

## PRESENT MOMENT, WONDERFUL MOMENT

A Sermon by the Rev. Phyllis L. Hubbell

Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church

(Universalist and Unitarian)

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### READING

*PHYLLIS: Many of you will know at least something of the Buddhist Zen master and poet, Thich Nhat Hanh, author of many books, and a worldwide voice of peace and reconciliation for the last forty years. Today, we reflect on mindfulness, the subject of much of his writing and teaching Here is an excerpt from Thich Nhat Hanh's writing:.*

Mindfulness is the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves. Consider, for example, a magician who cuts his body into many parts and places each part in a different region — hands in the south, arms in the east, legs in the north, and then by some miraculous power lets forth a cry which reassembles whole every part of his body.

Mindfulness is like that — it is the miracle which can call back in a flash our dispersed mind and restore it to wholeness so that we can live each minute of life. . . . Mindfulness frees us of forgetfulness and dispersion and makes it possible to live fully each minute of life.

Mindfulness enables us to live.

## SERMON

On any given Sunday people in the congregation people may be here who are struggling with extremely painful and difficult issues. Someone may be staying up nights, wondering how to find the money to stave off foreclosure. A mother may have just learned that her child is on drugs. A brother-in-law may have murdered someone's sister. Someone may be considering suicide. Someone else may have just learned that he has Huntington's disease. All those people I hold in my heart during the week, those whose stories I know as well as those whose stories I know must exist. Whatever my topic on a given Sunday, whether or not I am afflicting the comfortable or comforting the afflicted, I try to provide something in the service that will help get those in need through the week. That something may or may not be my words. But if they are, those words must be deep enough and strong enough to offer a foundation, something to stand on, something to hold onto, or be held by that will not be swept away in the storm.

So I look for the beliefs and practices that have sustained other strong souls who have endured much more than most of us will ever know. Today, we look to the life and teachings of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and poet Thich Nhat Hanh for inspiration.

Thich Nhat Hanh was born in 1926 in Vietnam, then occupied by France. During World War II when Nhat Hanh was in his teens, Japan invaded his country. After the war, France fought a deadly war to reoccupy the country. Most of us can only imagine living under occupation – the poverty, the

violence, the destruction, the powerlessness. In his twenties, Thich Nhat Hanh's country was divided into North and South Vietnam. Again, take a moment to imagine what it must have been like for him living through a conflict that split his country in half, as the Civil War once threatened to do ours. After the division, his new country, South Vietnam, was ruled by a brutal and corrupt dictator.

Some people who live through such times become what we call terrorists – filled with rage and despair. Instead, Thich Nhat Hanh became a Buddhist monk. Perhaps in response to the suffering he had witnessed, his vision of Buddhism was not of an isolated practice of meditation focused on individual suffering. He taught an engaged Buddhism, calling for Buddhists to practice their values of compassion and nondiscrimination in the world. Buddhism was composed of many sects, just as is Christianity. Thich Nhat Hanh felt called to unify Buddhism into one inclusive faith. But his early efforts were a failure.

Disappointed Nhat Hanh and some of his friends then founded a contemplative community where they practiced a simple way of life. They became very close. This was a period of great joy in Nhat Hanh's life. But the government and other Buddhists increasingly opposed Nhat Hanh's writings, threatening both his freedom and his life.

In 1962, at the urging of friends, Thich Nhat Hanh accepted a fellowship to study comparative religion at Princeton. He was one of the fortunate ones – shielded for a time from the violence in his country. But in America, he longed to return home where his friends and fellow Buddhists were facing

threats, harassment and even death. Some of you will remember that it was during this time that a prominent Buddhist monk publicly burnt himself to death to protest. Nhat Hanh returned home at the age of 38 after the dictator, Diem was assassinated in 1963, though the war was escalating.

Still, Thich Nhat Hanh now witnessed his long time dream fulfilled with the founding of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. Nhat Hanh founded a school to practice “engaged Buddhism” to send young people out to help repair the damage of war at a time when war was intensifying. One village they repaired only to witness it destroyed twice more. Twice more, they repaired it. I think about how you at Paint Branch might have felt if another fire had come again after you had completed the repairs from the first. Yet they rebuilt that village a second and then a third time. Nhat Hanh refused to take sides against those responsible, focusing instead on the need for reconciliation. Not surprisingly, both sides considered him the enemy. Many of his students and colleagues were killed. Someone attempted to kill him.

In 1966, Nhat Hanh returned to the U.S. to publicize what the war was doing to his country and plead for peace. The Vietnamese government seized this opportunity to exile him, refusing him reentry. From this time on, he became a refugee, homesick for his friends and his home, missing even the birds and the trees he had grown up with. He suffered, knowing of the dangers facing his students and colleagues. One of his students protested by publicly burning herself to death. An American military truck struck and killed the head of his school, someone closer to Nhat Hanh than a brother. Nhat Hanh closed himself in his room for two months after hearing the

news. Mindfulness does not insulate even the wisest and strongest from pain.

Even after the end of the war, the new government refused him return. He would not be allowed to return to Vietnam until 2005, when he was 79. I can only imagine the loneliness, the despair that I might have felt in his situation.

Last year, I joined a group of students studying Thich Nhat Hanh's writings in an on-line course. The leaders asked us to choose one of Thich Nhat Hanh's breathing exercises to practice each day. My favorite was the one from which the title of this sermon was taken. "Breathing in, I dwell deeply in the present moment. Breathing out, I know this is a wonderful moment. Present moment/wonderful moment."

I love this exercise. One of my friends tries to use it every time she's at a red light. Trying to find the wonder in each moment, the wonderfulness in each moment, having faith that it exists if only we can learn to be fully present in each breath we take is a core promise of Buddhism. I love Thich Nhat Hanh's words. Yet I wonder if they are really literally always true. What about those two months in his room?

I believe that with practice, I can learn to recognize that this present moment is a wonderful moment. Even when the computer seems to have lost my sermon at 7:00 Sunday morning. Even when there is some conflict that is waking me up at 3:00 in the morning. Even when I have heard bad news from my doctor.

But what about the really hard times? Can we really be mindful, can we really be thankful, when we are faced not with the merely inconvenient, but with tragedy, when we are sitting not in a traffic jam, but in the hospital room of a beloved child dying, or waiting at home for a loved one who was working at the Pentagon after September 11, or lying helpless in a hospital during Hurricane Katrina or living in a refugee camp without a sheltering roof and central air conditioning anywhere in the world with our home, family and community destroyed by war, poverty and disease.

I believe I have a strong religious and spiritual foundation but I don't think I'm there yet. My foundation has served me well during my difficult days and troubled nights. It hasn't kept me from having difficult days and troubled nights, but it has helped me know that I would get through them. It has helped me believe that my life has meaning. But I'm not sure that I could always have said, "Present moment, wonderful moment." Some of you have known far worse than I have

Yet I must also acknowledge that Thich Nhat Hanh has faced far more than I have—a country at war not several thousand miles away, but right next door, villages bombed, poverty, exile from all that was familiar, dear friends dead, not from a heart attack or cancer, but from the brutality and devastation of war—faced it and found peace. As I understand what he is saying, he is not promising us freedom from fear and pain, but that we will feel our pain as part of a larger, deeper reality that still contains joy and love and beauty. Someone we love dies, but the death is part of the love that will continue to enrich our life always. We have lost our job, but we have our health and our

friends. We have lost our savings, but we are surrounded by beauty. Thich Nhat Hanh assures us that the larger reality that we are part of even in the worst of our days is magnificent, full of miracles, full of love, full of possibility. Thich Nhat Hanh has written: “The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green earth in the present moment, to appreciate the peace and beauty that are available now.”

Nhat Hanh writes that lotus flowers are born in the mud, not on pristine marble. He does not seek a Heaven free from all suffering, for he says that from our suffering, understanding and compassion are born. Mindfulness is not a mindless freedom from suffering brought magically by the sight of the lotus flower. Mindfulness is seeing deeply what is in front of you, what is all around you, with the eyes of compassion and wonder. In time after he left Vietnam, Nhat Hanh grew to see the beauty and miracle present in all birds, in all trees, in all human beings. He came to find home wherever he was. He was no longer in exile, because his understanding of home had expanded.

Nhat Hanh also learned something else that I find profoundly hopeful. He discovered that once we have experienced something deeply, it is always with us. No grapefruit grow in New York City, yet Nhat Hanh, sitting in a library, could actually deeply experience that fragrance. Before Nhat Hanh was able to return to Vietnam, people asked him if he regretted not being able to return. “He replied that he [was] in Vietnam now.”

Think about that for a moment – Nothing, no-one we have ever loved, lost – not mother, not father, not lover, not unborn child, is ever lost to us. If we

learn to live mindfully, deeply present to all we hold dear, their voice, their touch will stay with us. They are part of our world forever. There to comfort us. There to make us laugh. There to urge us onward. There, not through our hanging on to the past, but by their becoming a living part of our existence, of our present. Present moment. Wonderful moment.

This is the moment we have. This very moment as we sit here in this holy place surrounded by beauty, surrounded by love, surrounded by hopes and dreams, and yes, by sorrow and regret. Here we sit, miracle of miracles, thinking, creating, growing, striving, something exquisite, something astounding coming up out of the mud. Alive. Breathing. Present moment. Wonderful moment.

May the ears of our ears awake, and the eyes of our eyes open. Present moment. Wonderful moment.

Thich Nhat Hanh in *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, quoted in the online course on Thich Nhat Hanh, *Spirituality and Practice*, [www.spiritualityandpractice.com](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com).

Thich Nhat Hanh in *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, *Id.*

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<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/thichnhathanh/transcript.shtml>. January 12, 2008.

Thich Nhat Hanh Wikipedia quoting from *Touching Peace*, Parallax Press, 1992, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thich\\_Nhat\\_Hanh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thich_Nhat_Hanh).