

**STARTING AFRESH**  
**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan**  
**University Public Worship**  
**Stanford Memorial Church**  
**January 8, 2012**

Happy New Year to each and every one of you here today! Welcome back to students returning from the long holiday break. 2012 has begun, and the winter quarter starts tomorrow. So I'm preaching today on the theme of starting afresh.

The lectionary reading for today from the Old Testament<sup>i</sup> consists of the first five verses of the Bible, which in turn describe the starting point of all creation: "In the beginning... the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep... Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." The New Testament reading<sup>ii</sup> recounts the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist appears in the wilderness and one of the people he baptizes in the River Jordan is Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee. As the one later to be known as the Christ comes up out of the water the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove.

There's a phrase in Japanese, *shoshin*, which means "beginner's mind." It's used in Zen Buddhism to describe the proper attitude for spiritual practice.<sup>iii</sup> The beginning of the universe, according to Genesis, has to do with God's mind starting with a formless void and then creating light from darkness -- an original enlightenment, if you will. And the beginning of Jesus' ministry has to do with his receptive mind being filled by the Holy Spirit. Can each of us start afresh in this new year, accessing the beginner's mind and starting off in a new way -- more open than ever to enlightenment from God and to the in-breaking experience of the Holy Spirit?

The Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, known for his tireless opposition to the Vietnam War and nominated by the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize, has written two books about Jesus and Buddha as spiritual brothers. The more recent, *Going*

*Home*, explicitly examines today's gospel lesson, connecting Jesus' baptism to the beginner's mind in terms of the experience of being born again or being resurrected. Thich Nhat Hanh sees the Holy Spirit as mindfulness, a sensibility already within us if we're able to cultivate it and help it to become manifest in us.<sup>iv</sup> Jesus once said, according to Luke, that the kingdom of God is not something to come in the future and be observed externally, but instead is something already present within each of us.<sup>v</sup> So, the Holy Spirit is already inside us, and baptism is public recognition that its energy is there, waiting to be brought to fuller fruition. From Thich Nhat Hanh's perspective, by touching the seeds of mindfulness and helping them grow within us, we can become truly alive, body and spirit together.<sup>vi</sup>

Mindfulness for him means "keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality;"<sup>vii</sup> otherwise stated, this is full awareness of the miracle of life itself. It requires us not to long for the past or hope for a better future, but to live totally in the present moment. There are a number of methods for doing so, but for him the primary one is meditation. As he puts it, "This is the practice of resurrection. We die so many times a day. We lose ourselves so many times a day. And thanks to the...practice [of meditation] we also come back to life several times a day. If you don't practice, then when you lose your life every day, you have no chance to be reborn again. Redemption and resurrection are neither words nor objects of belief. They are our daily practice. And we practice in such a way that Buddha is born every moment of our daily life, that Jesus Christ is born every moment of our daily life."<sup>viii</sup>

Going back to the power of the Holy Spirit within us -- Thich Nhat Hanh believes the reason Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days immediately after his baptism was to strengthen the Holy Spirit's presence within him through lots of meditation practice: sitting meditation and walking meditation outside in the elements, alone.<sup>ix</sup> The carpenter from

Nazareth, now about 30 years of age, is in effect reborn and starts his life afresh as a public preacher, prophet, pastor and healer.

What does this mean for us lesser mortals, though, either as followers of Jesus or the Buddha (or even simply as secular beings seeking a better life)? Thich Nhat Hanh makes it clear that theology, dogma and doctrine are not the way to human happiness, but only direct experience. No one can teach another person through ideas how to start afresh, be born anew, to be filled with the Holy Spirit. A teacher can only help a student go through the same kind of spiritual experience he or she has known. One may know how a mango tastes and might want to describe it to another person, but instead the other person should simply be offered a piece of mango so that he or she can have a direct sensory experience of it. Or, specifically in terms of one form of spiritual practice, he explains that "[If] you have learned walking meditation, you know how to walk, to dwell in the present moment, to combine your mindful breathing and your steps.... [Through] your practice you know that walking meditation can release you from the negative energies that make you suffer when you are upset or angry. Every time you get angry or upset or filled with despair, you practice walking meditation for half an hour or forty minutes and you always feel better. Then you know you cannot be without walking meditation...You...know by experience that walking meditation can be nourishing and transforming."<sup>x</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote a rather famous manual on meditation technique for the layperson called *The Miracle of Mindfulness*<sup>xi</sup>! and had it published in English thirty-five years ago. It explains contemplative breathing, sitting and walking in detail and then describes how to use those methods in many pragmatic situations, from washing the dishes and cleaning one's house to eating, listening to music, and carrying on a conversation. The central point is to be as

awake and as aware as much of the time as possible in one's life. He quotes lines from the ancient Buddhist Sutra of Mindfulness like this: "When walking, the practitioner must be conscious that he is walking. When sitting, the practitioner must be conscious that he is sitting. When lying down, the practitioner must be conscious that he is lying down."

As Thich Nhat Hanh once said to a Western friend, "There are two ways to wash the dishes. The first is to wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes and the second is to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes." He explains what he means by encouraging the second way as follows: "If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not 'washing the dishes to wash the dishes.' What's more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can't wash the dishes, the chances are we won't be able to drink our tea either. While drinking the cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus, we are sucked away into the future -- and we are incapable of actually living one minute of life."<sup>xii</sup> Obviously, this is far removed from starting afresh with a beginner's mind.

Here's one of his descriptions of his own walking meditation in his native Vietnam: "I like to walk alone on country paths, rice plants and wild grasses on both sides, putting each foot down on the earth in mindfulness, knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth. In such moments, existence is a miraculous and mysterious reality. People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child -- our own two eyes. All is a miracle."<sup>xiii</sup>

But how does this help us during most of our days in the new year here at Stanford: as students in class, professors teaching, and staff working? How does it help people in jobs out in the community? As he recognizes, "Active, concerned people don't have time to spend leisurely, walking along paths of green grass and sitting beneath trees. One must prepare projects, consult with ...[others], try to resolve a million difficulties... One must deal with every kind of hardship." So, how are we to practice mindfulness or meditational awareness under these circumstances? His answer is "Keep your attention focused on the work, be alert and ready to handle ably and intelligently any situation which may arise -- this is mindfulness [in these situations]."<sup>xiv</sup>

Knowing how to use one's breath is perhaps the most important dimension of mindfulness or connection with the Holy Spirit within. It's not coincidental that the biblical Hebrew and Greek words for Holy Spirit also mean breath or wind.<sup>xv</sup> As Thich Nhat Hanh explains, "Whenever your mind becomes scattered, use your breath as the means to take hold of your mind again... In a Buddhist monastery, everyone learns to use breath as a tool to stop mental dispersion and to build up concentration power."<sup>xvi</sup> It can be as simple as being conscious of breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing out. If one is angry, for example, one can literally take a big breath, or a number of big breaths, before responding, saying "Breathing in, I know the energy of anger is in me. Breathing out, I [let that anger go]." Repeat. Repeat. Until the anger is under control.<sup>xvii</sup>

Here's another concrete example that Thich Nhat Hanh gives of how breath relates to mindfulness: Say you're walking alone on a country path and then a friend joins you. If the friend begins to talk, maintaining mindfulness becomes more difficult. But, "if in your mind you think, 'I wish this fellow would quit talking, so I could concentrate,' you have already lost your mindfulness. But if you think, instead, 'If he wishes to talk, I will answer, but I will continue in

mindfulness, aware of the fact that we are walking along this path together, aware of what we say, I can continue to watch my breath as well."<sup>xviii</sup>

There's a line in a Vietnamese folk song which says: "Hardest of all is to practice the Way at home, second in the crowd, and third in the pagoda."<sup>xix</sup> Practicing mindfulness, or being aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit within, becomes most challenging in an active and demanding situation in real daily life. Thich Nhat Hanh has told his students that if they can meditate an hour each day that's good, but it's nowhere near enough: As he explains, "You've got to practice meditation when you walk, stand, lie down, sit, and work, while washing your hands, washing the dishes, sweeping the floor, drinking tea, talking to friends, or whatever you are doing... When you are washing the dishes, washing the dishes must be the most important thing in your life. Just as when you're drinking tea, drinking tea must be the most important thing in your life... Be mindful 24 hours a day, not just during the one hour you may allot for formal meditation."<sup>xx</sup>

So, here we are in the New Year, about to begin winter quarter at Stanford. As Genesis relates, "In the beginning...a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." As the Gospel of Mark relates, as Jesus "was coming up out of the water, he saw... the [Holy] Spirit descending like a dove on him." May we be filled with the breath of God as we start afresh. May we understand that the Holy Spirit is within us to be cultivated as much as it is all around us to energize us. May we take this opportunity, when we are fresh and most alert at the beginning of the year to start to develop habits of mindfulness that will sustain us through hard times ahead and bring us a deep sense of satisfaction and fulfillment as well.

## **BENEDICTION**

(In the words of Z en Master Shunryu Suzuki:)

We must not be attached to...[religion] or even to our practice.

We must have a beginner's mind, free from possessing anything,

A mind that knows everything is in flowing change."<sup>xxi</sup> AMEN.

## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Genesis 1: 1-5.
- <sup>ii</sup> Mark 1: 4-11.
- <sup>iii</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970), p. 21.
- <sup>iv</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), pp. 89, 194.
- <sup>v</sup> Luke 17: 20-21; note that the Jesus Seminar considers it probable that the historical Jesus did say something very much like this (Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), pp. 36, 364-365).
- <sup>vi</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*, pp. 89-91.
- <sup>vii</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness! A Manual on Meditation*" (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), p. 11.
- <sup>viii</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*, p. 92.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- <sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- <sup>xi</sup> See note vii.
- <sup>xii</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness!*, p.4.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 742.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness!*, pp. 15-16.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*, p. 192.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness!*, pp. 16-17.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- <sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, p. 138.