

Continuation

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

Selected verses from the Buddha's "Discourse on Happiness"
(translated by Thich Nhat Hanh):

To live in a good environment,
to have planted good seeds,
and to realize that you are on the right path —
this is the greatest happiness.

To have a chance to learn and grow,
to be skillful in your profession or craft,
practicing the precepts and loving speech —
this is the greatest happiness.

To live honestly, generous in giving,
to offer support to relatives and friends,
living a life of blameless conduct —
this is the greatest happiness.

To avoid unwholesome actions,
not caught by alcoholism or drugs,
and to be diligent in doing good things —
this is the greatest happiness.

To be humble and polite in manner,
to be grateful and content with a simple life,
not missing the occasion to learn the Dharma —
this is the greatest happiness.

To live in the world
with your heart undisturbed by the world,
with all sorrows ended, dwelling in peace —
this is the greatest happiness.

For those who accomplish this,
unvanquished wherever they go,
always they are safe and happy —
happiness lives within oneself.

Two passages from *No Death, No Fear*, by Thich Nhat Hanh:

We are often sad and suffer a lot when things change, but change and impermanence have a positive side. Thanks to impermanence, everything is possible. Life itself is possible. If a grain of corn is not impermanent, it can never be transformed into a stalk of corn. If the stalk were not impermanent, it could never provide us with the ear of corn we eat. If your daughter is not impermanent, she cannot grow up to be a woman. Then your grandchildren would never manifest. So instead of complaining about impermanence, we should say, “Warm welcome and long live impermanence.” We should be happy. When we can see the miracle of impermanence, our sadness and suffering will pass.

Someday when we die, we will lose all our possessions, our power, our family, everything. Our freedom, peace, and joy in the present moment is the most important thing we have. But without an awakened understanding of impermanence, it is not possible to be happy.

Sermon

Two years and 900,000 American deaths from COVID... and millions more around the globe. Some of these deaths have touched some of us quite personally of course... and all of these deaths touch our hearts and awaken our compassion.

As most of you may know, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh died on January 22 this year, though not of COVID.

Yet he would encourage us to think of his death – and all deaths, including our own, this way, as he wrote: “I am a continuation, like the rain is a continuation of the cloud.”

With that affirmation in mind and heart, my sermon today is titled simply “Continuation.” But before I reflect on this thought in the wake of Thich Nhat Hanh’s death and so many other deaths, first a little bit about Thich Nhat Hanh’s life.

Born in 1926, he was ordained a monk in the Buddhist tradition at a temple in Vietnam when he was sixteen. When war came to Vietnam several years later, as his biography on the website of his Plum Village community in France puts it, the Buddhist monks and nuns had to decide whether to remain in their monasteries meditating or to leave and help those who were suffering in the midst of the war.

Thich Nhat Hanh didn’t believe one had to choose – so he did both, which led him to found what he called Engaged Buddhism. You might say a both/and Buddhism: contemplation/meditation/prayer *and* service/activism in the wider world.

In 1961, when he was 35, Thich Nhat Hanh came to the United States to study comparative religions at Princeton Theological Seminary; then the next year he went to Columbia University to teach and research Buddhism.

He returned to Vietnam and continued his service and his activism, his Engaged Buddhism, speaking and writing against the war and for peace. In 1966 he traveled again to the United States and also to Europe “to make the case for peace and to call for an end to hostilities in Vietnam.” At about that time, Dr. Martin Luther King nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

In response to all this... both North and South Vietnam denied him the right to return to Vietnam, his home.

Thich Nhat Hanh remained in exile for thirty-nine years, writing numerous books, founding the Plum Village monastic community as well as many other centers for Buddhist practice, and continuing to speak out for peace, non-violence, understanding, and care for the earth.

In recent years, Thich Nhat Hanh's health declined as he aged, leading to a serious stroke in 2014. The stroke left him unable to speak or move about on his own; but, as the Plum Village website tells us, he continued to teach – simply through his example and presence.

Finally, after those thirty-nine years in exile, in 2018 he was permitted to return to Vietnam and live out his days at the temple where he had been ordained all those years earlier.

As we've said, Thich Nhat Hanh died on January 22. Yet he affirmed that there is no death as a final end. Rather, as we heard, in regard to himself and by implication all of us, he wrote: "I am a continuation, like the rain is a continuation of the cloud."

As an extension of this affirmation, the second reading this morning, from Thich Nhat Hanh's book *No Death, No Fear*, invited us to be grateful for the reality of impermanence. He wrote that impermanence, one of the central truths of existence lifted up by traditional Buddhist teachings, makes everything possible, yes clouds and rain and sun, and indeed everything and everyone that we love.

So he wrote that we should celebrate impermanence as a miracle! Indeed, he went on, "without an awakened understanding of impermanence, it is not possible to be happy."

What do you think? We might after all protest! For doesn't it seem natural, utterly human, to try, at least sometimes, to hold on to our happiness – to stop time when things are going well and to rush time when they are not going so well?

Maybe. We all do this.

But Thich Nhat Hanh wrote and Buddhist teaching affirms, that this is a recipe for suffering, not for happiness.

Now, I find it very interesting that the two Buddhist teachers of our time who are of greatest world-renown, the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, both lived huge parts of their lives in exile from their home countries. The Dalai Lama since 1959, when he was twenty-four, and Thich Nhat Hanh, as I've noted, for thirty-nine years, the majority of his adult life.

They could easily have dwelled on how terrible this was, could easily have become bitter and angry, immersed in suffering during their long exiles.

Yet... both have been known not for bitterness or anger or for hatred of those who had exiled them, those who had caused great suffering for their people. Far from it. Rather, they have been known for their kindness, for their teachings about understanding and peace and compassion, and, not incidentally, for their gentle good humor.

How, we might ask, would it be possible not to be bitter and angry in the midst of decades of exile from home and worse?

Well, here's a clue from another passage in Thich Nhat Hanh's *No Death, No Fear*:

Our true home is in the here and now. The past is already gone and the future is not yet here. “I have arrived, I am home, in the here, in the now.”

True home. Here. Now.

Hmmm. Is it really this simple? Is the answer to all our suffering, fear, anxiety, whether about death or any number of other things... simply to learn to be at home in this present moment? What about when we are in the midst of real suffering? What about those in refugee camps or those who are caught in the crossfire of war? Can we say to them “You are at home in the present moment.” That just sounds cruel! How can we possibly make sense of all this? Well, maybe it’s about compassion, about connecting with others in the here and now even (or especially) in the midst of suffering and pain; maybe it’s about learning to deal with things as they are, to act in relation to how things are here and now, rather than getting lost in wishful thinking for how we wish they were.

Even so... when it comes to the reality of death – whether the death of a dear one or our own death – isn’t it normal and human to resist? Understandable to rage, rage against the dying of the light, as poet Dylan Thomas wrote? Isn’t it normal and human to want our dearest ones never to die, to wish that they were among us always or among us again?

Well... yes and yes and yes again. All normal, all understandable, all human.

But necessary? Or a good idea? Wise? Spiritually healthy to stay in that place of rage against dying, to stay in that place of ever wishing that our dear one had not died or could somehow return?

Well, the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, guided by Buddhist teachings, both realized that bitterness and anger in the midst of exile – a sort of living death after all – bitterness and anger as they watched with deepest sympathy from afar the sufferings of their people, were not spiritually healthy ways to live. Instead, they discovered that their and our “true home” is not in a particular country or town – much as we might love our country, love our town – but is rather in the here and now wherever we are and whatever is going on... however hard the here and now sometimes can be.

So... back to the question of death (perhaps the starkest reminder of the reality of impermanence) and to Thich Nhat Hanh’s invitation to his followers, to all of us, to understand his passing not as a final end but rather as a continuation. Which is a way of inviting us to continue to experience his presence and his teachings in *this* here, in *this* now.

None of which means we’re not meant to experience grief. Of course we grieve!

Look, I cried my eyes out when my father died at the age of 71. Also when my mother died at the age of 95. Ninety-five! Couldn’t I have just been grateful she had lived so long and so beautifully? Well, sure, and I was and I am grateful for that. But I was also really, really sad – yes, Mom was and remains a “continuation,” but I missed and still miss her by my side as I still miss Dad by my side. Even while understanding with my head, and in some measure with my heart, that of course that can’t be so. I’m on a path here! We all are.

And those we’ve known and loved who have died far, far too young, not even adults? Well, that’s never going to feel as though it was in the natural course of things or acceptable. Of course not. But the only way to live forward is to seek to experience even our dear young ones, too, as a continuation. We can’t change the past, much as we would want. But we can, as best

we can, slowly learn to live in our true home, here and now, with our beloved young ones (as with all of our dear ones who have died) in our hearts and memories though no longer by our sides making us laugh and making us proud.

Finally, when it comes to my own death? No question that I've lived way more many years than I could possibly hope still to live. So... getting closer (which of course has always been the case!)

Now... do I "like" the idea of dying? Heck no! I like *life* too much to say that. But do I fear my death with the same depth of feeling that I had as an adolescent, when death felt like a dark force stalking me, threatening me with losing everything and everyone I loved? Oh, I remember that fear, that darkness. But now? No, pretty much not. So though I don't like the idea of dying, I do feel that with age I'm slowly becoming more accustomed to the reality of my mortality. Which is, you see, perhaps oddly enough, an invitation to my/our true home here and now.

I'll close with this from the wonderful treasure of a writer, Annie Dillard. When not even thirty years old, she composed a passage in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* that I read when I was just a few years younger than she was at the time. This passage has stayed with me all these years and for me rings more true than ever. Here are a few selections from that passage:

Did you think... that you needed, say, life? Do you think you will keep your life, or anything else you love?...

You see the creatures die, and you know you will die. And one day it occurs to you that you must not need life. Obviously...

I think that the dying pray at the last not "please," but "thank you," as a guest thanks his host at the door.

...then you walk fearlessly, eating what you must, growing wherever you can, like the monk on the road who knows precisely how vulnerable he is.

Vulnerable, impermanent... and, we might add, who knows that he is already and always will be, home... here... now.

Impermanence the gift, things never the same, yet always continuing in the midst of the dear gift of this existence we share.

Amen. Blessed be.