

Spiritual Activism: Buddhism

A sermon offered February 21, 2010
At Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

Huang Po, Chinese Zen Master in the 10th century of the Common Era wrote:

The primal mind has to be recognized along with the senses and thoughts.

It neither belongs to them nor is independent of them.

Don't build your understanding on your senses and thoughts,
yet don't look for the mind separate from your senses and thoughts.

Don't attempt to grasp Reality by pushing away your senses
and thoughts.

Unobstructed freedom is to be neither attached not detached.

This is enlightenment.

Thich Nhat Hanh on Engaged Buddhism

“when you practice sitting meditation in the temple and you hear the bomb victims crying outside, you have to go out and help, because to meditate is to be aware of what is going on in yourself and also around you. In a situation of war, you have to be engaged to be true to your tradition of compassion and love. But if you are so busy doing the work of relief, you may lose your practice and you will be exhausted. You'll be burnt out. That is why you have to find ways to maintain your practice, maintain your solidity, your freedom, your peace while you are doing the work. Society has so many social ills as a result of development and globalization. If you have true love, you see what you can do to transform the problems of drugs, alcohol, violence, and the breaking up of families. There are so many, many ways for you to express your love.”

Sermon

This year our Religious Education Classes have been studying the world's religions. We do this not to show where they were wrong and we are right – but to learn, in respect about these various traditions and to learn from them. We do this so that our young people will grow up understanding that there are, as Rumi, the 13th century Sufi mystic wrote: a hundred ways to kiss the ground – by which he meant – kneeling for prayer. And I want a way to share – here at this end of the building – some of that same learning. I want it to be useful to us. Last week we shared the unfurling of the banner. It's part of an effort that comes out of Boston, the headquarters of our religious association that we chose to participate in. It says – in a condensed fashion – that we will pursue justice as an expression of love – that we will work for the good of others. Of course, it's said that any religion worth its salt has love as a central message. The hanging of such a banner means more than – hey – we're joining all the rest of the religious community with a message of love. Hanging a banner is rather a declaration – that we will stand on the side of love – not just mention it in passing. And we will do this – not at the expense of our

spirits – not at the expense of our sense of connection with one another – not with ideology – but in way that embodies the noblest in a spiritual path. And we are blessed to have a world of religions to explore and learn from to inform our own evolution as Unitarian Universalists.

This week I want to begin a series of reflections on the ways that the world's religions – particularly the ones whose histories we may be less familiar with – have responded to the timeless cry for justice – for world healing. Each tradition has its own path and its own way of responding to the fact that the world can be beautiful and it is a place of challenge, hardship, suffering and at times cruelty.

Yesterday I was here for a very short time in the morning welcoming people to a conference on Immigration Reform. Perhaps because I offered a prayer for the work they were going to do together – as each person introduced her or himself they talked about the religious group they were from. It was, at least on the surface – mostly mainstream religious groups. Still, it was so heartening to have people eager to create a fairer world and willing to stand with people of other faiths – not in judgment –but in partnership. Perhaps we need a lot more of that. Certainly it was, in no small part, due to strength of faith that activists were able to endure the hardships of the civil rights movement. It was strength of faith that enabled Rev. Mark Kiyimba of Uganda to speak out against the bill in his nation that would call for the death penalty or life sentences for LGBT persons. Faith can give us strength to act in the face of injustice. We know the kind of power that Christianity and Judaism have given people to act for justice. Yet other faiths have the same ability – sometimes to inspire acts of love and courage – and sometimes madness.

Still, as I was growing up, I was given to think that Eastern Religions were all about staring at your navel until you achieved some sort of nirvana. As I studied more about Eastern Religions I grew wary of the emphasis on detachment. For myself I am attached. I love the world and I couldn't imagine taking on a practice that would ask me to step back from the world in detachment. The image of the meditator, calmly folded into a lotus position while escaping the world and its concerns just discouraged me.

Then I discovered engaged Buddhism. Engaged Buddhism is the form of Buddhism that calls the faithful to alleviate suffering not simply within oneself but wherever one sees it.

It takes to heart the sutra – the buddha's teaching on loving kindness – which is at the foundation of Buddhist teaching.

Let none through anger or ill-will

Wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life

Her child, her only child,

So with a boundless heart

Should one cherish all living beings:

Radiating kindness over the entire world

Spreading upwards to the skies,

And downwards to the depths;

Outwards and unbounded,

Freed from hatred and ill-will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down

Free from drowsiness,

One should sustain this recollection.
 This is said to be the sublime abiding.
 By not holding to fixed views,
 The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
 Being freed from all sense desires,
 Is not born again into this world.

It was, in part, my husband, Mark, who encouraged me to look more closely at Buddhism, fortunately at the Zen Buddhism practiced and taught by Vietnamese Master Thich Nhat Hanh. It was Thich Nhat Hanh that look that took me to engaged Buddhism. He was a surprise to me – some 15 years ago as Mark tried to teach me walking meditation. I discovered a monk whose real practice was what I've come to call spiritual activism. Some of you may be very familiar with his teaching and practice because over the last twenty years or so he has published more than 100 books helping Westerners – such as myself – to understand this deeply Eastern practice.

Engaged Buddhism starts from two different directions and ends up in a powerful transforming center – the sort of center that we can see in the lives of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Bo Lozoff, and so many others.

Engaged Buddhism is a Buddhism that seeks to fulfill itself through service to humanity – service in places of danger or places where there is no peace. The first direction of Engaged Buddhism are the four Noble Truths – that there is suffering, that attachment leads to suffering, that there is a remedy to this suffering and that the remedy is the eight fold path of Right View, Right intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, And Right Concentration.

So the one direction is to cultivate those things in your heart that you wish were manifest in the world – peace, gentleness, generosity, mindfulness, clarity, and actions that do no harm. The other direction arises directly from the Sutra of Lovingkindness.

So with a boundless heart
 Should one cherish all living beings:
 Radiating kindness over the entire world

Well I know that can't just mean sit there beaming love. Let it be is a Buddhist teaching that can be interpreted many ways. As an adolescent activist it bothered me that we might be encouraged to simply sit back and let the world spin out of control or that by sitting back we might prevent the world from spinning out of control. But in reading the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh I have found that while he means that we should no no harm he also means that we should do whatever allows other beings to simply be.

And it's not enough to get your own inner ducks in a row – organize your thoughts, feelings, intentions – there must also be something we do that is of service in this world. When I was in a discussion group with some of the nuns who travel with Thich Nhat Hanh – I was distressed about the impending war in Iraq. I spoke about it and asked what I could do. The nuns were very direct – create peace in yourself. You're not ready to save the world. I wasn't satisfied with that, it was very western of me – I felt impatient. At the same time, I knew that I couldn't be the sort of being of calm and peace that the teacher was. No matter what he faced – he was able to face each challenge from a deeply grounded center – a place of knowing himself and being very solid. I wasn't there. Could I do good work without being – well – perfect?

Perfect is not going to be possible – not for this or any other human – we can simply keep practicing and working to be better and better. But in the meantime our best learning is with other people and our best testing is in the laboratory of the world where – as the hymn we sang last week – Immortal love says – we can see how wide and far we stray. I could not believe that Thich Nhat Hanh would want me to simply wait for some greater enlightenment before acting. In part that's why he says that peace is every step. You can't wait for peace to start walking.

Thich Nhat Hanh has been able to be a teacher to so many Westerners because he was exiled from his country during the Vietnam war. Neither the Communists nor the South Vietnamese trusted him because he would not take sides. He began a program in the villages – working with Sister Chan Kong who remains with him today. They created schools and brought young people not only from the villages but also from the universities to help alleviate the suffering of orphaned children and displaced villagers. They smuggled people to safety and they taught the principles of engaged Buddhism – or Buddhism pointed toward social justice. As a result there were more and more people not only eating and learning – but also protesting the terrible waste of the war. Even after exile he and Sister Chan Kong found ways to support orphanages and those monasteries that were continuing to the work of serving the poor and homeless. In 2008 Thich Nhat Hanh was finally allowed to return to Vietnam. Even then – his gentle teachings raised suspicions. In a State in which people are expected to stand with their country right or wrong the notion of not clinging to ideas – like communism or capitalism or being right but simply being right with other people is a threat.

For Buddhists such as Thich Nhat Hanh it is not enough to gaze at your navel – and feel that you are at home in the present moment in a private state of bliss. It is not even enough to march and speak out protest against injustice. The buddha's charge to alleviate suffering is meant to push us to right action on behalf of others – protest – yes – but also feed, clothe, educate, and try to bring liberation.

The same spirit of Social Justice is evident in the Dalai Lama – who met this past week with President Obama. Again – another exiled Monk – but this one is also a head of state. The White House put off meeting with the Tibetan leader out of fear of China's reaction. The associated press wrote: There was no welcome fanfare on Thursday, nor a public appearance with the president. The White House released only a single official picture, rather than allow independent photographers and reporters to see the two men together. The Dalai Lama did meet with reporters outside the White House, playfully tossing a bit of snow at them and declaring himself "very happy" with the visit, and had a short news conference at the State Department. There, he chided China for what he called its "childish" and "limited" approach to Tibetan efforts for greater rights." And from a distance it does seem childish that a great and powerful nation would be so threatened by someone who preaches kindness and non-violence and poses no threat of arms and threatens no violent resistance. For His Holiness there is great power in powerlessness and for China there is some powerlessness in great power. When the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, said the following: I accept the prize with profound gratitude on behalf of the oppressed everywhere and for all those who struggle for freedom and work for world peace. I accept it as a tribute to the man who founded the modern tradition of nonviolent action for change - Mahatma Gandhi - whose life taught and inspired me.

His holiness was pointing directly toward the path of action. In Buddhism the stories of the Bodhisattvas help to reinforce the idea that we are called to be in the world and to serve the world. For – as many of you may know the Bodhisattvas are those people who have found real inner peace and no traffic light, no hostile person, no angry nation, no outer turmoil can shake their inmost calm.

According to literal Buddhist belief these persons are then free to leave this world and dwell forever in peace, but instead they choose to remain here and serve others. There was a seventh century Japanese Buddhist priest named Gyōki. He is well known for his good work. He traveled the countryside teaching Buddhist practice and bringing new farming techniques to the poor and oppressed. This was a time when Buddhists were supposed to remain isolated at their temples and he gained such a following that that he was arrested. But there were so many people who thronged the capital city to support him that he was released and formally named Bodhisattva by the government.

In a conversation with the activist bell hooks Thich Nhat Hanh, who met only once with the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King jr, called the civil rights leader a bodhisattva. He said: “Martin Luther King was among us as a brother, as a friend, as a leader. He was able to maintain that love alive. When you touch him, you touch a bodhisattva, for his understanding and love was enough to hold everything to him. He tried to transmit his insight and his love to the community, but maybe we have not received it enough. He was trying to transmit the best things to us—his goodness, his love, his nonduality. But because we had clung so much to him as a person, we did not bring the essence of what he was teaching into our community. So now that he’s no longer here, we are at a loss.” It reminds me of the chalice lighting – be ye lamps unto yourselves – the Buddha was not saying never listen to others – but was saying don’t cling don’t idolize others or their ideologies because that only brings weakness. We are more grounded when we are not waiting for the next pearl of indispensable wisdom but are careful enough that it can arise within our own minds or in the minds of those we respect and are equal to.

Many faiths have the same ability to inspire acts of love and courage – and sometimes madness. The gift of engaged Buddhism is to remind and instruct followers to remember loving kindness above all, to love the world tenderly over any other idea of virtue so that no matter how passionately the follower may want to bring salvation to the world they cannot be so attached to that idea as to cause destruction in the process. What the social theorist Robert Jay Lifton called destroying the world in order to save it. Engaged Buddhism and other forms of spiritual activism that we will visit – share this insistence – that the world is to be cherished over ideology. That is the real heart of detachment. To learn to want with out being willing to devour to get, to pursue peace without creating violence to get reach it, to aspire to nonviolence while refusing to be paralyzed when faced with violence, to learn to understand without being willing to be self-righteous, to achieve inner peace without abandoning the world.

Ajahn Pasanno is a Buddhist Abbott – serving in Thailand. His work in social action included creating a community of care to preserve a precious forest by gathering all the parties who were concerned – those who logged and those who wanted to preserve the trees – in a way that facilitated better understanding and a common cause. He said With social action work, we have to be patient, discerning, equanimous. We have to be willing to try and to fail. We have to recognize that sometimes things will work and

sometimes they won't. And that they always work out in ways we may never have conceived. This is the same as returning to the foundation of one's own practice: keeping the precepts; developing clarity, tranquillity, and peace of mind; establishing wisdom through reflective investigation; cultivating the qualities of kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These form the foundation that allows us to move out into the realm of social action.

As Abbot Ajahn said -- it is this peace and groundedness forms the base for Buddhist social action. For centuries – 500 years before the birth of Jesus -- the Buddha was teaching a method of intense inner discipline. The purpose was not simply to be internally disciplined but to be at one with the world – to know oneself well – clearly and compassionately and therefore to know the world clearly and compassionately. I have great respect for psychotherapy –and I see that the Buddha understood the nature of the mind long before Freud or Jung and understood how to bring peace to the mind. Spiritual activism – rises out of that place within us that knows that we are connected with all that lives, has lived and will live. It arises not from desperation or frantic reaction but from a reservoir of compassion. Spiritual activism renews itself because it comes from a source deep within and permeating the world. It requires that the means and the end are as one – so that people are not burnt out, not doing violence to create peace – not starving to feed others. Instead spiritual activism comes from discovering and yearning to share that place of profound connection and peace that's available to every person.

Spiritual activism changes the world from the inside out. It renews the soul and then bestows the energy to renew the world.

This week I watched a remarkable film – called Fierce Light – about spiritual activists around the world and from different faiths. I hope that sometime soon we can watch together here. At the heart of the film – is this idea that in that place where we hear the world through our own heart and respond to the world with all our heart we kindle a fierce light than cannot be dimmed. Such a fierce light gave birth to Engaged Buddhism. And such a fierce light is here among us – so that we may learn together and move together as spiritual activists. Therefore, let us learn together – to gather the world's insight and to balance social action with inner work and spiritual growth. Let us see that fierce light in our chalice and cherish it in one another's faces and actions. Our fierce fire will be a strong, indestructible illuminating and creative flame.