

"Everyday Spiritual Practices"  
The Reverend Kent C. Matthies  
Sermon delivered September 15, 2002

### My Buddhist Retreat

At one time I worked with a dear friend, Larry, who was a Buddhist UnitarianUniversalist. In his early retirement Larry sat in quiet three times a day for extended periods of time. At least every other month Larry would go on a weekend or week-long silent retreat. He would come back to church and rave about the challenging, centering and rewarding aspects of these experiences. I was impressed and would say, "Larry that sounds really interesting. I would love to check out one of the retreats with you some day."

Larry would say to me, "Kent what you need to do first is begin sitting in silence for 10 or 15 minutes per day. You need to work your way up to at least an hour of meditation before thinking about a retreat which lasts an entire weekend." I would say "Oh yeah Larry you're right, I know what your saying, I should get into it a little bit before I dive in head first." For years, I had spent five minutes of quiet time in the morning to center myself. But I never followed Larry's advice of increasing my meditation time. I thought I didn't have more time to spend quietly in the morning and that when the time for the retreat arrived, somehow I could get by.

Finally, Larry and I picked a weekend to go to a silent Buddhist retreat in West Virginia. So we were driving up there and I had just finished what seemed like ten million tasks in order to be able to leave the office and I was settling into the idea of going to this retreat. I said "Larry I am really looking forward to the meals this weekend. What time is dinner tonight?" Larry said "I told you they don't eat dinner at this monastery." I said "What?" He said, "I told you they eat breakfast at 7 a.m. and lunch at 11 a.m. And then they only drink tea and water for the rest of the day." Now this got me nervous, because I like my meals.

We actually got there in time for the delicious 11 a.m. vegetarian lunch. It was a bit odd eating in silence but I was OK. But by late afternoon I was starting to feel the challenge and the discomfort. When I was ready for dinner we had tea in silence. I was looking around for a cracker or a piece of bread with no luck. Then the program began. The head monk had us all sit like pretzels on tiny little pillows while he did a two-hour guided meditation. My stomach may have spoken more than the head monk during those two hours. I was sweating and really embarrassed about the noises coming from down there. By the end of that time I had decided this was not for me. I had hoped for some rest and relaxation on this retreat. I didn't want to return home starving and in pain.

Earlier in the day I had identified a very kind-looking monk. I approached him at 9:30 at night and asked his permission to speak. "I am a bit embarrassed to say this, but I have some things going on back at home. I think I came too early to this middle level retreat, and I think that I need to go home." He asked me a few questions to make sure I was

okay and said I could go. Ten minutes later I approached Larry in the dead silence of our dormitory and said, "Larry I asked one of the monks for permission to talk with you and he said okay. I have two things to tell you. First, I love you very much. Second, I gotta get the hell out of here. I am going back to DC tonight. The monk said he would find you a ride. I'm really sorry." Soon after, I was driving my car in the pitchblack of the West Virginia woods trying with the monk's directions to get back to the highway. I remembered there was a McDonalds up the road and I was determined to find that place. At ten minutes before eleven I ran to the counter and asked, "Are you still open?" She said "Yes." "Do you have any double cheeseburger meals?" She said "Yes." I said "YES! You don't know how happy that makes me. Give me one please, and super size it!" On the way home eating my cheeseburgers and fries I sang the old slave spiritual, Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom.

### Every Day Spiritual Practices

After hearing this story you might ask "Why is this guy the one preaching on everyday spiritual practices today? Isn't there anybody a little more qualified on this topic? And what are everyday spiritual practices anyway and why are we spending time on them at all?" In his book Scott Alexander writes "A spiritual practice is any regular, intentional activity that serves to significantly deepen the quality and content of your relationship with the miracle of life." If you have problems with the word spirituality, take it right out of the equation. Hopefully we can agree that when we are trying to be healthy and happy we may be helped by "regular, intentional activities that serve to significantly deepen the quality and content of our relationship with the miracle of life."

These practices can include, but are not limited to, quilting, needlework, knitting, painting, sculpture, drawing, biking, running, walking, writing in a journal, prayer, meditation, raking the yard, painting the house, putting up wallpaper, martial arts, yoga, gardening, cooking or washing the dishes. Many of you engage in at least some of these practices and you have more of your own regular disciplines which keep you sane in moments of stress. When we immerse ourselves in these activities, give ourselves over to them, engage in them with focus and mindfulness, they are often quite renewing physically, emotionally and spiritually.

As we just passed the painful first anniversary of September 11th, our country debates about protecting ourselves going deeper into war, and the economy struggles. Many of us feel stress. Around these issues and others many of us have feelings of fear, frustration, powerlessness, moodiness and irritability. Now, more than ever, we need our tools and activities which can stabilize us and bring us back to center.

Even without the stresses of war or economic insecurity the fall generally is a very busy time of the year. The church and school years crank up with all the extra activities involved and we often find our calendars more booked than we would wish. Many of our congregational leaders are carrying heavy loads of tasks and duties. In our busyness we can feel an emotional void. We are living in a society, which frequently encourages us to

want more and better: more money, better jobs, better clothes, houses and cars. In the midst of the big race for more, we can benefit from slowing down, exploring new and recommitting to established disciplines of self-care.

### Reconnecting with Our Bodies

There are so many good reasons for engaging in regular spiritual practices. This morning I offer three reasons to take time out to care for ourselves. First, our bodies, minds and spirits are intricately linked. Everyday spiritual practices allow us a more holistic approach to recognizing these connections in our lives. Plato and Aristotle were some of the first and best known people to articulate what has become known as Cartesian dualism, which believes in a dichotomy between the physical/material realm and the realm of mind and spirit. Today, we can perhaps see this emphasis on the mind in the amount of time people spend watching TV and surfing the internet while completely disregarding their bodies. Another common area of complaint about this type of dualistic thinking comes against "western medicine", which at times focuses too much on the body and not enough on the spirit. The fashion industry often puts emphasis on body shape.

One of the quickest and most tangible ways to identify the connections between body, mind, spirit happens when we are stressed out. You feel it in the body. Working the body, with a spiritual practice, often helps us to focus on the moment, relax and feel better emotionally.

Growing up we all teased my dad because he was such a hard worker. He often worked two jobs and then came home to work on the house. Now that I am in adulthood I see that my father's passion for washing the cars, mowing the lawn, and painting one side of the house every year are key elements of how he keeps himself physically and mentally fit. If he is feeling trapped in some emotional issues my father loses himself in his physical work. By throwing himself into the tasks he comes out emotionally feeling he has accomplished something productive for himself and others.

### Creative Invigoration

My second reason in support of everyday spiritual practices is that they often unleash creativity, which provides some of the most renewing energy known to humankind. Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Weiman believed that "human existence is distinguished from every other kind of existence by a creativity....In connection with this creative capacity, humans are also explorers, dreamers, and symbol makers who are not satisfied with existence in which we find ourselves.....To be most fully human is to be creative."

In my last job before seminary we were required every two months to attend meetings, which lasted three to four days in a row. For many of us it was not only challenging to remain alert and productive throughout the eight to ten hour days, but some of us could barely sit there without looking like we were going to fall over. A couple of people took

up the creative practice of knitting in the meetings. This became a contagious way to pass the time. Soon about eight out of eighteen people were using their long needles and beautifully dyed wool yarn to create sweaters, scarves and socks. It seems the knitting brought a calming cadence and focus to all of our minds.

Although I benefited from the group knitting it wasn't for me personally. And you already know that long periods of meditation have not been my strength either. But with the help of others, we each have the ability to discern our own interests and passions for daily practices. Over the years, exercise, dance, basketball and prayer have developed as my regular activities. Currently I am experimenting as a beginner with weekly yoga. We can all encourage and support each other in creatively walking our own paths.

Blessed is the person who knows the spiritual benefits of cooking. Family and friends are better off when they share ways to creatively prepare nourishing and tasteful meals. Crushing a clove of garlic with your thumb on a counter and then slicing the bulb, slicing onions, chopping celery, simmering a pot of tomatoes and beans, kneading bread, or pouring the fresh ingredients into the ice cream machine--these are all activities that improve our connections with the miracles of life.

All kinds of artists are finding that a return to their craft is exactly what their souls need in the aftermath of September 11th. As pointed out in the reading from Barbara Davenport, people who regularly create through knitting, cooking and gardening often find these practices help them to feel connected to the earth, find deeper generosity, give them more patience and bring a more exciting sense of wonder and awe for the world.

### Preparing for Life

My third category of endorsement for regular spiritual practices is that these activities allow us to feel more centered, fit and prepared to live life to the fullest. We are all well versed in the excuses we and others give as to why we can't commit to regular practices. The primary reason given is often busyness. It seems that now more than ever people are extremely occupied with work, family and community obligations. It feels as though we run from one volunteer activity, to work, to be with our family and loved ones, to run errands-- we hurry through meals and to bed and then we start all over again. Because we have so many obligations, many feel it impossible or overly selfish to take time for ourselves.

We often feel that if we take forty-five minutes for the capricious activities of going for a walk in the woods, we won't finish all of our necessary tasks. The paradox is that when we do take the time to take the walk we are often much more invigorated and capable when returning to the rest of our lives. When we engage our bodies the brain releases chemicals (endorphins), which are designed to make us feel good. We are often much more pleasant to be around after we take care of ourselves.

Gandhi believed very strongly in exercise. When advisors, politicians, admirers and friends wanted to be with him during his exercise time they would have to almost run

after the skinny little man as he set a very quick pace. Franklin/Covey, the nationally renowned business and time management consultant, calls it "sharpening your saw." If you don't sharpen your saw every day you won't be very efficient in the cutting you have before you. If Gandhi wasn't too busy to take a long walk every day while serving as the leader in bringing down the British Empire in India, are we too busy for spiritual disciplines in our own daily lives? When we go through stress, anger and sadness, slowly returning to our daily practices increases our ability to step back from problems and to gain perspective. We can even gain calm, peace and joy.

These practices do not have to be alone or individualistic. We can cook, garden, clean house, and take walks together as families. With mindfulness, families can teach each other about productive and happy living. As I begin to watch all the wonderful parenting which takes place in this community I am grateful to learn from you about deepening the quality of life.

### Conclusion

Let's not allow society to fool us into thinking we have to be professional athletes in order to benefit from physical, daily disciplines. Let's not fool ourselves into thinking we have to be able to spend an entire weekend retreat in silence in order to spend five to fifteen minutes of silence. By intentionally engaging in a variety of realistic activities we can increase the simplicity and joy in our lives.

In our activities we might cultivate a gorgeous plum tree, which bears delicious treats for our own consumption. As co-creators in life we may also create gifts for others whom we will never know.

- copyright 2002, Kent Matthies