For forty-plus years, the Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has been an ongoing teacher for me in my understanding of Buddhism, for which I continually seek to keep a beginner’s mind.

This morning we turn to Buddhism’s holy day of Wesak that honors the Buddha – his birth, enlightenment, and death. And in doing so, I remind us that more than 500 million adherents to Buddhism, with its non-theistic spiritual path, are our fellow travelers on this planet.

Thich Nhat Hanh begins his classic volume The Miracle of Mindfulness, published by our UUA Beacon Press in 1975, with comments by his friend Allen. At the time, Allen had a son Joey – age seven – an infant daughter Ana, and his wife Sue, with both parents getting little sleep.

Allen and the boy Joey visited the monk, and the boy’s energy was boundless allowing little conversation until he went out to play with other children.

When asked about family life, Allen told the monk:

I’ve discovered a way to have a lot more time. In the past, I used to look at my time as if it were divided into several parts. One part I reserved for Joey, another part was for Sue, another part to help with Ana, another part for household work. The time left over I considered my own. I could read, write, [work], research, go for walks.

But now I try not to divide time into parts anymore. When I help Joey with his homework, I try to find ways of seeing his time as my own time. I go through his lesson with him, sharing his presence and finding ways to be interested in what we do during that time. The time for him becomes my own time. The same with Sue. The remarkable thing is that now I have unlimited time for myself!

The author Thich Nhat Hanh, no doubt with a wink for the irony, reports that Allen “had discovered this for himself in his own daily life,” not from books or teachers. (2-3)
Unlimited time for ourselves… connecting with the moment… the web of Life in all its flux, transiency, delight and pain – that is but one of Buddhism’s encouragements.

And, notwithstanding Allen’s insight as reported by Thich Nhat Hanh, and as much as we are responsible for our own awakening, it is certainly true that writings and teachers can be helpful. One Sutra that goes with and within me counsels,

“Things are not what they seem; nor are they otherwise.” (Lankavatara)

And, “Be in the present moment.” “Be here now.” (Thich Nhat Hanh)

And,

There is really nothing you must be [or do, or have, or know or become]….

However, it helps to understand that fire burns,
And when it rains, the earth gets wet.
Whatever, there are consequences. Nobody is exempt.
(quoted by Robert Fulghum)

Some years ago with the gift of sabbatical time, one of my spiritual adventures was to visit India to breathe in its stunning, diverse religious culture and heritage.

In that pilgrimage, among the highlights was going to Sarnath and Deer Park, on the outskirts of Varanasi. For me, it was a breath-giving, astonishing confluence of Nature's grace and beauty, of history, and of spiritual imagination and wisdom.

It was there that Gautama Buddha began to teach his first five disciples after finding enlightenment, that is, after becoming awake (and as many of you know, Buddha is a title in Sanskrit for “one who is awake.”) Dozens of pilgrims/tourists and monks were also walking or sitting or meditating over the several acres.

There at Sarnath a peaceful, lush green park greeted us with paths inviting walking meditation, which we welcomed. And yes some deer still graze across the way, not too far from

- a temple,
- a large tree that began as a sapling cutting from the original Bo tree where the Buddha had meditated and became awake roughly 2500 years ago;
- an adjacent museum, and
remnants of several monasteries that once housed as many as 3000 disciples, as well as stupas with remains of monks from over the centuries.

Altogether a peaceful oasis amid urban sprawl these days. I walked through it quietly, mindfully, allowing my imagination to roam, wondering about the landscape and the conversations 2500 years ago. To walk where this teacher walked… a teacher who has influenced so many across the centuries: I was standing there, where the teachings were first shared… a bit dumb-founded and in awe.

Then even with my monkey mind, Western habits of analysis, and with my self-awareness as a pilgrim in full force, I began to let go…. I began to move into the moment, non-duality, at-homeness. Visiting there, I felt – not thought – but felt something of Thich Nhat Hanh’s experience

“My heart is at peace.”
“I walk on the new green earth.” (p. 20)

In revisiting some teachers and teachings of Buddhism this morning, much of which resonates well with our religious tradition, I begin with the approach described as “beginner’s mind.”

Beginner’s mind can be characterized in different ways but fundamentally suggests a practice of seeing/experiencing/embracing whatever we encounter, wherever it is, with “openness, eagerness and lack of preconceptions.” The phrase is also used in the title of the book Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind by the Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki, who says the following about the correct approach to Zen practice: “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the expert’s mind there are few.” (“Shoshin”, Wikipedia) Which of course, I argue with as both true and untrue….

Beginner’s mind: Live with openness, eagerness and lack of preconceptions…. Knowing each moment has many possibilities.


To illustrate that approach, I turn to this vocation of ministry as a testing ground for embracing a beginner’s mind. As I mention in the newsletter, 40 years ago – tomorrow to be precise – this congregation ordained me. I was soon called to serve our congregation in Roanoke, Virginia… not clueless in my lack of experience with some good mentors (lay and ministerial), but well maybe clueless in much.

I had an inkling that approaching ministry with a Beginner’s Mind was a good beginning. Then and now… eager to serve, learn, grow, make mistakes, experiment (things like balloons at Easter in SW Virginia or adding a Flaming Chalice to worship
here or whatever)… to invite healthy criticism, to nurture congregational life, make some mistakes, even apologize… to be present in times of joy and sorrow, fully present with a breaking heart at times… to set boundaries at times … to break boundaries (leading us toward being a Welcoming Congregation – which took some time even here in the 1980s).

The confirmation of a Beginner’s Mind approach was confirmed by those whom I have served in Roanoke and here… confirmed by their and your willingness, eagerness, and openness, equal to or greater than mine… of two congregations… to experiment, change, become unstuck sometimes, to explore, expand circles of caring and witness… over the long haul here to be a diverse, prophetic spiritual community…. Audaciously, humbly seeking to be part of the counter-cultural Beloved Community.

Always changing, and we are still in the middle of that creative surge with untold, unknown opportunities… all the time, whether expanding our spiritual offerings for parents and children, and for all ages, fixing up our facilities, or honoring our service and witness beyond ourselves for a better world… Always-new beginnings awaiting….

And deeply, from my heart: Thank you for these years of growth, challenge, and change….

That spirit of ever-new beginnings, returning to riches of Buddhism, is sometimes a challenge, and perhaps like you, I have imprinted within me, the Zen admonition and declaration: “Seven times down. Eight times up.”

For me, I have found guidance over the years in the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths, the first of which is that Life is Difficult; or Life is filled with Change. Or sometimes only focusing on the negative: Life is filled with suffering, but again that is only half the story.

Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths are voiced in many ways, and briefly the core ideas are:

1. This world is full of constant change, flux, impermanence, 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 Things are mindfulness, compassionate living, and spiritual enlightenment giving us freedom through the Eight-fold Path (listed in the order of service).

Recently, I have continued my investigations of Buddhism with the help of American Buddhist nun Pema Chodron’s volume Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change.
She speaks about a tradition of three vows that enable us to live with strength and courage amid the flux of life, the impermanence, the constant reality of change that surrounds us in the “four pairs of opposites: pleasure and pain; gain and loss; fame and disgrace; and praise and blame.” (54)

The first vow is to commit to not doing harm; to engage in practices whereby we have clarity about our emotions, fears and hopes; being present, being mindful, and avoiding acting from confusion. It is a matter of working on oneself, self-understanding, and knowing the scripts, the narratives by which we live, which sometimes cripple us or our perceptions.

Authentic living is best served if we accept that everything changes…. And resisting that only makes us suffer. There are times when we simply must let go of our expectations, plans, goals.

Life’s way is that of change. It is open-ended. Wake up to that!

Also, and, in addition, Chodron encourages us to accept that within us there is a fundamental goodness to be tapped, which certainly echoes our own faith tradition honoring the worth and dignity of every person.

Mindfulness is a key part of Buddhist exhortation and teaching that is a present-day challenge. There is a report, often replicated I suspect, about a college professor not allowing cell phones into her classrooms… with students reporting that they felt more alert. Is that a surprise? Culturally, we offer intensive training in distraction rather than in staying present.

Chodron for her part offers a path of how to respond to fears, anxieties, or triggers in our lives. The briefest outline is 3 steps, which she expands in a host of ways… but the basics:

1. Be fully present.
2. Feel your heart.
3. And engage the next moment without an agenda. (21)

She remarks that we are habituated to various exit strategies that keep us from accepting the reality of flux and change:

We all have our familiar exits: zoning out in front of the TV, compulsively checking email, coming home at night and having three or four or six drinks, overeating, overworking. (26)

Or endless chatter…. Or add your own specialty.
She invites us to grow in understanding that we are not bad people who need to shape up, but good people with malleable temporary habits that we can change. (26) We can be kind to ourselves with greater self-understanding.

Chodron invokes many teachers, and one from 8th century India, Shantideva advises (regarding not doing harm):

When the mind is wild with mockery  
And filled with pride and haughty arrogance,  
And when you want to show the hidden faults of others,  
To bring up old dissensions or to act deceitfully,

And when you want to fish for praise,  
Or criticize and spoil another’s name,  
Or use harsh language, sparring for a fight,  
It’s then that like a log you should remain. (Chodron, 34)

Like a log!!

She also has some detailed instructions on meditation that I commend to you, as well as other exercises and counsel about appreciative awareness going beyond the wisdom of restraint at times. Once again, that guidance is Pema Chodron’s volume Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change.

In addition to the vow of doing no harm, which also means befriending oneself, there is the vow to be of benefit to others, and third, to live in, to embrace the world just as it is. Just as it is....

With a Beginner’s Mind, I am welcoming new angles, new practices, as well as revisiting old affirmations and truths.

One that I share again has to do with letting go of attachment to our own egos, our position, and our proper role.

The Third Noble Truth declares we can find freedom from these attachments through mindfulness and compassion, and I return again to a parable – one that has instructed me for more years than I can remember.

Robert Coles, the child psychiatrist, Harvard professor and author, illustrates this for me vividly, and once again a story about what he learned from Dorothy Day, the great activist:

Thirty years before... (Dorothy Day) died ... (Coles) came to the Catholic Worker [house] as a self-confident medical student to do volunteer work. Somebody pointed him to the kitchen where ... (Day) and
someone else were eating. They were in deep conversation. He waited. He knew enough about psychiatry to recognize that the person she was with was disturbed... somewhat incoherent. Day was completely engrossed.

"When they had both finished their lunch and their conversation, they got up, and I approached her," [writes Coles.] She could have certainly guessed that I was going to address her and not her companion. But what she said to me was, 'You wanted to speak with one of us...?' With one of us. Well, that took care of me. I don't think Harvard had anything more to teach me in four years than she had to offer me right then and there." (Quoted in "Context," ed. by M. Marty, 10/1/87)

We need not be so attached to our own egos.

Mindfulness and compassion. A clear mind and an open heart. Very simple things, especially if we have a Beginner’s Mind as we seek to live with non-duality.

My colleague James Ishmael Ford, ordained in both Buddhist and Unitarian Universalist traditions suggests, “The sense of oneness is the secret.”

He continues affirming that the sense of unity generates good will, which empowers us to act with compassion.... He also embraces the power of agnosticism... deep unknowing... not knowing... the power of just being present. (If You’re Lucky, Your Heart Will Break – Field Notes From a Zen Life, 126)

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

And Chodron speaks to me on many levels about that awareness. She writes,

It is crucial for all of us to find a practice that will help us have a direct relationship with groundlessness, with impermanence and death... that will enable us to [be in] touch... with the transitoriness of our thoughts, our emotions, our car, [our cat,] our shoes, the paint job on our [apartment].... We can get used to the fleeting quality of life in a gentle, natural, even joyful way, by watching the seasons change, watching day turning to night, watching children grow up, watching sand castles dissolve back into the sea. (129)

Finding ways of letting go... and being present.... Breathing in pain and breathing out peace... and accepting/embracing the world just as it is. Making friends with the “ever changing energy of life."

One more practice from Thich Nhat Hanh: When things seem to be falling apart, disconnected, Buddhist wisdom again reminds us of infinite connections, and he 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, 120-1)

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

Of the Buddhist teachings especially felicitous is the admonition to trust the teacher in the mirror: the Buddha counseled to be a light for oneself, and hold to your own light with confidence, which is to say, to remember the teacher in the mirror.

When you get up in the morning, a little worn and bleary, or bubbly and exuberant, look into the mirror, and say good day. Look into the mirror at night before bed, and blow yourself a kiss good night.

May we with compassion and understanding, with mindfulness and boldness, live with that spirit of Jimmy Durante, the great singer, comedian, and actor from the 1920s to the 1970s. He said, "Sometimes I sing so pretty I like to break my own heart."

With your strength and with your beauty and with others… Be here now…. Living amidst anxiety… living with peace… practicing letting go.

Letting go… enlightenment – becoming awake – comes in simple things

• A bell.
• The silence.
• A flute.
• A smile.
• Knowing that we have unlimited time for ourselves.
• Knowing that fire burns and the earth gets wet when it rains.
• A touch of connection.
• A shared dream alive.
• A day of survival… a day of new life.
• An old wound shifted to the side rather than living too tenderly at the heart’s center.
• Walking in wonder.
• Taking time for contemplation, mindfulness, and for compassionate action.
• Embracing a Beginner’s Mind.

May the music bless us once again and open us to deeper compassion and deeper understanding that we own nothing and that we must share everything.