

High Feasts & Holy Days

Lesson 4: Nirvana Day

2.26.2017

Objectives: Explore Nirvana Day and its Buddhist teachings about impermanence.

Materials: flipchart, colored sand/spoons/trays, broom and dust pan, lesson attachments.

Time allotments suggested and meant to be adapted for **75 minute class**.

1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins)

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ What’s one thing you’d do today if you knew you were going to die tomorrow??
 - ▶ From your most recent worship (likely Story Sunday, Feb. 12), what’s one thing that you remember as interesting or meaningful?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.
- **Please take a few minutes to invite reflections from youth about their recent worship experience. Use copies of worship programs as helpful reminder.**

2. Silly Fun: Tree Pose (5 minutes max)

We say that Unity is a place where people lead lives of integrity, service, and joy. We say that at church we find and keep our balance. So in the spirit of yoga.... who can stand on one leg the longest, in a tree pose, *with their eyes closed?!?!*



3. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: *“We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”*

Teacher reads: (from various sages and mystics, on the impermanence of life)

“In the end, everything we love will be taken from us – people, places, possessions. And the only permanence we will ever know is the permanence of love.”

4. Joys and Sorrows (10 minutes): Listening is a precious gift that we offer one another at church. Using the balance scale and the blue (sorrows) and yellow (joys) stones, invite youth to share a joy and/or a sorrow from the past week, as a way of meeting one

another with our lives and *sharing* in community. You will want to set limits (e.g. two stones max per person) so that no one monopolizes sharing time.

Each Sunday, a copy of the congregation's Embracing Meditation will be made available to your class, so that stones can be put in for those whose names are being spoken in the Sanctuary.

5. Buddhist Teaching on Nirvana (15 minutes)

Teacher talk: *What do we already know about the Buddhist understanding of nirvana?*

- On a flipchart, write down what youth feel they already know about this spiritual goal in Buddhism, and what message/meaning it may have for human beings.
- Share this background information for understanding nirvana (may be challenging!):
 - In Buddhist thought, *nirvana* refers to an awakening, or enlightenment, or realization that frees us from the cycle of delusion and suffering. In closely observing the compounded nature of everything, the Buddha realized that nothing exists independently but in utter dependence on everything else:

For example, there is no such a *thing* as “cake” that is independent of eggs, milk, flour, oil, heat, time, humidity, baker, recipe, language that calls it “cake,” taste buds that help identify it as cake, gravity of the earth that allows all this to work, etc. And each of those ingredients (such as an egg) itself depends on an endless list of interdependencies, until finally, there are no separate *things* but endless interdependencies upon interdependencies that change from one impermanent form into another impermanent form.
 - In the same manner, what is death? Or birth? Or self? (In Buddhist thought, there are no individuals, just persons. If this is challenging stuff, consider taking the RE class on East Asian Religions when it's offered!)
 - Awakening to *interdependence* (a Buddhist word) may be an awakening to *love* (a word used by other religious traditions).

6. Nirvana Day or Parinirvana Day: Introduction (5 minutes)

Teacher summarizes: Nirvana Day (or Parinirvana Day, meaning *complete* enlightenment upon the death of his physical body) commemorates the Buddha's death at the age of 80, celebrated in some countries on Feb. 8 but most on Feb. 15. Rather than being a sad occasion, the holy day celebrates the Buddha's attainment of Enlightenment/Nirvana before dying. Typically, the day is spent in meditative activities at the local temple and visiting people, bringing food and gifts and rereading the accounts of the Buddha's last days.

We'll do a few things today in honor of Nirvana Day:

- Read aloud excerpts from the *Parinirvana Sutra*, the scriptures of the Buddha's final days.
- Create sand mandalas, Buddhist meditative art forms that remind us of the impermanence and changing nature of all things.

7. Reading from the *Parinirvana Sutra* (20 minutes)

Read the attached sutra “popcorn style.” Youth volunteer to read a section at a time, with sections designated by the Buddhist symbol of the Dharma Wheel. *Reading of any sacred scriptures should be done with respect*, as these words are holy to Buddhists.

Helpful reading notes:

- Buddha is also referred to as *The Happy One, The Enlightened One, The Master, The Tathagatha* (meaning “one who has thus gone/come”).
- The word for monk is *bhikkhu*.
- Ananda was the Buddha's attendant, cousin, and disciple known for his incredible memory (and so writings were attributed to him).

Questions for Discussion:

- What details are mentioned that point to impermanence as an unavoidable truth of existence? (e.g. flowering of trees, flowing stream, birth/death, funeral pyre, thunder, etc.)
- The Sutra states, “Impermanent are all compounded things.” An onion may be a helpful example of a compounded thing, one layer upon another layer, as one peels away toward the core. What is at the core? Nothing? Or does it hold the vast sky?

8. Sand mandalas (20 minutes)

Hand out copies of paper patterns for sand *mandalas* (from Sanskrit, meaning “circle”). Group youth into pairs or fours, and give them spoons and colored sand. Encourage groups to share and swap colors. Fill in the mandala patterns on the paper. As a challenge, see if youth can work mindfully in silence (either for the entire time or for the first 10 minutes.) At the end of the class, each group deconstructs their mandala:

- Say the words, “All things are impermanent and subject to change.”
- Taking turns, each youth uses one finger to gently brush away the sand from the mandala.
- Use broom/brush and dust pan to deposit sand in trash basket.

9. Say goodbye until next time: Extinguish the chalice, saying together:

“*May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.*”

10. Help clean up classroom before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- return blue/yellow stones to containers
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheet