

Sacredness of the Ordinary

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We are all familiar with Buddhist monks, dressed in simple robes, heads shaved, often with the contented half-smile of enlightenment on their faces. However, you may be less familiar with the “Toilet-cleaning monksⁱ of Japan”. Yes, you heard me correctly. There is a certain sect of Buddhism whose primary practice is to clean toilets. My husband, Peter lent me the issue of TRICYCLE magazine, a Buddhist review that featured the commune near Kyoto, Japan “where toilet-cleaning [is] considered a path to self-knowledge”.

As you can imagine with the toilet being a modern convenience, this is a relatively new aspect of the more ancient Buddhist religion. The founder Tenko Nishida lived from 1872-1968. In the late 1880's, Tenko became disenchanted with capitalism. He refused to compete with others in order to secure his own livelihood. Tenko engaged in three days of meditation and found enlightenment. His spiritual awakening cast off the assumption that we work in order to live. Instead, Tenko held that life is freely given to all beings by what he called “The Light”, (what others might call God or the Spirit of Life or Nature). Life itself does not need to be worked for instead work is a way of offering thanks for life itself.

Like the Buddha, Tenko renounced his family, status and all worldly possessions. As well as practicing meditation, Tenko served other people by chopping wood, cleaning households, and scrubbing privies. He lived on the bare necessities and soon attracted followers to his way of life. The donation of a piece of land allowed Tenko to establish a community called Ittoen or “One Light”. At its height in the 1950's and '60's, the community had hundreds of followers. Today, there are 300 members. However, their spiritual teachings and practice extends far beyond their immediate circle.

Ittoen offers training sessions for business people and factory workers. This is not the typical American business conference. Instead of attending seminars with Power point presentations, the four days of training involves early morning meditation and then going from door-to-door begging to clean toilets. The article showed a photograph of

workers from Mr. Donut lined up along a sidewalk with brushes and buckets in hand. Four thousand Mr. Donut workers attend this training annually not to learn how to clean but “to promote humility and facilitate group dynamics.”

As the author of the article points out, imagine if American workers went through the same training. It is difficult to imagine employees of Mocha Motts or the Steamship Authority, “jogging door-to-door, heads bowed, begging to clean toilets.” It’s also a stretch to imagine someone knocking on my door offering to clean my toilet as a spiritual practice.

When I traveled to Kyoto as a part of a Wisdom Tour, we did not visit Ittoen however I did witness a reverence and care for the physical world as a reflection of the spiritual. I will never forget visiting one Buddhist Temple where a group of lay people was sweeping the grounds. Each person had a matching bandana around their neck signifying they were lay people of the same community. No one spoke but almost every square foot there was a person working diligently. Heads bent, sweeping with a bamboo broom, calmly ridding the grounds of what seemed like clean gravel of any litter, cigarette butts, and fallen leaves.

The first tenet of Zen Buddhism states: “*The realities of life are most truly seen in everyday things and actions*”. Can spiritual awakening truly be found in mundane tasks like cleaning toilets, raking the yard, and washing the dishes? As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that life is a continual journey of growth and discovery. We build our own theology or beliefs about life through engagement with the world around us. Our spiritual path may inspire us to read scripture, to pray, to meditate, to create rituals, to study or to take a pilgrimage. Each one of those spiritual paths may bring great insight. However as Zen Buddhist principle #11 states “*One can only live in the present moment*”. On our spiritual journeys we may encounter moments of transcendence, but we must also pick up our socks and take out the trash. We do not need to sit in a Buddha Hall or travel to Japan to find these spiritual practices. They are a fundamental part of living.

Buddha means “the awakened one”. When Gautama arose from his meditation under the bodhi tree, he woke up from the dream of being a separate ego in a material universe. Instead of clinging to material attachments, illusions of grandeur and

separateness, he taught the release of suffering through mindfulness in the present moment. When we can see ourselves as connected to all of life then tasks that are usually viewed as unpleasant are transformed into an opportunity to be fully awake to the miracle of life itself. What if instead of thinking of the routine parts of our day as “chores”, boring jobs that we have to do before we can go on to something more rewarding, we recognize the sacredness of the ordinary? Cleaning the toilet is not dirty but an opportunity to cleanse our environment and ourselves. Raking the leaves is not drudgery but an opportunity to be in touch with the cycles of nature and with the ground of enlightenment.

The most simple spiritual lessons are often the most difficult to remember. Oftentimes when I am doing the dishes or mopping the floor, I am not fully present. My mind is frequently rushing ahead to what I have to do next or thinking back to a previous activity. When I am distracted from the task at hand, my work is often sloppy. As the saying goes, “Haste makes waste”. I can certainly attest to that as my kitchen was covered in batter while I rushed to make waffles this week. It took me a little while to even notice this was happening until the batter oozed out of the side of the waffle iron, onto the counter and slowly down the cabinet to the kitchen floor. I was in the midst of another task when I finally noticed. My first reaction was an exasperated sigh as if the waffle iron was to blame! And then knowing the topic of today’s service I chuckled to myself, because I obviously failed at the Zen of Waffles. In rushing I must have poured too much batter into the waffle iron, which was why it was now oozing like slow moving lava from a volcano. I took a deep breath and cleaned up my mess. I slowed down bringing my full attention to making the next waffle. When I performed the same task with greater attention, the waffle was perfect! Instead of being something I needed to get through, I enjoyed the process of cooking and then truly appreciated the good results.

So, I invite you in the week ahead to practice mindfulness. When you are eating, take the time for a sustained, mindful, attentive tasting. Notice the textures and flavors of your food. Pay attention to the source of your nourishment and our intimate connection to the earth. Open your awareness to those who are hungry and let it awaken your gratitude and compassion.

When you are walking outdoors, take the time for a sustained, mindful, attentive step. We are often in such a rush to move from place to place that our minds race ahead of our bodies. Enjoy walking not only as a means to arrive but just for walking. Take your steps in full awareness and invite a sense of balance and harmony as you tread lightly on the earth.

Much of our unhappiness or tension comes from not being fully present. The most tedious activities are transformed when we become aware of each action. One can only live in the present moment so do not miss it! I already heard someone lament that New Year was flying by! Actually, it has just begun. Let's savor every moment.

May the insights of Buddhism help each one of us truly see the realities of life in everyday things and actions. To do so takes practice and attention. Perhaps when we have more fully awakened to this truth, we can surprise the neighbors by going door-to-door begging to clean their toilets. Maybe we better just begin at home. For in the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, "Any ground we sweep in full awareness is the ground of enlightenment."

ⁱ Louise Rafkin, "A Yen for Cleaning", *TRICYCLE The Buddhist Review*, Spring 1998, p. 51-55.