

First, a reading. At one time the Buddha was at Mala, and taught thus:

“..When a mountain stream overflows and becomes a torrent of floodwater carrying debris, a person who wants to get across might think, “what is the safest way to cross this floodwater?’ Assessing the situation, she may decide to gather branches and grasses, construct a raft, and use it to cross to the other side.

But, after arriving on the other side, she thinks, ‘I spent a lot of time and energy building this raft. It is a prized possession, and I will carry it with me as I continue my journey.’ If she puts it on her shoulders or head and carries it with her, do you think that would be intelligent?”

The monks replied, “No, World-Honored one.”

The Buddha said, “How could she have acted more wisely? She could have thought, ‘This raft helped me get across the water safely. Now I will leave it at the water’s edge for someone else to use in the same way.’ Wouldn’t that be a more intelligent thing to do?”

The monks replied, “Yes, World-Honored One.”

The Buddha taught, “I have given this teaching on the raft many times to remind you how necessary it is to let go of all the true teachings, not to mention teachings that are not true.”

Those of us who have only really been exposed to American Buddhism might be surprised to know that in eastern parts of the world, the tradition looks different than the Americanized version. Buddhism, like other traditions, is diverse, and shaped by its cultural context. And there is more than one major school of Buddhism: there is Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. There are also many kinds of Buddhism within each of these categories.

Generally speaking, Theravada relies on the Pali canon, texts written in the Pali language, which contain the Buddha’s earliest teachings and discourse. [A canon is a collection of texts that are accepted as authoritative.] Insight Meditation comes from Theravada. You’ve probably heard of it. Insight Meditation became popular in Myanmar and was brought to the US back in the 1960’s. Its focus is awakening, or enlightenment. Sharon Salzberg is a well-known American insight meditation teacher. I’m going to draw from her writings today.

Like Theravada, Mahayana Buddhism also relies on the Pali canon, but it also may include texts beyond that. Its focus is not just on personal awakening, but on cultivating Buddhahood for all sentient beings. Mahayana meditation practice often includes more chanting and mantras than Theravada. Zen Buddhism is one of the traditions that comes from Mahayana. Angel Kyodo Williams is a Zen Buddhist priest. I quoted her in the blurb describing today’s sermon.

The third school, Vajrayana is sometimes called tantric or esoteric Buddhism. Some consider it to be part of Mahayana, and some consider to be its own third category. Vajrayana includes Tibetan Buddhism, and the Dalai Lama.

Mia told us the story of how, about 2500 years ago, a prince named Siddhartha became the Buddha instead of a king. After his enlightenment, he spent 45-years crisscrossing the Ganges Plain in northern India, during which time he gave many profound teachings. But underlying them all were four noble truths:

1. There is suffering.
2. There is a cause of suffering.
3. There is an end to suffering.
4. The way out is the eightfold path.

Sometimes people have accused Buddhism of being pessimistic because of all this talk about suffering. But the Buddha wasn't saying that life is *all* suffering. He was saying that suffering exists. Life also involves happiness. But we do okay with happiness. Happiness does not send us scrambling for a religion to help us with our lives. Suffering is what we humans need help living with or resolving. We suffer, he taught, because of our relationship with impermanence. Everything changes. We can't make anything permanent, including our happiness. Trying to hang onto the things, people, and conditions that we enjoy leads to suffering, because everything changes eventually. Our very lives will pass away. When angel Kyodo Williams says, "What does it mean to be born into this life and be so bothered by it?" she is talking about the suffering that humans experience, simply because of the way we relate to our human condition: that we are mortal and live in a state of change. There is suffering, but the Buddha also taught that there is an end to it. The end to suffering can be found through the eightfold path. In its explanation of Buddhism for beginners, the Buddhist magazine Tricycle explains the eightfold path this way:

The path begins with **right view**, also called right understanding. We need to see clearly where we are headed before we begin. **Right intention** means the resolve to follow this path. **Right speech** and **right action** refer to what we say and do—to not harming other people or ourselves with our words and behavior. **Right livelihood** means how we live day to day, making sure our habits and our work don't cause harm to ourselves and others.

Right effort refers to focusing our energy on the task at hand. **Right mindfulness** means awareness of the mind and body ... With mindfulness, we might pause and consider whether what we are doing is harmful to ourselves or others. Finally, **right concentration** refers to dedicated practice, whether it is meditation or chanting. In other words, once we have directed our minds and lives toward awakening, we can proceed.ⁱ

Another important and very old teaching in Buddhism is that we should try the teachings out for ourselves and see if they ring true. The reading I started with is about letting go of teachings when they are no longer useful or are not true.

So, here we have a set of simple teachings, that can take a lifetime, or perhaps more than one lifetime, to fully flesh out and live into. We've got just a few minutes this morning. So

we can't cover much, but I can share a small part that I have found true and valuable in my own life. I invite you to consider it for yourself, and see if it's true for you, too. It has to do with the concept of faith, through a Buddhist lens. Sharon Salzberg writes that in Pali, the word for faith is "saddha," which means "to place the heart upon." To place the heart upon. Unlike faith as a suspension of reason, or as something you better have or else, in Buddhism it is a verb: to place the heart upon. We don't have faith, we faithe.

Faith begins by acknowledging that the nature of our lives and of the world is change. Everything is changing, passing away, leading into something else. This is true about the things that structure our days, about relationships, and about feelings. We may be cheerful in the morning, cranky in the afternoon, and pensive at night. (Of if you're me, cranky in the morning, pensive in the afternoon, and cheerful at night). We may feel spiritually fulfilled and at peace one moment, then tormented or alone the next. All that lies outside of us is also in flux. People and things come and go. Institutions rise and fall. Even the Sandia and Magdalena mountains are wearing away in the wind. Now—and this is important—what happens is when we cling to what was never permanent, we suffer and are not able to fully live. Buddhism observes that our attachment to what we cannot control and what is not permanent, is a major source of suffering. The answer is to practice nonattachment.

That can be challenging. I mentioned that I have studied Buddhism formally—graduate school—and informally—through self-study and practice. I learned to do pastoral care from Buddhist teachers. I've studied Buddhist scriptures. And yet, at first, I struggled to even understand this core principle.

I like my attachments, I thought. I am attached to the people I love. To my vocation. To poetry and music and pretty things. I thought letting go of attachments meant trying to not enjoy the people I love and the things I like, or that it meant caring about them less. And I thought, even if the objects of my love are mortal and life transient, and losing them will someday certainly cause me suffering, it's worth it because I love them so much. It seemed worth the risk. I was afraid that letting go of attachment would mean not loving life. That it would mean trying to be neutral toward life. But really, nothing could be further from the truth.

In Buddhism, being attached is not the same as loving someone or enjoying what is pleasurable. To love is to care deeply for someone. Enjoyment is a natural part of life. To be attached is to be unable to let go of something after it is gone. It is to cling to the illusion, the dream, of permanence. Attachment makes us unable to let go. When we are attached, instead of letting go, we may rage against the absence of the thing or person or status or ability we have lost. We may obsess over change, asking "Why me?" or even turn against ourselves, wondering what is wrong with us that this change has occurred. We may run again and again through daydreams of the ways we could have prevented the loss, and in the process of all this effort to stay attached, we are in tunnel vision mode. We don't see what else is happening around us, we only see the loss or our anger over it. This kind of attachment causes suffering. Faith is trusting in the change. It's letting go when it is time and staying present.

We can choose to stay present to our lives, to see the present moment and the larger picture in which we always knew change would unfold. This doesn't mean we don't feel sad or angry—those are appropriate feelings when we experience a loss. But we don't need to subject

ourselves to the suffering that comes from resisting reality and grasping at something we cannot hold onto. By accepting the reality of what is, even though we don't like it, we reduce our suffering and allow ourselves to be open to now. To the help, the peace, the sources of strength and courage that are available now, and to the transition we must make. Negative feelings pass over us like storm clouds—we don't try to hold onto them. It's hard but it's worth it. So that we don't miss the gifts that life also offers us if we would just pay attention.

It's easier if we've also been practicing nonattachment and presence in good times. But society and our own impulses conspire against us in this. Most of us keep ourselves in a constant state of distraction. Much of that is the pursuit of pleasure, or its inferior substitute, numbness. Again, it isn't that pleasure is bad. It's good. But the constant, distracting pursuit of it can also be a sneaky, destructive way of tuning out life. That has a way of catching up with us.

I think of the words of the mystic Rumi, who was Sufi, not Buddhist, but who wrote, "Sit down and be quiet. You are drunk and this is the edge of the roof." When we go through life depending on impermanent things for our sense of peace and stability, all the while at the brink, in any given moment, of an experience that will shatter our peace, it is as though we are drunk on an illusion, and we are standing at the edge of the roof. Faith (the verb) begins with awakening to this reality, and then... paying attention. Presence.

If that sounds too hard, here's one more thought. In Sharon Salzberg's telling of how the Buddha became who he was, when she gets to the part about the demon Mara attacking him, she shares a little more detail. She says Mara tried to distract Siddhartha with seductive visions and storms, and then frightening and disgusting images. [This is what happens when we get still and present a lot of the time, right? It's another reason for staying distracted. Bad stuff comes up if we're too quiet.] But Siddhartha persisted. Then Mara tried to shake Siddhartha by challenging his worthiness. Mara asked him, basically, "Who do you think you are to be sitting there with that immense aspiration? What makes you think you can actually be enlightened?" In response, the Buddha reached down and touched the earth with his hand, "asking it to bear witness to all the lifetimes in which he had practiced generosity and morality, lovingkindness and wisdom. He asked the earth to bear witness to his right to be sitting there, his right to aspire to full understanding and infinite compassion." With that, Mara was defeated.

It is significant, Salzberg writes, that Mara attacked Siddhartha's sense of worth. How many of us see great spiritual teachers and think, I could never be like that? I'm not wise enough.

But you do not have to be a Buddha to be present to your life,
to find out what it is you can place your heart upon,
to grow in faith.

That is the wisdom of Buddhism, and that is my prayer for you today.

ⁱ <https://tricycle.org/beginners/buddhism/eightfold-path/>