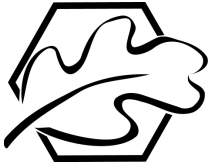




Smiling Buddha
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Smiling Buddha

Bodhisattva

This morning I'd like to start with a film I found on YouTube a year ago. It's about seven minutes long. It was created for a computer screen rather than a large projector screen, so it's technically a little rough. But it's worth it. If you can't see the screen, please move around until you can.

The film is by Christine Rabbette and Patrick Quinet and Artemis Productions. It's called *Bodhisattva*. A Bodhisattva is a Buddhist saint who is almost enlightened. Rather than leave this world, they dedicate themselves to helping others become enlightened.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKnY8tBLG3g>¹

Were you able to follow the story even though it was in French?

A Bodhisattva is supposed to be a force for healing in the world. Think he qualifies? Anyone feel like trying his strategy?

Lightly

This morning I want to talk about smiling and taking ourselves lightly as a way of being a force for healing in the world. I want to start with the dark side of lightness and the weighty side of light

¹ The film opens with a rather glum scene on a subway with people bored, tired, worn out and resigned to a humdrum life. A guy comes on and starts chuckling. At first people look a little annoyed. But his laughter is contagious and soon everyone his howling with mirth. The guy smiles with deep satisfaction, gets off the train and sits down on another subway and starts chuckling.

heartedness because we face a lot of dark and weighty issues: environmental catastrophe, economic meltdown, political stalemate, wars, famine, personal stress.

Our mission statement says that we come together to deepen our lives and be a force for healing in the world. Our intention is to engage these dark and heavy issues.

Engaging

Joanna Macy is a Buddhist activist who describes three aspects of engaging: with the hands, the head and the heart. We haven't talked about these for a while, so let's quickly review them.

Hands

Engaging with the hands is like staunching a wound. There are people and creatures who are bleeding literally or figuratively. The work of the hands helps those who are hurting or stops those who are harming.

It includes housing the homeless (like our Family Promise program of housing homeless families here on campus), feeding the poor (like our help with Loaves and Fishes and St. John's Shelter). It includes peace vigils, rallies, boycotts and direct action of any kind.

Would you call out a few more examples? ...

Okay good, we've got it.

Head

The work of the head may not directly help people in need but it changes the

systems that are harming. It's head work because it's creating alternative ways of doing things.

It includes appropriate technologies, alternative economic systems like farmers markets, working for marriage equality, changing laws that favor the wealthy at the expense of the rest of us, political election reform, water rights, health care reform ...

What are other examples? ...

Okay good, we've got it.

Heart

As important as the work of the head is, it's limited by the depth and breadth of our consciousness. Some problems are deeper than laws or social structures. Some of our personal struggles require more than coming up with a new set of goals. Sometimes we have to expand how are minds and hearts work.

This is the work of the heart – deepening our consciousness, expanding our empathy, seeing life from new perspectives.

Imagine requiring congress people to have dinner with a member of the opposite party every week. This wouldn't address a specific issue or policy, but it could create a more congenial atmosphere conducive to new solutions.

The work of the heart includes meditation, prayer, contemplations. It includes learning – like my journey to Palestine last Fall. It includes the class I'm offering on consciousness and spirituality. It includes our Ministry Circles and raising happy, healthy children.

What are some other examples? ...

Okay good, we've got the idea.

All three ways of engaging are important. To be effective in our lives or in the larger world we need to work with our hands, our heads and our hearts. Some situations require more of one than the other. But we don't want to ignore any of the three completely.

Smiling and laughing are part of engaging the heart. When we take ourselves too seriously we create a mess (think about congress this summer). On the other hand, when our minds and hearts are light, they are more agile. Smiling openly and genuinely may not solve immediate problems. But it can elicit a consciousness that engages more creatively and effectively.

So I'm not advocating smiling as a way to ignore the serious issues we face. I'm not even suggesting we need to take a break from them. I'm saying that smiling and a healthy sense of humor are integral to engaging our lives and the world effectively.

Two Guards

Consider two different states of consciousness. One is a brooding, contracted, vigilant seriousness. The other is the light spirited, healthy sense of humor we saw in the film. Let's personify them as two guards whose job is to protect the town – keep it safe and well functioning. We'll call them Bruno and Billy.

Bruno puts on his chain mail, helmet, and breastplate, picks up his shield and crossbow, and climbs into the stone tower by the city wall. From there he looks out through arrow slits, scouring the countryside for terrorists and rogues.

Meanwhile, Billy sets his weapons aside, takes off his armor and dons comfortable clothes. He walks across the drawbridge, sits under an awning and

relaxes. With a smile, he greets the crowds coming and going.

Both Bruno and Billy are alert and diligent. But who is going to be more effective in spotting and solving problems?

Bruno is well protected by the tower walls. But the arrow slits constrict his vision. He's too far away to see people's eyes or facial expressions. He can pick out stereotyped bad guys and good guys. But he's so uptight he can barely see past his own paranoia. He's more likely to project ill will on the innocent and miss problems in ordinary-looking folks. And when he does see a problem, what can he do? He's so far away. He can shoot arrows or call in the troops. He can recommend sophisticated weaponry, higher military budgets, stricter laws and bigger prisons.

Meanwhile Billy has a 360° range of vision. His relaxed attention is more likely to pick up subtle cues both friendly and unfriendly. He can see small problems before they become big troubles. He can walk over and check out a situation without pre-judging. And if there is a problem, he has lots of options: talk, tell a joke, give a warning, ask others to keep an eye out, offer friendly advice and a thousand other non-invasive interventions. And if the troops need to be called in, he can do that with more assurance that it's appropriate.

Which consciousness would you rather live inside, Bruno's or Billy's? Whose life is going to be more happy and joyful? Would we rather live in a stone tower or in the open air, with a suspicious heart or with a spacious heart?

And who is more likely to be well received? Bante Vimalaramsi, the monk I've trained with for three or four years, insists his students smile all the time. I've noticed that when I'm smiling, strangers

are three times more likely to smile and say hello to me. When we smile, the world is a lot friendlier.

Embodiment

So, let's see if we can embody Bruno and Billy and a few other states – see if we can connect with them emotionally and viscerally, not just through thoughts and images.

We are very sensitive to picking up states of consciousness from others, as the film demonstrated. So let's do a few theater games for those who'd like to give it a try.

If you are comfortable, using your arms, show the people around you how Bruno might communicate, "No you can't." Look around you at others.

Now show how Billy might communicate, "You're welcome here."

I see some of you are using facial expression and body gestures as well. That's fine. You can stand if you like.

Show us how someone might express, "I'm so bored."

Show us how someone might show a child, "I'm so delighted with you."

Show us, "I'm determined to get through this."

Show us longing.

Ease.

Light-heartedness.

Thank you.

Smiling Meditation

The topic this morning is smiling. So let's all do a smiling meditation together.

Close your eyes if you like.

If you're feeling the stress of your life or the problems of the world, don't push them away. There's no need to hold onto them

either. Let them be – maybe off to the side or in the background.

Remember a time when you were happy or joyful or in good spirits. Remember what that felt like. Bring some of the feeling into your being now.

As you do this, allow the corners of your mouth to rise a little. It doesn't have to be a big smile. And you don't even have to feel like smiling. Just raise the corners a little even if it's mechanical.

Let your eyes smile as well. Whether they are open or closed, feel the smile there.

And feel it in the center of your chest. Let your heart smile.

Now send that smile to yourself. Wish yourself happiness or ease or wellbeing – any uplifted stated is fine.

...

Now send that smile out to people and creatures around you: in front, behind, to the left and right, above and below. Send a smile, a wish for peace and wellbeing, for ease and comfort to all beings everywhere.

...

Thank you.

If that feels good to you, you can make it a daily practice. Whenever you think of it, smile. You don't have to be feeling good to do this. Just raise the corners of your mouth. Then feel it in your eyes and heart. You can do this in solitary meditation. You can do it standing in line at the grocery store. You can do it when you visit legislators. You can even do it at church. Perhaps even right now.

Because of the way we are wired neurologically, even mechanically smiling tends to elicit a lighter state of mind and heart. And it lightens those around you, just like in the film.

Companion

Let me offer two thoughts about the nature of smiling and taking ourselves lightly.

First, genuine smiling shouldn't be confused with criticizing ourselves or someone else who is feeling bad. Many of us are struggling with heartrending issues. Smiling is not denigrating these states. Pushing away hard feelings is a losing strategy. It just makes things worse in the long run.

Instead, true smiling is like a fair witness, good friend or companion who compassionately sees whatever is going on and accepts things as they are.

So, if we're feeling depressed, anxious, worried or burdened, smiling takes them all into a light, loving embrace. It's not telling them to shush up. It views them from a gently elevated mood.

At most, it is saying that we're taking ourselves too seriously. We don't have to carry those burdens. We can let them be and allow them to travel with us if they want. But we don't have to carry them.

Parallel Universe

Second, spiritual happiness – the deepest wellbeing – is not an emotion, feeling, mood or thought. Feelings, moods and thoughts have tension. Spiritual wellbeing has no tension. Consequently, it has nothing to draw our attention. We may not see it.

It's like a space within which we experience everything. If we look at our hand, we see the hand but may not notice the space between the eyes and hand. But it's always here. Similarly wellbeing pervades everything, but we can go for days, months or years and never notice it. We are more likely to see the clouds than the sky that holds them. We are more

likely to hear the distant traffic the quiet around it. We are more likely to feel upset than the wellbeing around it.

And if we are upset and try to push it away or look the other way, this creates even more tension that grabs our attention. We remain oblivious to the space of pervasive joy.

Yet, we can learn to notice this gentle wellbeing. If we aren't holding on or pushing away, then we can be both upset and perfectly fine: "Ah, so." We can be depressed and happy. We can be worried and light of spirit: "Wow, look how worried I am." We can be angry and smiling. If we aren't used to this, it can feel weird at first – like we're living in two co-existing universes at once.

The trick is not to hold on or push anything away. Instead we simply recognize what's going on, breathe into it and soften.

We release the thoughts or feelings – let them be what they are. If we fight reality, we lose every time. So we allow it to be as it is.

Then we relax any tension in the body, emotions or mind.

And we smile. We invite a lighter space to surround us. And we savor it.

Pretty soon, something else grabs our awareness away. So we recognize it, release, relax and smile again.

That's the trick: recognize, release, relax and smile again and again and again.

And if we want to deepen the wellbeing even more, then we send it out to other beings in all directions. We don't try to hold onto it or think of it as *our* wellbeing. The space between my eyes

and hand is not my space. The wellbeing we experience is not mine or yours. So we release it. William Blake wrote:

*He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sun rise.*

So when we experience that joy, we smile and kiss it as we send it on to others.

Practice

Want to practice this a little?

*What is going on with you right now?
Open to it. Soften into it. Recognize it.*

Then release it. Breathe through it and let it be as it is.

Now relax.

Smile.

And radiate it out to others. ...

Blessed be.

Closing Song

*Happiness runs in a circular motion;
Life is like a little boat upon the sea;
Everybody is a part of everything anyway;
You can have it all if you let yourself be.
Why-o? Because! (4x)*

Closing Words

The closing words will be done in call-response. I'll call out a phrase and you can repeat it back.

Ha

Ha, ha

Ha, ha, ha

Ha, ha, ha, ha

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha

...

May we go in peace, smiling into our hearts and smiling into the world.