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Cultivating Grace: Ease and Irrational Joy

Contemplation

Atiśa was born a prince in Bengali, India in 980 CE. As a young man he renounced his royal prerogatives for the spiritual path. He trained with over 150 of the best teachers from Indonesia to Tibet.

Unitarian Universalists can appreciate that he was not wedded to any one path. He looked for common elements in the Buddhist, Hindu, and other traditions of his time. He summarized these in seven points for training the mind-heart.

For our contemplation this morning, I'd like to slowly read each of these seven. There's no need to ponder or analyze them.

Some may brush past you with little impact. Others may stir depths. Just notice what they evoke.

I invite you to close your eyes, relax, smile, and see what these bring up in you.

- Consider all phenomena to be dreams.
- Don't be swayed by outer circumstances.
- Be grateful to everyone.
- Don't brood over the faults of others.
- Explore the nature of unborn awareness.
- At all times simply rely on a joyful mind.
- Don't expect a standing ovation.

Sermon

My boys were teenagers when video games were becoming the big thing. Wanting to be an engaged father, I joined them. Since I got killed quickly, they didn't mind giving me a turn.

The game I enjoyed most was Zelda. In it I became an elfish little guy sporting a green hat, green pants, and a sword that looked like a sharpened butter knife. For some reason, the king called on diminutive me to rescue his Princess Zelda from the archfiend Ganon.

The quest took me out of my pastoral village into a vast realm of many lands, mountains, plains, villages, cities, wizards, peasants, monsters, fairies, a magical relic called the Triforce that held it all together, and much more. As I traveled, I learned the ways of this world—its people, rules, laws, customs, and values. I gathered weapons, wealth, and wisdom and grew into a powerful adult. After many months—it felt

like a lifetime—I accumulated enough talent, strength, and thumb dexterity to defeat the evil Ganon, save the princess, and return home proud and victorious. The king threw a party. My sons patted me on the back.

This morning is the last sermon in a series of four on cultivating grace. Cultivating grace is the opposite of winning a video game. Rather than defeating the bad guys and earning a reward, cultivating grace is about learning to enjoy what life has already given. We don't have to search far away lands or beat up monsters; we just need to ease into the joy that's around us waiting quietly to be noticed.

This is also the last sermon in a series of over 300 I've offered over the last 13 years. Tomorrow I'll disappear to give you space to decide upon and settle in with your new leadership, rediscover your collective identity without me, and notice anew the

grace you are for each other. This morning is the last I'll speak to you as your minister

It's a poignant hour for me.

Some of you have encouraged me to say something moving and inspiring to guide you into the future, like a philosophical Roy Rogers waving farewell from atop Trigger, his trusty golden palomino. Perhaps I could elaborate for an hour on each of Atiśa's seven-points for training for the mind-heart.

Instead I'll merely introduce you to them and reflect on what they have to do with ease and irrational joy.

I use the contraction "mind-heart" to refer to qualities we often think of as separate or even opposing: mind versus heart. Yet the word "thoughtful" describes someone who has heart qualities: kindness and compassionate. And the word "caring" refers to mind qualities: considerate and thoughtful.

So mind-heart refers to awareness that is clear, present, penetrating, loving, kind, courageous, and humble at the same time. Atiśa was showing us how to rediscover this intelligent caring that is always with us even when we have forgotten it.

Dream

His first point for opening the mind-heart is: "Consider all phenomena to be dreams." I doubt Atiśa ever played Zelda. But if he had, he might have made this point differently: "Please remember, life is not a video game."

Video games create their own dream worlds, each with it's own rules, laws, values, and ways of defining success and humiliation. The more we engage these worlds, the more real they become to us. As we push buttons and watch creature move across a screen we can become intrigued, frightened, elated, discouraged, angry, triumphant, and entranced.

The faculty that allows us to identify with caricatures on a screen also allows us

to identify with the thoughts in our minds. Atiśa might say, "It's as if people walk around with their minds in an inner video game. Most people believe their thoughts are real."

Isn't it amazing how many people believe their thoughts? Imagine this: picture a thousand pound boulder floating gently in the air over your head. Can you see it?

This is easy to do in video games and easier to do in our minds. But please don't try it in the real world. Why would anyone trust their thoughts to tell them what's real, much less what's safe?

To be clear, there is a real world. Atiśa just says the world most people think they see is shaped more by their interpretations than by reality itself.

This is tragic because we don't all play the same games. Democrats play different games than Republicans. Some people think government is a magical Triforce holding the world together and making people play fair. Others think government is the evil Ganon to be defeated. Catholics have a different game plans than Buddhists. Mystics and Mafioso, philanthropists and truck drivers, Unitarian Universalists and Fundamentalists, pro-choice and pro-life don't see the same world or play by the same values. This creates so much unnecessary suffering.

It's easy to see that others are in a dream state. It's easy to see the flaws in their games. But it's difficult to see the flaws in our own.

Consider the statement: "We must be kind to children." Do you agree?

This statement exists in our minds but not in reality. In the real world, all of us are unkind to children at times – some more than others. In the real world, there is no rule that says we must be kind.

"Well," we think, "Be kind or pay the price. God will punish you. You'll be reborn as a cockroach. Your life will be miserable."

That may be true in some people's minds. But in the real world? We don't really know what happens after death. We don't know if Hitler was reborn as a stinkbug. We *do* know some unkind people seem happy with their lives.

If we wake up out of our mind-dream and see people getting away with hurting children, we may feel angry, sad, scared, compassionate, cynical, or some mixture of all of these. We feel more.

Mind rules insulate us from feeling the reality of suffering around us. Artificial rules allow us to feel superior as we chastise an offender or feel smug as we think, "They'll get what's coming to them. Just wait and see."

Without the video games in our minds, without made-up rules and lists of rights and wrongs, life is raw. It's more immediate. It's more real. We're touched more deeply for better or worse.

When Atiša says, "Consider all phenomena to be dreams," he's not encouraging us to upgrade to the latest 3D software. He's encouraging us to get out of the game altogether. Wake up.

Outer Circumstances

This brings us to Atiša's second point: "Don't be swayed by outer circumstances," or "Don't be taken in by appearances." Don't be fooled by a casual glance. Slow down, take a closer look, open your mind, heart, and intuition.

If we don't we can make irreversible mistakes. Poorly chosen words or ill begotten deeds can't be erased.

In video games, they can be erased. In fact most video games support reincarnation: no matter how many times we die, we can always start over.

In real life, we can never start over. We can make amends. We work toward forgiveness and reconciliation. Love can soothe wounds. We can change direction and head off on a different path.

But the new path begins from where we are now, not from where we were before the mistake. In the real world we can't go back in time.

So part of the heart-mind training is to keep awareness alive, open, and subtle so we live with more mindfulness and heartfulness.

How do we become more sensitive and mindful?

Unborn Awareness

This brings us to another of Atiša's points: "Explore the nature of unborn awareness." "Unborn awareness" means awareness uncluttered by thought – raw perceptions before it's labeled, categorized, or turned into rules.

In video games we can accumulate a lot. In *Zelda I* found four swords, three helmets, five shields, dozens of potions, ten bottles of medicine, two hundred pounds of gold, and three weeks of food and could carry them all easily without so much as a backpack.

In real life, the more we carry, the more we plod. Ideas and rules can be a weighty burden: we all know people weighed down by voluminous opinions or who drive around with a garbage truck full of expert opinions. We might even feel sorry for them if they weren't so irritating.

Zen Master Suzuki Roshi famously said, "In the beginner's mind are many possibilities. In the expert's mind there are few." So "explore the nature of unborn awareness" means taking our opinions and ourselves lightly.

Joyful Mind

As the uncluttered mind becomes relaxed and serene, a joy arises quietly. This brings us to another of Atiša's points: "At all times simply rely on a joyful mind."

We've seen that rules are not reliable. Rules are clunky; life is nuanced. Rules are

small; life is big. Having lots of rules is like living in a reality TV show.

We've seen that thought is not reliable unless we don't mind having a boulder fall on our head.

What can we rely on to guide us?

Atiśa says we can always rely on joy. He's not referring to the bouncy joy of a party or carnival ride. It's the quiet joy of gazing at the Milky Way or sitting by the ocean at dusk.

A pervasive joy arises out of relaxed, unborn awareness. It's part of the natural mind-heart. It's an irrational joy: there's no reason for it. It just is. It's the best kind.

I ran into an old friend the other day. "How you doing?" I asked.

"Great," she said sincerely.

"How come?" I asked.

"No reason," she said.

"That's the best reason," I responded.

We all touch that irrational joy at times, if only fleetingly. The feel of it is a great guide for living.

Let's try it now. Let your eyes rest and body soften. Relax. Allow the corners of your mouth to rise slightly...

Can you feel the mind-heart lighten, brighten, and clear a little? ...

If we want to live satisfying lives, this quiet, ever-present, ease and irrational joy are a advisor: "Always rely on a joyful mind-heart."

Practical

Atiśa's points have practical implications. One is to not make important decisions when we're angry, worried, or tired.

When we're stressed, we fall back into old patterns, old programming, old reality TV reruns. Conversely, when we're relaxed, the mind-heart becomes creative and able to see beyond our own policies.

This congregation will be doing interesting things in the next few years: the building project and ministerial transition are the most obvious. It's inevitable that surprises will visit from time to time. You'll have important choices to make collectively. "Rely on a joyful mind-heart."

When we're uptight we're stupider. We function out of our reptile brains more than our higher neocortex. We operate with less wisdom.

If the congregation feels anxious about something, it's important to give it time, talk to each other, soften, relax. Be thoughtful and caring. This congregation has been around 145 years. Taking a little more time to make a good decision won't hurt. Making a worry-laden decision could hurt.

When considering your own family, I'd say the same thing. When considering your individual life, I'd say the same thing: whenever possible, wait until awareness is light and expansive before committing to a course of action.

"At all times simply rely on a joyful mind."

Gratitude

This is so important that Atiśa says it in different ways. For example: "Be grateful to everyone."

Most video games have good guys and bad guys. In the real world, not so. There's nobody down here but us chickens. Some of us are more confused than others, to be sure. But don't equate confusion with evil. Be grateful to everyone.

Brooding

Atiśa restates another way: "Don't brood over the faults of others." Oh how we love to brood over the faults of others. It's a waste of your lovely energy.

Judgment of fault is based on a set of rules. Brooding over people breaking our rules is just a way of covering the

tenderness in our own hearts and defending against feelings.

Closure

I could spend hours on Atísa. It's tempting: it would be an excuse to linger a little longer.

But all things end. So I'll leave you with this introduction and invite to contemplate these as you feel drawn.

Meanwhile let's seek closure.

In the spring of 2000 I was considering serving three congregations.

A few years earlier, one of them had gone to two services. In 2000 both services overflowed. A few members gave the church land to build a larger facility or to sell and pay for expanding the current building. There were deep pockets. The only thing keeping them from leaping forward was settling a new minister. I was a candidate.

Another congregation had just completed a new building: a beautiful geodesic dome with hardwood floors and picture windows looking into a wooded glen. I was their top candidate.

And a third congregation had just fired their minister. Brouhahas had spawned a reputation for being prickly and contentious. I was a candidate for their ministry as well.

The outer circumstances of this last one gave me pause – but didn't sway me. My thoughts warned me away from Sacramento, but the joyful mind felt something unusual here:

In the midst of controversies, in the midst of passions about what was best, when confronted with Ganon or some other archenemy, when brooding over the faults

of others, when threatened by opinions likely to bring disaster to the known world, there was a place in you that knew it was all just a video game.

When those you were fighting showed signs of distress, your game dissolved. Your values shifted. You stopped your crusade so you could tend to the heart of your worn brother or sister. You were grateful to them.

This showed deep wisdom – perhaps not clearly articulated but nevertheless lovingly enacted.

The quiet, unborn awareness in me said, "I like these people. I could grow old with them."

So I accepted your invitation and joined you. I shudder to think I ever considered otherwise. It's the longest I've worked in one job. It's been a good run.

Over the years I'm sure I've gotten caught in my own rules more than I know. I am a Taurus after all. For the strain this caused, I humbly apologize. To your patience and heart, I gratefully bow.

I don't have a trusty golden palomino to climb upon or a Stetson hat to wave farewell. But soon I'll have a new bicycle and helmet to head out along the American River. Thank you so much.

And I do have a wish to leave with you.

I hope you will remember who you are. Don't expect a standing ovation – when wisdom is deep and kind it doesn't draw attention to itself. Nevertheless, people will feel it without knowing from whence it came.

You can trust your heart and the joy within it. Rely on a joyful mind. Remember who you are.

Namaste. I bow to the light within you.