

MINDFUL INTEGRATION

*A Dharma Talk offered by Reverend Nathan C. Walker at the
First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia on October 11, 2009*

The mindfulness bell rang as Thich Nhat Hanh entered the dimly lit meditation hall. Nine hundred of us stood and bowed. Thankfully my positioning meant that our eyes briefly connected. A tear rolled into my closed mouth. I had arrived.

He walked intentionally before the orchids, which were just as gentle and lovely as Thây. We call him Thây, Vietnamese for teacher, and he calls us Buddhas-to-be. I stood smiling and thought, “what an honor to be in his presence.” He placed his palms together and bowed to us.

The Sangha gathered for a five-day retreat in upstate New York just as the autumn colors illuminated the hillside. I’m certain none of us had read all of his 100+ books but between us all maybe we had. Thich Nhat Hahn became a prominent world leader after being exiled from his homeland, Vietnam. During the U.S.-Vietnam war he engaged in non-violent civil disobedience, which inspired Martin Luther King Jr. to nominate Thây for a Nobel Peace Prize. Thich Nhat Hanh’s commitment to peace and human rights became known as “engaged Buddhism.”

As we returned to the lotus position, a young Buddhist nun stood serenely and mindfully before the microphone and shared some big ideas, including, “We free ourselves from the inferiority complex, the superiority complex, the equality complex.” I wrote these phrases in my journal as two-dozen nuns and monks interspersed with one another and began to sing. Together they chanted about non-dualism and non-discrimination. It was inspired. The evening progressed with singing and stories and laughter. Thây retired to his study as we stayed for the orientation, which watered a painful seed in me.

A young monk sat in lotus position on the platform. He instructed us to quietly enter the meditation hall at 5:45 am with women sitting on one side and men the other. My spine straightened. Did he ask us to separate by gender?

We were then asked to practice noble silence as we mindfully loaded onto the bus for the thirty-minute silent ride to our hotels. Just past the lobby, a woman made eye contact with me. I do not remember how our conversation began but will never forget how it ended. I asked, “Is it custom for men to sit separate from women in morning meditation?” She burst into tears.

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I fell into a troubled sleep. I felt itchy but was not scratching at my skin. My conscience was scratching at my imagination, replaying some of the mindfulness trainings:

- Protect the Sangha by taking a stand and practice understanding;
- Speak truthfully and use loving speech;
- Practice compassionate listening and reconcile all conflicts, however small;
- Dwell happily in the present moment and transform difficult emotions;
- Deal with anger by looking with the eyes of compassion;
- Commit to find ways, including personal contact, to be with those who suffer;
- Renounce narrowness by practicing deeply;
- Understand that knowledge is not changeless, absolute truth;
- Remain determined not to be bound by any practices, even Buddhist ones.

Out of this state of complexity, emerged serenity and clarity. The Holiday Inn notepad was just the right size for me to write Thây a brief letter.

Saturday, October 3, 2009

Dear Thy [I realized later that his name was misspelled. How embarrassing. Good thing my knowledge is not changeless!],
Aware of the suffering caused by segregation, my intention is practice *Mindful Integration* by sitting with my sisters. I am determined to use my peaceful presence to cultivate equality for all.

With loving respect, (and in the name you gave me)

Creative Generosity of the Heart (Nate Walker)

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I awoke at 4:45 am, boarded the bus and watched the moonshine fall on changing leaves. Entering the meditation hall, a nun bowed to me. I handed her the note address to “Thy.” She smiled, bowed and whispered, “I will give it to him.” I bowed and rested my meditation cushion and blanket on the left side of the hall. My intention was not only to communicate with Thây but also to assure the women sitting next to me that my presence was not a threat to their sense of safety. I gently distributed seven copies of my letter to the surrounding women, and then breathed into lotus position with eyes closed.

The sun rose. Chanting filled the hall. I was at peace.

After the final bell, as we silently walked toward the breakfast tents, a hand rested on my shoulder. Brining my chest toward hers, a woman looked at my nametag, and her eyes were bright. She bowed and mouthed, “thank you.” I bowed. We smiled.

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After mindful-eating, mindful-walking, and mindful-working the afternoon was open for mindful talking. We gathered in clusters of twenty or so, the monastic-facilitated Dharma discussion groups. I was in the one that welcomed gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. I came to love them. I soon felt comfortable to share my letter. Some responded with gratitude, others with anger about gender separation, others with perplexity about the heterosexual assumptions. We spoke of gender as a social construct, an illusion. Others looked me in the eye and sincerely expressed concerns for my equality complex.

Together, we created a culture of deep listening and loving speech. We all left enriched by one another’s presence, one another’s perspective.

Meanwhile, other dharma groups were discussing the same subject. Some read aloud my letter to Thây, others had written their own. Some made the commitment to not separate from their families but to sit together as one.

However, the Dharma police, as one person put it, were in full force the next morning. At one point they were quite hostile. The women greeting us made clear that we were to separate by gender. I bowed and handed my journal, where a copy of letter was scribed. It was quickly dismissed but no one prevented me from accepting the invitation by one woman to sit next to her.

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I later shared this story with a friend of mine, who said, “Leave it to Nate to have to protest at a Buddhist retreat.” I could not help but laugh. After all, humor can often reveal truth.

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Days fell into one another. The silence touched a core part of my being. The walks were lovely. The people were kind and the grounds colorful. Breathing became such a joy.

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On the last day, in the last hours of the retreat, just before our busses left for the train, we were invited for a Question & Answer period with Thich Nhat Hanh. It perplexed me that Zen Buddhists would have a Q&A period, where “answers” were given. I had crafted and then recrafted an intentional question for Thây.

The session began with the children. One boy asked why he shaved his head. Thây replied by saying, “To save money on shampoo.” Another child asked if she could have a hug. His body-microphone amplified his simple “Yes,” as he opened his arms. The children were invited to go and play as the adults were invited forward to ask questions of the Zen master. We were invited to listen to the mindfulness bell and out of the deep silence discern when to speak, allowing space between people, without the need to rush the process. I was, of course, the first one to ask a question.

Not really. I was actually the second. Unfortunately, my bus scheduled to be the first to depart, requiring me to leave early. I sat in the empty chair and listened to the ringing of the bell. My eyes again connected with his then fell to the page.

“Thây, my question is related to the request that women and men separate during morning meditation.” I was only subtly aware of the nine hundred practitioners listening. It felt as if Thây was listening to me read from my diary, which is true. “I contemplated this practice, listened to the suffering it caused my friends and made the decision to practice non-dualism and non-discrimination by writing you the following two sentence letter.”

I read aloud the note with the intention of not only giving him the context of my question but to explain to the Sangha about my previous communication with Thây.

I looked to see him staring into the sea of people and said, “I reflected upon whether this practice derived from my equality complex.” The Sangha laughed.

“I’ve meditated on this term and found it to be helpful when identifying how in the name of openness we become closed minded. Yet, it can be a harmful term to dismiss even the most intentional forms of equality.” I continued, “My intention for practicing *mindful integration* is simple: to choose not to water the seeds passed on to me by my culture, my religion, and cultivated by many cultures, many religions throughout human history—the seeds of gender superiority.”

“I know by sitting on separate sides during meditation, we are still equal. I am also aware that in my country’s history teaches me that separate-but-equal is still segregation.”

“Thây, this weekend it felt so good, so good not to water these deep seeded customs. It felt so good to be thanked by so many women and so many men for practicing *mindful integration*.”

“In this context, the following question is asked with loving respect.” I looked at my teacher and asked, “sometime this next year, when lay and monastic practitioners gather during one morning meditation... will you invite us all to practice *mindful integration*?” I signed the letter, “Love, Nate,” and left my mailing address.

I bowed.

His response was unexpected in many ways. He first reached out his hand. I offered the hand-scribed question but, with energy, he took the microphone instead. I thought he no longer wanted me to speak. I was wrong; he wanted another to have the microphone to answer the question.

He passed the hand-held microphone to the familiar young nun who was kneeling next to him. She had been preparing to read aloud the written questions that people asked. When given the microphone she shook her head and said, “I don’t want to answer.” Dismissive, Thầy then gestured to the eldest nun, his meditation partner of 50-years, Sister Chân Không.

Sitting in the front row, she placed her hands on the floor and literally crawled on all fours. She scooted herself into lotus position next to the young nun. Alone, these non-verbal gestures answered the question for me.

Usually quite eloquent, Sister Chân Không stumbled to describe Vietnamese culture. She told the story of a teenage old daughter whose father would no longer hug her because she grew breasts. She consoled the daughter, listened to her pain and helped her understand the importance of separating from men. She described it as natural part of her culture.

I remember lending her my attention while she spoke, gently smiling my eyes. She returned the respect. It was lovely to connect with her. She went on to explain that it is not discrimination to separate men and women in meditation: “That is wrong thinking,” she said. She smiled.

I bowed to her. I do not remember if she crawled or scooted or walked back to her seat.

The young nun passed the handheld microphone back to Thầy who explained that this practice was not segregation. He started by saying, “Ask any woman and she’ll tell you she likes to be with other women.” He explained that at Plum Village nuns live together and monks live together. They like to be together. It’s not segregation. When there are more women than men in meditation, “the women sit behind the men,” he said. This meant that even though this is the custom, a practice upheld by meditation-hall ushers, it is not dogmatically applied to all situations.

Thầy described the suffering that comes from the inferiority complex, a wrong perception that comes from the lack of self-esteem. He talked about the superiority complex, “a disease” that comes from thinking oneself is better than others. He also mentioned the equality complex, “a disease” that comes from thinking there is separation. “To think that this is segregation,” he said, “is a kind of disease derived from wrong perceptions.”

“There is a way out of this suffering,” he proclaimed. “Look deeply into the nature of no-self. In Buddhism there is no self to separate. Know this and you will be free.”

He bowed. I bowed. I walked slowly to my cushion trying to breathe deeply. One woman touched my shin and bowed to me. I returned the gratitude. I walked away and boarded the bus.

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The sting from having my thinking labeled as “diseased” lasted for about twenty-five minutes. This was most surprising. In this past this kind of event would have left me feeling

troubled for many moons. I had, after all, long before mastered the art of holding-grudges. And yet it was the practice of mindfulness that set me free this time.

I began to see Thây as a “continuation.” Continuation is a Buddhist concept helping us understand that there is no birth, no death. We are a continuation of our ancestors and our words and deeds continue past the time our body returns to the earth. I began to see Thây as a continuation of his teachers. He is, after all, the forty-third patriarch of Zen Buddhism.

I began to see the experience as an intercultural encounter between a Vietnamese and an American; an intergenerational encounter between an eighty-three year old and a thirty-three year old; an inter-religious encounter between a Zen master and a Unitarian Universalist minister. I began to see him as just a guy, simply human.

I began to see myself as simply human, just a guy. I am, after all, the seventeenth settled minister of the historic First Unitarian Church, established in 1796. The only female settled minister since that time was my colleague, the Reverend Dr. Holly Horn, who served as co-minister with her husband. My ministry is a continuation of the same patriarchal system of which we are all a part. In this way, there is no separation between me and Thây. We are both continuations of all who came before and our words and our deeds serve as continuations to our collective future. The question remains, how do we view the legacy on which our leadership rests and how will our words and deeds heal the suffering engrained in this continuation?

I hope to some day offer Thây a cup of tea so we can discuss another question. I would like to ask him how the ethic of no-self is achieved when the act of separating by gender physically brings more attention to self. My question is intended to help me go deeper into the practice and to apply the dharma mindfully.

Although questions still remain in consciousness, my appreciation for Thây became the balm that comforted the initial sting. There was something healing about Thây’s human response. I deeply appreciate his insights about equality and no-self are certainly profound however do not agree about its application in this context. I say this having spent a lifetime observing segregation in religious rituals.

As a Unitarian Universalist, my faith journey has been deeply informed by the spiritual practices where men are separate from women, as found in some Hindu and Sikh temples. The same is true in Mormon temples, and in some Jewish synagogues and Muslim mosques and in some Catholic rituals. Even in Transylvania, Unitarians still separate men and women in worship. It is not only Buddhism. These observations helped expand the view that this particular mediation session was an isolated event in one particular sect of one world religion. My circle of compassion was expanded by my direct experience with gender separation affirmed by many world religions and by many cultures. I came to understand that gender separation is a deep seeded continuation of the physical ways we create spiritual separation.

I experience the freedom that comes when transcending the complexes that cloud my perceptions. I seek not to dominate but to coexist. I seek not to diminish but to cultivate self-worth. I seek not to separate but to mindfully integrate. These intentions are made possible because of my moral imagination put me in the shoes of a woman who was in pain. Her tears inspired me to practice mindfully and to be at one with all who suffer.

May suffering, in any form, inspire us all to do likewise.

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