech and mind in perfect oneness,

I send my heart along with the sound of the bell.
May the hearer awaken from forgetfulness
And transcend all anxiety and sorrow.

**

Listen, listen,
This wonderful sound
brings me back to my true self.
(Being Peace, Thich Nhat Hanh)

My colleague Rev. Robert Senghas, also ordained in a Buddhist order, spoke to us some years ago and shared his order’s nightly prayer:

“Let me respectfully remind you: life and death are of supreme importance. Time swiftly passes by, and opportunity is lost. Each of us should strive to awaken…. Take heed. Do not squander your life.”