

Cultivating the Great Action of Generosity

Rev. Mark Hayes

April 23, 2006

Meditation

This morning's service has grown out of one set of experiences from my sabbatical; namely, a week-long mindfulness retreat in the style of Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh focusing on the theme of generosity. In that spirit, and in acknowledgment of Earth Day, which was yesterday, I have chosen for our time of meditation to share with you this reading from Thich Nhat Hanh:

In Buddhism, there is a practice called "Touching the Earth" that can help us realize our wish to generate the energies of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. During the practice, we touch the Earth deeply six times, surrendering ourselves to the Earth and to our own true nature. We touch the Earth with our forehead, our two legs, and our two hands, so that our mind and body form a perfect whole, allowing us to transcend our small self. We surrender our pride, notions, fears, resentments, and even our hopes, and enter the world of "things as they are." Touching the Earth is an effective yogic practice. We return to our own source of wisdom and are no longer separate and apart from our Mother Earth. The practice of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity helps establish our connectedness, which brings about health and happiness.

We won't go outside right now to touch the earth literally. But I invite you into a time of quiet during which we can each return to our own source of wisdom and sense our oneness, our connectedness with the earth. Also, throughout this service I will make use of the "bell of mindfulness", a regular feature of a mindfulness retreat. Hearing the bell is the signal to stop talking, moving, and thinking. Breathe in and out deeply and let the sound of the bell call you back to yourself, breathing and smiling. Experience the bell as your own inner spirit calling you.

[the bell rings]

Reading “Introduction” to Mindfulness Retreat on Cultivating the Great Action of Generosity Larry and Peggy Rowe Ward

Thich Nhat Hanh writes: “Whether you give your presence, your stability, your freshness, your solidity, your freedom, or your understanding, your gift can work a miracle.”

[Through the retreat] we will experience training in the core practices of Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Village community. Practices include sitting meditation, indoor walking meditation, outdoor walking meditation, guided meditations, total relaxation, eating meditation, mindful movement, touching the earth and the practice of noble silence. During our short course, we will focus on the paramita of generosity.

The Chinese character for paramita means to cross over to the other shore. a paramita is translated as a perfect realization that can be practiced in our daily life. In our daily life, we might have the experience of sadness, anger, depression, hurt, or despair, and we would like to cross over to a shore of well-being. We have to take an action to cross over, and that is called a paramita. We return to ourselves through our practice of mindful breathing, we overcome our distress and cross over. Every day we can practice this “perfection.”

The great action of generosity arises from within us. . . Thich Nhat Hanh refers to the teachings on this paramita as the teachings on love. Generosity means to first of all offer joy, happiness, and love. There is an onion plant in Asia that is the symbol of love. It is very delicious and it is used in many dishes. It grows back in less than 24 hours every time it is cut. In practicing love, we can reach the shore of freedom, harmony, and healthy relationships.

[*the bell rings*]

Sermon

I have long held the conviction that generosity begins with gratitude. In order to be truly generous, you must be truly rich. And gratitude is our inner awareness and acknowledgment of the riches at our command. Riches of the world around us and its resources, riches of the spirit, riches of friendship and family, love and community.

So it all begins with gratitude – a deep appreciation for the gifts we receive from whatever source. In his book *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thich Nhat Hanh tells of an encounter he had with a Protestant Christian minister, who asked him whether he was a grateful person. As the Buddhist monk thought to himself “Yes,

I am a grateful person,” the minister went on. “If you are really grateful, how can you not believe in God? God has created everything we enjoy, including the food we eat. Since you do not believe in God, you are not grateful for anything.”

“I thought to myself,” writes Thich Nhat Hanh, “I feel extremely grateful for everything. Every time I touch food, whenever I see a flower, when I breathe fresh air, I always feel grateful. Why would he say that I am not?” He goes on to say, “I had this incident in mind many years later when I proposed to friends at Plum Village that we celebrate a Buddhist Thanksgiving Day every year. On that day, we practice real gratitude – thanking our mothers, fathers, ancestors, friends, and all beings for everything. If you meet that Protestant minister, I hope you will tell him that we are not ungrateful. We feel deeply grateful for everyone and everything.”

I invite you to join me now in a few moments of silent reflection, during which we call to mind some of the many gifts and riches that we enjoy, and for which we are deeply grateful.

[the bell rings]

One of the reasons I return periodically to the theme of generosity is that this religious community, which draws us into its loving embrace, and which at its best nurtures and feeds our spirits, depends for its very existence on the generosity of its members and friends. And of course that generosity comes in many forms. The most obvious is our sharing of financial gifts for the upkeep and operation of the community. While this aspect is not the central focus of my thoughts this morning, I don't want to neglect it entirely.

We are currently at that point in the church year when we set the course for the coming year, including putting together a financial budget. It is only through the generosity of all of us pledging what we can for the coming year that we can have the clarity to make reasonable and financially responsible plans for the future. And so I ask one final time for all of you members and friends who have not yet made your pledge for next year to do so as soon as possible. Today wouldn't be too soon.

As I said before, money is not really the major focus of my message this morning. Just as important to the health and vitality of this community is how we share our time, our energy, our ideas, our enthusiasm, and our love – with one another, and with all those we come into contact with. In the course of the mindfulness retreat, Peggy Rowe Ward made the point that for her, generosity is not, at its heart, about giving, but rather about being open. Being open means sharing not just your material resources, but sharing yourself. When you bring

your whole self into a relationship – into community – the gifts of your self flow naturally, enriching all around you.

In the reading earlier, I quoted Thich Nhat Hanh saying “Whether you give your presence, your stability, your freshness, your solidity, your freedom, or your understanding, your gift can work a miracle.” Your very presence here this morning is such a gift, and is part of such a miracle. Sometimes the impact of your gifts remains hidden and unknown. But be assured, if you share openly of yourself, the impact will often be miraculous indeed.

I would like to present another opportunity this morning for some of you to share of yourselves. Each of us has undoubtedly encountered numerous “teachers” of generosity in our lives, particularly those who have taught by their example. I invite you to take some time now to think about one such person in your life. Someone whose generosity had a great impact on you, making you want to pass that generosity along. Then, when we return from those reflections, those who wish may share with us about some of those experiences of receiving the generosity of others. Let us be together in silence.

[the bell rings]

I invite you now back into the present moment. If your reflection brought you any thoughts or memories that you would like to share, please raise your hand, and the microphone will come to you. . .

[congregation members share reflections]

There has been much giving here this morning and, I trust, much receiving. The amazing, miraculous thing about that is that giving and receiving are part of the same reciprocal, interdependent process. The more we give, the more we receive. The more we receive, the more we are moved to give. The giving and the receiving feed on one another in a wonderful unending cycle.