

## **On the Way to Mindfulness**

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

October 4, 2009

By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

My introduction to Asian religions came from an unusual place: Saturday afternoon kung fu movies. As a kid in suburban small town Michigan I didn't exactly get a diverse upbringing. But I did get Detroit area television. These were pretty bad movies by any standard really; unless of course you watched them devoutly every week as I did. The stories were pretty thin and the acting even thinner. Bruce Lee's death left a huge vacuum and people were trying to cash in. Most of the movies consisted of two rival kung fu schools, one of which gets wronged somehow, and they fight. The details are not particularly important most of the time. There were occasionally some references to Buddhism or Taoism thrown in, but these often went by without much elaboration. Just enough for an impressionable kid to get a taste of something exotic while still maintaining some mystery.

Some of these movies started to influence America beyond the grindhouse cinemas. One of the most memorable for my generation was "The Karate Kid" and its sequels. Oddly enough, it preserves a lot of

the standard plot structure of the classic kung fu genre. However the production value was far better, and more importantly, the spiritual dimensions of the martial arts was explored in a way that was very accessible to Americans. Who can forget “wax on and wax off”! I was enthralled by this. In the second movie the teacher Mr. Miagi teaches us a form of mindfulness training. When I was in High School I would hide away from other kids sometimes and practice some of the techniques shown in the movie. This was my first step; informal and a bit silly I will admit, but truly the first step down my current spiritual path.

When I finally had a formal instruction in mindfulness meditation a few years later, it was such a refreshing experience. In college it was so easy to be carried away in a million different directions. Stopping and meditating for awhile felt like drinking a glass of water after running a long race. My soul was thirsty, and it satisfied. I believe that that experience is the true test of a spiritual path. This morning my aim is not to convince you to follow my spiritual path. My spiritual work would not do you much good, directly. You have to find the path that works for you. But whatever it is, you will know it when you have that soul satisfying experience. Whether it is meditation, prayer, or jogging, just do it and just keep doing it. My minister when I was growing up, used to say that he felt closest to God in his prayer life when he was out on his riding lawn mower, mowing the lawn. Just him, nature, and the

divine. That is all that spiritual practice is really: you, that reality which you hold to be of ultimate concern, and a few key symbols you engage with intentionally so as to point you along the way.

Early in my ministry, I was asked to give a lecture on mindfulness and interconnectedness. This was an invitation that came from one of my parishioners in Omaha who was a professor of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Nebraska in Omaha. She and a colleague were looking for guest speakers in their class on cross cultural perspectives, and after hearing a few sermons she thought it would be fun to have me speak to her students. At one point in my life I had dreams of an academic career, so this was almost like a dream come true. I pounced at the chance. A college lecture is a lot different than a sermon, or should be, and it was a challenge to write it. But I produced something that I really liked, and even came up with some unique metaphors that I still use sometimes. I rolled into this class and found that there are other differences. For example, all you choose to be here this morning. I thank you for that and for your attention. College kids, at least this group, you could tell that they were a less enthusiastic crowd than what I am accustomed to seeing on a Sunday morning. About a quarter of the way through my lecture I saw a couple of them reading a newspaper! They were sitting in the back. Thankfully, some of my listeners were paying better attention.

When I was done, I remember one young woman in the front row raised her hand to ask a question. She said something to the effect of, “Well of course I am mindful. I know that I am in this room. I am pretty sure that I am not dreaming. When am I not ever mindful of the present moment?” An excellent question! Why over think this mindfulness business? Aren’t we all mindful of where we are and what we are doing all the time? My response was “Not as often as we think we are!” How often are we aware of driving? Or driving while talking on a cell phone? Surely we do both at the same time; surely no one is sleeping or hallucinating. But the reason more and more states are banning cell phones while driving is because it is hard to be aware of everything at once.

I asked this woman, “Are you aware of the room? The plane flying overhead? The feel of the chair you are sitting on, the state of your breakfast being digested, or your diaphragm pulling in air? What about the person next to you; are you aware of their breathing too?” All of these things happen in the present moment. Mindfulness is the state of being fully aware of everything happening within your five senses right now. And then now. How about now? Constantly. It is not easy to do this even for one moment, much less a continual series of them. Most people find it very difficult to watch their thoughts when they meditate. Are minds are not used to being watched. It is uncomfortable in the beginning.

In her book The Chocolate Cake Sutra, Geri Larkin writes:

“Clearheadedness is fed by spiritual practice, whether it is meditation, prayer, bowing toward Mecca, chanting, or whatever your practice is. If we stick to whatever tradition we are most comfortable in and do our best to keep ethical principles, sooner or later living smack in the middle of present tense happens. And with it comes a joy in the data pulled in by all of our senses, even when the data isn’t good news. You start to experience almost everything as simply data. And you discover that you can actually stay upright in any situation you find yourself in. If you are quiet, out of this clearheadedness will come a knowing about what you can do to help a situation. Maybe it will be to hug someone who is hurting. Maybe it is participating fully in an argument without giving in to the temptation to curse.”

Larkin is notoriously prone to cursing a lot, so the final sentence in that quote is probably an injunction to herself. Being aware of the data, the simple facts of our existence without any of the stories or interpretations we might assign to them, is the heart of mindfulness practice. It is the ultimate case of getting real with ourselves. Notice how there is not magic here. No extra stuff, nothing supernatural. Just being alive is a gift. But too often we don’t unwrap it. We skim through life barely aware of things. We are too focused on what is coming next.

Too wrapped up in what we don't have to see the myriad of blessings right before us. Mindfulness is a prophet in the wilderness calling us back to see the obvious. In many ways the student in the class I taught is on to something. Yes of course we should be aware of where we are and what we are doing. Why aren't we?

Here we arrive at the words of the Buddha in this morning's ancient reading. "A flickering, fickle mind is difficult to control. The wise person strengthens it with determination. Like a fish thrown onto the shoreline, the mind thrashes and quivers when we do not transcend passions. The mind is difficult to control. It flies from object to object, landing wherever it pleases. Thus it is good to tame the mind, for a well-tamed mind brings happiness." I love the poetry and imagery of this verse. But in a way it is too true. "It is good to tame the mind, for a well-tamed mind brings happiness." Thank you, Captain obvious! The real question is how do we get there?

Actually the answer to that is both very simple and very difficult. First the simple part: for five minutes every day, sit and breathe, and pay attention. That is all. If you want to use a mantra by all means go ahead. The hard part comes a bit later. That five minutes can be awfully easy to put off, schedule around, over and through. It can be uncomfortable physically and sometimes even psychologically to really take a hard look at ourselves. But over time, like a small running river that can carve out the Grand Canyon, that five minutes expands to ten,

then twenty then thirty. The present moment is less scary. Things slow down. The mind, while perhaps not tamed, is at least a bit less frenetic. Passions and the emotions are easier to see. We are no longer, as Hamlet once proclaimed, passion's slave. I dare not say the "E" word—Enlightenment, but mindfulness is a practice that can be very transformative. Even if all you know is what you get from Ralph Macchio movies.

I don't know about you, but I was shocked and saddened to hear this week about the David Letterman scandal. I normally don't pay a whole lot of attention to celebrities and their comings and goings, but this one caught my attention. I am a night owl, and I used to watch his 12:30 show a lot when I was younger. I like his show still. Perhaps I should not be so surprised to hear about men in power having multiple affairs with women who work for them. But I have not yet become that cynical. You probably saw clips on CNN about how he was being extorted for millions of dollars to prevent this information from leaking. So he turned the guy in and admitted it to his mother, his wife, and the nation a couple of days ago.

It is interesting to watch those clips while you are reading the Dhammapada. I may start doing this more often: just watch the news and read scripture from world religion texts to see if they sync up somehow. "Knowing how fragile our bodies are, we need to make a fortress of our minds. In this way when temptation strikes wisdom is the

weapon that will defend us from anger, greed, and delusion.” I felt a mixture of things when I heard about the extortion piece of the story. One of my first reactions was, how much money would David Letterman spend right now to go back and practice a little bit of wisdom. How much of his millions would he give up right now to have tamed his mind just a bit more so that he could have avoided making the choices he did? “Your own mind untamed,” the Buddha says, “can harm you more than anyone or anything, even your own worst enemy.” The answer of course is that there is no amount of money that could erase what he did to himself and to so many others. A little bit of mindfulness can go a long way. It is the ounce of existential prevention that is greater than the pound of karmic cure!

You see my answer to my student friend in Omaha was at best partial. Yes mindfulness involves being aware of the sights and sounds of the room, the creak in your back or your knee. During my sabbatical a few years ago I was meditating so much that I could tell how much longer before the alarm would sound just by how much pain I had in my knee. It is an odd form of keeping time! But meditation is intended to get at our minds. It is a time to slow down so much that we can look at all our crazy patterns and stories. What are the thoughts and feelings that keep coming up? Why are we so attached to them? How can we let them go?

Some have compared spiritual practice to practicing the piano or another instrument. One sits and breaths much like a musician practices their instrument. The “performance” is going out into the rest of your life with the same level of awareness and letting go. This is by no means easy. Larkin tells this story:

“In Detroit we greet each other on the street. Friend, strangers, everybody. So this homeless man and I always said good morning to each other. After a few weeks we began to exchange a few sentences. By the end of the first autumn I was bringing him granola bars each time I saw him.

One day he was there without the cardboard boxes or the bedding. It was cold—November. In the night someone had taken everything while he was asleep... I told him I’d go back to the abbey to get him some things.

‘Nah. Just give me your sweatshirt.’

He was starring at my favorite, faded to just-the-perfect-shade-of-green hooded sweatshirt. I’d had it all my adult life. It had seen me through graduate school, marriage, Europe, Australia, and childbirth. It was my Bunky, my grown-up pacifier, my lucky sweatshirt. I’d even worn it to bed sometimes when I was too tired to change clothes or

slightly too cold to get to sleep without an extra layer. He wanted my favorite green sweatshirt.

I am quite skilled at giving things away, known for it even. Every week I give at least a painting or a book to someone. I've given away all of my clothes except for a handful of things (per advice from Oprah) that give me joy. I don't have any jewelry to speak of.

The man wants my Bunky. "Why" I ask

"Because it smells good."

"You want my favorite sweatshirt in the whole world because it smells good?"

"Yeah. And because it is really cold out here!"

I sighed. Took the sweatshirt off. Handed it to him. Walked away waiting for the tears to come. Instead I felt elated. Thrilled, even. Happy for both of us. That's what generosity does, the real kind. And, okay, I miss it sometimes, but giving it away was the right things to do.

A few weeks later when I saw him without it he told me someone had stolen it. 'My favorite thing in the whole world,' he said. We just looked at each other and started laughing."

That is the fruit of mindfulness. To be able to give up your favorite thing, be glad about it, and then laugh when it disappears forever. To know yourself that well is an amazing practice. Whatever it is that grounds you in what you believe, follow it diligently. Never let it go until you can let everything go. Amen Blessed Be.