

Thich Nhat Hanh, mindful breathing and awakened engagement



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Throughout my years of compassion work (ministry, chaplaincy, teaching) I was privileged to be in the presence of honorable teachers from many traditions. I stood near the Dalai Lama when he came to the seminary one year to dedicate a Buddhist library. While working for a non-profit, I took several young people to a youth conference in Seattle where Archbishop Desmond Tutu sat with his friend the Dalai Lama to address the gathering. When visiting Switzerland, fresh out of college, I sat in a small seminar with the respected New Testament scholar Marcus Barth, son of Protestant theologian Karl Barth.

It was a joy to build collegial relationships and personal friendships with not-so-famous teachers. Among some wonderful pastors and priests like Joy, Sara, Paul, Dan, Todd and others, Jerry and Michael became close rabbi friends, as did Lee, a Zen Buddhist priest, and the Hindu monk, Vimukta. Macha, a Wiccan friend; Rich, a Franciscan; Matt, a Jesuit. Each one a teacher who encouraged my work and shared in compassionate ministry.

One of the great delights in serving for years as an

interfaith chaplain was the opportunity to draw insights from the full spectrum of wisdom teaching. In our chaplaincy with home-seeking people ("homeless"), we often took a vanload of people to the Green Gulch Zen Farm in Muir Beach. We quietly walked the beautiful land, ate lunch with the residents, and sat in the zendo (temple) with a priest. One Spring, I drove several unhoused individuals to a Buddhist retreat center to hear Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. I'll never forget his gentle smile, walking silently with him, or the mindful meditation he led while 2,000 of us ate apples.

I had been reading his books on meditation for years, sharing his call to mindful awareness through breathing with people I worked with in the jails, shelters and streets. For example, he wrote: "whatever we are doing, we pause for a moment and just enjoy our breathing" ("Peace is Every Step"). Thay—meaning "teacher" — offered us basic instructions for being more alive and better humans, especially in the midst of suffering. He presented a teaching I rarely heard, or hear, in other religious traditions or teachers of faith. With an emphasis on personal mindfulness, the intent was to be more awake in order to be more fully engaged with the world and the world's suffering. What if more faith teachers encouraged this healthy balance of personal contentment interwoven with community responsibility?

Thay passed away this month (January 2022) in a monastery in Vietnam. The announcement from his Plum Village community didn't dwell on grief, but stat-

ed: "With a deep mindful breath, we announce the passing of our beloved teacher, Thay Nhat Hanh." His sangha (congregation) remembers him as an "extraordinary teacher, whose peace, tender compassion, and bright wisdom has touched the lives of millions ... we can see that Thay has been a true bodhisattva, an immense force for peace and healing in the world. Thay has been a revolutionary, a renewer of Buddhism" To honor the man's life, the community calls us not to mourn so much as to be more alive: "Now is a moment to come back to our mindful breathing and walking, to generate the energy of peace, compassion, and gratitude to offer our beloved Teacher. It is a moment to take refuge in our spiritual friends, our local sanghas and community, and each other." It was beautiful to watch the memorial service online, hearing the bells and chanting, seeing his body placed in a coffin and covered with sandalwood.

I've been honored to learn from so many teachers, including jail inmates, unhoused persons, immigrants, persons with mental and physical disabilities and more who share their insights and wisdom. Sometimes I have to pay special attention, to listen harder and longer to hear. Sometimes it takes days or years of reflection before learning what I need to learn. Teachers like Thay remind us of this truth: returning to our breath is returning to our life, and there are always lessons present as we are present to our lives and the lives of others.

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The story I often tell of our wedding was in a sense a culmination of my Buddhist relationships. Being clergy ourselves, Carol (Presbyterian) and I (Humanist) were married in the zendo at Green Gulch by four women clergy, friends representing Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Wiccan traditions. While some family and friends were surprised by the location and radically inclusive ceremony, most joined in the joy of our celebration – a wonderful day of presence, with loving bows and breaths.

The life and teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh inspire these grateful expressions of mindful breathing and awakened engagement.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.