# Courage and Trust In Our Path

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 57:44

When I was thinking about what I wanted to talk about tonight, I kept finding my mind going in two different directions. I wanted to talk about two things, but they're like opposites—complete opposites of each other. How could I put them together? Then when I was sitting this morning, I had a revelation: this is one of the many paradoxes of the Dhamma. They totally belong together; they just seemed like complete opposites to me.

What I want to talk about really is what I call undaunted courage—not fearing freedom, the sense of the vastness of the path and the totality of our commitment that's called up again and again and again. And this motivation that is called up is absolute non-clinging. How to have total commitment and motivation without any striving or clinging. That's the paradox, but that's our path. I'll share my thoughts, but basically you have to figure it out for yourself. This is one of those talks where I'm actually talking to myself as much as I'm sharing with you all.

We've talked about the Four Noble Truths, and really the fact that the path is vast, is profound. It encompasses every aspect of our life. There's nothing left out if we're really seriously taking this path to heart. When we talk about what the Buddha talked about—the third noble truth, the ending of suffering—one would think that is why we enter in and what inspires us to keep going on the path. But here's where it gets interesting: Is that really something that is an inspiration, a motivation for each of us?

It's talked about in different ways. I'm not going to give a whole talk on that, but sometimes it's described as the sense of the heart and mind completely freed from greed, hatred, and delusion. Or the deathless, the unconditioned. Or as the Buddha often said, the mind of non-clinging. Absolutely nothing is worth clinging to. Nothing can be clung to. "One who knows that nothing is to be clung to directly knows everything"—that's a quotation from a sutta.

So with this, does one's mind open to that as a possibility? Sayadaw U Pandita, who was a very strict teacher, very embedded in the Burmese Theravada modality of the scriptures and the commentaries—he used to talk about a moment of pure mindfulness, real presence of mind, free from kilesa, free from the torments of greed, hatred, and delusion. He would call a moment of mindfulness a moment of freedom. And then there's the idea that absolute freedom is the complete liberation of a heart and mind where greed, hatred, and delusion no longer arise. But even a moment of freedom from clinging, from greed, hatred, and delusion—a moment of mindfulness, a moment of freedom—this is something that's accessible to all of us.

What the Buddha was saying, really, in terms of the vastness of this path and what it calls out of us—it

calls out commitment, it calls out everything. But at the same time, as Ajahn Buddhadasa was saying (he was a Thai forest monk who died in the late 1990s), in a talk he gave to Thai people that's now well known in the West because it was translated by Bhikkhu Santikaro, he speaks about Nibbāna for everyone. That's what he's really saying: Nibbāna is for everyone. That's what the Buddha said. "If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so. But it is possible, so I ask you to do so." Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as me or mine. It's like a clarion call.

We start out thinking, "Oh, be nice, maybe I'll get rid of some stress." And we find we're moving into a whole other depth and direction that we may not have had any idea of when we first started. I find this potential of cultivation of the heart-mind both deeply, deeply inspiring, really motivating, and also at times—depending on the mind state—extremely daunting, extremely challenging.

Freedom from clinging—yeah, I got that one down. We're headed that way. You know, you've been here just about a month now. You're getting adrift, right? It's not quite so straightforward, right?

So this actually really motivates and inspires me to think of the uncompromising way that the Buddha spoke and shared his awakening, and that this is possible for us. In this motivation, the Buddha never lost sight of two things in his practice: not to shrink away from the struggle, and not to rest contented merely with wholesome states of mind. So here we're in the "don't shrink back from the struggle." And the next I'll get to with absolute non-clinging.

Don't shrink from the struggle. This is the paradox.

What I find really interesting in my own practice, in my own life—because practice is our life, it's not just the retreat—and in talking to so many people over so many years, I see it again here. Four weeks into practice, you're all in different places. Each person's particular path is unique, even though the processes and the truth of things are the same. Each person's process is unique. But everybody is really in there, going through so much stuff.

From now on, you're probably getting a sense of the sine waves of practice. It's not that you're doing something wrong, that it keeps going up and down and up and down. People come in and say, "Well, what's going on?" And now people say, "Well, I don't know. I don't know what to say. What was happening yesterday—well, that's over. I don't know. Yesterday was incredible, but today it's horrible. I don't know what's going on." And I think, great. You're really here now. This is really dying into the practice. This is what's happening.

And so you can see, sometimes you're seeing a lot. There may be a lot of insight into particular personality patterns, difficult or suffering personality patterns. You may be noticing more and more wholesome states arising—the Brahma Viharas, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom. You may be seeing different aspects of the three characteristics. And it doesn't just come up in neon lights: "Now you're getting an insight into impermanence." It kind of slowly seeps in. Sometimes you get a hit, but it's kind of slowly seeping in. The

fact that you start to notice you've had fifty-two emotions in the last three hours—"What's the matter with me?" Nothing. It's not you. This is impermanence. Just sit back and let it roll.

So sometimes we're really having a lot of insight. And we think, even if we try not to, back there we go, right—yeah, it's clicking. This is how it's supposed to be. And then, right, then either... "I understand impermanence now. I've got it. That's in the bag, right?" We all know this. "I don't have to go further with it."

The next day, a mental state comes up and you're like, "This is how I've been my whole life." Every memory that comes up is from that mental state. "This is how I'm going to be the rest of my life. It's completely hopeless." You come in, the teacher points it out, and you kind of nod and go, "Yeah." But you walk out and go, "What do they know? I know. This is how it is."

And then at some point we wonder, but what's the point? I'm going through all this. I see it so clearly. And all this stuff comes back, at least as strong as before, if not stronger. What am I doing here? What are they talking about? This doesn't make any sense. And I could be watching the baseball game.

A friend on staff was just saying, should I go to Joseph's group? Should I go to Carol's talk? Should I go home and watch the baseball game? I said, this could be your night to get enlightened. He said, you think I could get enlightened watching, rooting against the Yankees with aversion in my mind? Slim chances are slim.

This is a moment of our life. What we all have is sometimes you think, I'm going for the baseball game because what's the point anyway? I could sit on the cushion and watch aversion, or I could watch something enjoyable and feed aversion. Either way, you know.

Okay, I'm not advocating that. But we start to really see. It gets hard to trust. And this is just normal. Honestly, this is normal. This is how it is for all of us.

But what gets interesting to me, the piece I want to talk about, is the vastness, the uncompromising nature of our commitment—which of course you can't make a commitment and have it stay; it's coming and going all the time. Our understanding of what we're doing deepens as wisdom grows. Our motivation ebbs and flows, comes from different places. Aspiration may change.

So sometimes over periods of practice—and this is a good long chunk of four weeks—I want to talk a little bit about what I call times of hitting the wall. And I don't mean hitting the wall where it's just really difficult and hard to be with, as Jill was speaking about last night. No, that feels like hitting a wall, but you're still practicing with it. That's not what I mean. That's part of it. But there are times when, for different reasons, something happens and it may shake not just doubt as a hindrance, but it may shake your sense of motivation or sense of purpose. Sometimes people say, "Oh, if awakening includes this, maybe I didn't really want it," kind of thing. And it's poignant. It's just a passing thing.

But I want to highlight a few of these because I think it happens to most of us at some point, where you feel a little shaken. The kind of thing where you're just in a mind state, looking back over years of practice, and you think, I've been practicing for X number of years and this is what's going on. This hindrance is still taking over and I believe it. And it's not just that momentary, normal aversion, but somehow deeper in that moment.

I want to pinpoint a few of these because I think they're fascinating and important to recognize, to include as part of all of our practice. Because once we recognize, oh yeah, this happens, then we can look and see. It's a rare person who doesn't come up against this.

And much of this sense of shaking your motivation, shaking your commitment, the sense of "well, this can't be right"—a lot of it is due to whatever idea or view you might be holding in the background of your mind. Often not recognized: ideas about what's supposed to happen, or how practice is supposed to be, or what the trajectory should be. You all know how we do this. But it can be a really deeply held belief, and when it just isn't aligning with the actuality of our experience, it can breathe this sense of "well, this can't be right, I can't do it."

It's a rare person who doesn't experience this. There's a line from the Buddha where he's talking about sense of self, and he says, "But in whatever way they conceive, the fact is ever other than that." I want to say that about whatever ideas our mind and thoughts might have about what freedom and awakening are going to be like. In whatever way we conceive, the fact is ever other than that. This mind—what we know—we can't know what we don't know.

We can't imagine from this vantage point. Those of you who are older, in my age group, will remember Krishnamurti. Some younger people don't know who he was, but he was very well known in our day. His famous line was "freedom from the known." The known is an idea that we project—what awakening is like, what a mind of non-clinging means. All kinds of stuff gets projected. We want to know. We want a sense of where we're going. And we all talk about it, but really, at heart, we can't know. We simply can't know.

I want to give a few examples that came to mind. The first one I mentioned in a talk the other night—it's really obvious. When we have known how things have been, when we know how practice works, we don't recognize changing conditions and we take it personally. I mentioned in my talk on impermanence the story of Bhikkhu Assaji, who was ill and dying and really upset because he couldn't get concentrated anymore. And the Buddha's response was essentially, "Hey, conditions have changed. And anyway, awakening isn't about concentration." But that's something we can all relate to—taking it personally. It's sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, that we're putting on it. "I am not able to do this thing"—this thing being concentrated, or seeing through impermanence, or whatever it is. "This thing is what has to be happening for the path to develop toward freedom. And I can't do it, although I used to be able to. So clearly I've gone backwards. I'm failing." Not far from "what's the point, I can't do it." As Assaji was saying to the Buddha,

"Let me not fall away." And there's a lot of suffering in that.

If we can see, "Oh yes, there's a view here, I'm comparing to impermanence"—fine, it's recognized and it's gone. But sometimes it goes deeper than that. There's this insidious sense: "I can't do this. I can't do this." Maybe I could before, or maybe it's something that's talked about or we've read about or heard about, and it hasn't occurred in our experience. And very deeply the sense can come in: "I can't do it." Again, this is sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view. It's like a cage of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, the cage of personality view, where we're viewing it all through our personality and the ideas we have about this personality, this body and mind. We just think we know how it is. "It's like this, and obviously I can't do this. I've done everything to the best of my ability, and this is how it is. It's over."

But we don't even know. We don't even know what's possible. We don't even know what directions the practice might go, and we don't know what's possible in the experience of this mind and body.

I know in my first long retreat—I'm a person without a lot of energy, and many people think you need to sleep a certain amount. In daily life, maybe you do. But then something happens here. A lot of people have been saying they're waking up really early, filled with energy, and the mind goes, "Oh, but I need so much sleep." They go back to sleep and actually wake up feeling crappy—because you don't need it. And even if you do, who knows? We're in the cage. This is a simple example. There are things much grosser than this, and much subtler. We're in the cage of "this is what this mind and body can do, it can't do anything outside of that, so why even try?"

And then it can go further: "Well, don't push outside your comfort zone." Sure, when you're really suffering and difficult stuff is coming up, the idea of pushing outside the comfort zone, colored with aversion, is not helpful. But when we're interested and there's energy and the practice is going along, and we think, "Oh, I'd better go to bed now because I might be tired tomorrow"—

No, you have no idea. You have no idea what's happening now. I can remember many times I'd think, "I've got to go to bed now, I'm falling asleep on my face," and I walk out into the dining room, and then my body just starts walking back and forth. I feel like the dhamma took over. My mind wants to go to bed, my body's going to do walking meditation. So the mind might as well come along with it.

And that's a simple example. But just not to die into the idea of "this is all that's possible." Look and see. I don't know. We don't know. We just don't know.

Don't be afraid of your own aspirations. When things aren't going well and you're running into one of these walls—"Well, I just can't do this. This is what concentration should be like"—for some reason, concentration is one of the bugaboos that people often get really caught on. We'll say, "But there's a lot of mindfulness." "I don't care. There's not concentration." "What about calm? There's investigation." "Anyone can investigate, but concentration proves it's going somewhere, right?" And there's nothing you can say to bust through that. If you just keep going, keep going, you'll see through it.

Don't be afraid of your own aspirations. Don't say, "Well, it can't happen for me. I'm just a nudnik and I'm doing my best. But I'll never experience freedom from clinging. The best I can do is shuffle through the retreat and maybe feel a little more at ease at the end and have some nice moments. But nothing's ever going to happen for me." The cage of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the cage of believing that—just see when it's like that. Who knows? Die into this moment. See what's happening.

So that's one kind of hitting a wall.

Another one is what I alluded to earlier: when we're starting to see painful, suffering habits of our mind. Maybe personality habits that we're starting to see—self-hatred, for example, or any personality habit, greed. Or dhamma habits of clinging. And we really have time where we're seeing it coming up with interest, really experiencing the deluded nature and the suffering aspect of it. And you think, "Wow, that's so interesting. I really see." Whether it's the personal pattern or the clinging pattern, you really get it.

And then it keeps on coming, more and more. And then, especially if it's a painful personality pattern, you not only experience it, you not only get angry and yell still, but you exquisitely experience the shame of it because you're much more aware through the whole process. And people have said, "What? This is making me more neurotic, this practice. I'm just more aware. I'm suffering."

It's a phase. It's not making you more neurotic. But you think, "This isn't how it's supposed to work." And it can shake our faith if you let yourself keep believing that.

Sayadaw U Pandita used to talk about "don't stop within." Don't stop within. One aspect of that is not being satisfied merely with wholesome states of mind. It's something we can experience when there are really beautiful, wholesome states—whether of collectedness or joy or mindfulness or interest or calm. Of course, the habit of mind is going to cling some. I'm not talking about that. I don't call that stopping within.

We just watch that. That's exploring how clinging works and how it kind of freezes things.

But sometimes it can be quite a profound experience—deep equanimity, not just some moments on retreat, but in your life. I'm not just talking about retreat here. You come out and you feel, for me, for example, much more equanimous, more balanced, much more at ease and open and flowing with things. And I can see this part of the mind goes, "Well, that is good enough."

Sometimes we can see for ourselves—and this just requires a lot of honesty as we go through our life of practice—how as we begin practice, most of us just want to get rid of some suffering. That's normal, and that's all we know. So the motivation will deepen and widen as our understanding deepens and widens. And sometimes you might really see, and it takes honesty—no one else has to ever know. You just look for yourself. You say, "Oh, actually, really my motivation was just to get more comfortable." But now I am more comfortable. Sometimes people feel a sense of the urgency or the motivation kind of going out. Okay, you can cruise. This is good enough.

But when you really have the Dhamma bugging you and the wisdom is growing, that won't do it for long because nothing stays. That sense of balance—you still have more, but it'll come and go. The wisdom will keep waking us up, will keep looking, will reassess, will reconnect with our motivation and really find that sense of looking. Yes, do I truly trust that at moments it's possible to free the heart and mind from clinging? Is that a possibility? Do I think it's just a lot of hogwash, or do I really believe this? Find the way to motivate ourselves again in whatever way. Don't just stop within in that way.

Another thing that I found really interesting in myself, frequently on long retreats particularly: as your practice is deepening, the sense of clinging is so strong, seeing a lot of habits of personality view, and they're getting shaken up. And sometimes there's a resistance, a fear—this is the best I can put it, maybe different for you—at losing a sense of myself, a sense of some kind of identification with a particular personality or how I feel about myself. It's hard to really put it in words because when I lay out my personality, I think, "Well, am I attached to that?" But there's something that can come, a sense of... it's working too well.

And sometimes the mind starts throwing out ideas of how liberation might be, though we really can't know. But if liberation from clinging means I don't love my family anymore? If liberation from clinging means I don't care about my grandkids, or I can't enjoy music, or I can't tell the taste of good food from bad food, or I just won't bother—whatever our mind makes up—everything's just going to be a dull gray blob and I don't care about anything. Is that what we're talking about? That's not too enticing, right?

So our mind makes something up and it can create this sense of shaking. If I'm not going to care about engagement with the world, I don't want to do it. Notice when that comes for you. See what it is and don't believe the thought, because the mind can't know.

I did notice one point on a retreat when I was in Burma. I was really in there, but I saw how the mind was really happy to give up all the unpleasant aspects of my personality and things of life. But it wanted to somehow hold on to the pleasant ones. No, I can still get to have all this stuff! Remember what I was saying about craving, *tanha*—it's not about the objects. It's about the quality in the heart, in the mind. "No, if freedom from clinging means I can't have music, I'm not going there." And again, we've missed the picture.

But it's interesting just to see how our heart can come up against these kind of walls. And for a while, we bounce back and go, "Uh-uh, no thanks, not me."

Trungpa Rinpoche calls it—I think someone mentioned this—nostalgia for samsara. Even though there's so much clearly unnecessary suffering in the reactive formations of my personality, the way I react to things when there's wanting, when there's identification, when there's fear, there's still some kind of comfort. Comfort with just feeling comfortable with the way we're used to being with ourselves in body, in mind. That's what I call a comfort zone. It feels a bit like putting on an old, tatty, dirty bathrobe that you've been wearing for forty years. You just love it and put it on. It looks like crap, but you just don't want to get

rid of it. Nostalgia for samsara. In the cage of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the mind creating moment to moment.

So just moments of moving out of the familiar—it's uncomfortable. The mind likes to be familiar. I've felt in myself at times, more noticeable in deep retreat but it can happen in life too, that it feels like a series of small deaths.

A death of—I couldn't even say to what—but it feels like a death to some aspect of belief, of my personality, or some way I'm so familiar with being. I'm really familiar with being this cranky person. Who would I be if I was friendly to people? That's exaggerated, but it just feels familiar. We just want to hunker down there. And the practice is calling us actually to open into the unfamiliar, into the unknown, every single moment.

Nibbāna for everyone.

It's a rare person who doesn't come up against some of these challenges or many others. These are just the ones that came to my mind. It's challenging. It's demanding for everyone. No part left unexamined in terms of all aspects of our life.

But these times when we're butting up against the discomfort, moving out of the comfort zone of body or mind, or just saying, "No, this isn't familiar, this can't be right, I don't know where this is going"—those are really, on retreat here, the valuable, juicy moments. Not to get something, just to open into, to practice stretching our trust, our motivation, our commitment.

Commitment to what? Not to any result. And this is the paradox. We're totally motivated, committed to awakening from suffering. Yet any idea of what that should be like and leaning into it is striving. So what do we commit to? What's the motivation?

Freedom from clinging is absolutely uncompromising. So what's required—this is how I think of it—what's required is moment-to-moment total commitment to open fully into the unknown of this moment right now. This moment right now is all there is. And the complete willingness to trust, to open into it with awareness, is the commitment that's called forth from us again and again.

It shakes us up. Awakening shakes us up, shakes up our views of the world. Enlightenment doesn't confirm us, gratify our sense of self, make us feel all comfortable and nice and secure. You know the feeling of how nice it'll be when I'm enlightened? Guess what? Guess what isn't around for that? The sense of "me" is what gets seen through. You don't have to get rid of it. It's just seen through as a construction that arises and passes moment to moment. Another sankhāra, another mental construction. It's seen through.

And so all of our views, beliefs, attachments, ideas, strategies of self-interest—they're all going to be challenged. And a lot of the holding and a lot of the discomfort we feel, often subtle and unconscious, is around that. Just some subtle sense of who I am and what I want is being challenged. But we can't think

our way into this. Don't even think about it. Our support is simply moment-to-moment awareness.

I'll read this from Ajahn Sumedho:

"As one begins to realize or to recognize non-grasping as the way, then emotionally one can feel quite frightened by it. It can seem like a kind of annihilation is taking place. All that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real starts falling apart and it can be frightening. But if we have the faith"—and faith I say as confidence—"the willingness to continue being aware, to continue bearing with these emotional reactions, and with awareness allow things that arise to cease"—I just want to say, as if we could stop that—"to appear and disappear according to their nature, then we find stability not in achievement or attaining, but in being. Being awake, being aware."

So the way my mind works, what really is the again and again motivation—I don't say total motivation, but it's just called up from us again and again and again—is this willingness to trust and surrender into this moment, awareness of just what's happening. How do we continue to discover the courage, the wisdom, the humility to do that?

It's really a shift of motivation. Not the motivation to awaken, but a shift away from our habitual, worldly way of doing anything—to lean in, imagine, try and get there, try and make it happen—all the stuff that turns into striving. It may begin as some vega, as real urgency, a lot of energy. You bring it to practice, you know how—

As practice goes on, you can come and be really present at the beginning, putting in a lot of energy that's balanced, and then somehow it gets all screwy and striving comes in. Have you noticed that? There can be enormous commitment and energy without the striving, but just given the habits of our mind, sooner or later we start leaning into some idea or some experience, and the striving comes in.

So the motivation, for me—and again, this is my personal way of thinking about it—shifts from attaining to what Ajahn Sumedho says: to being aware, to being awake. When? Only right now, in this moment. It's all in the motivation. It kind of shifts from wanting awakening to just loving awareness—not in order for anything else, but just because that's life in this moment.

I'm going to read a couple of different voices about this. This is Ajahn Sumedho again. He said, "We have an ideal in our mind of how reality should be, but that's not how it is." I heard this on a talk, and he was laughing as he was saying this—the ideal versus the reality. "Life is fair and unfair. There's pain and pleasure, success and failure. It just keeps going like this. With steady awareness, we begin to recognize the nature of conditioned phenomena—conditions continually arising and ceasing in consciousness. When with awareness we recognize this, we start to awaken out of confusion and delusion to the real. We recognize the real." And he says, "Awareness is not a state, not something we get behind and observe. It's a recognition. It's a verb." And then he says, "Because the real isn't what you're expecting, I tell you." And he starts laughing.

Now from Andrew Olendzki, who used to be the director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies: "As sati grows, as mindfulness grows, our attention, our mental capacity, gradually shifts from the objects of attention to the process of being aware. This involves an attitude of letting go, of not holding on so much to the object, abandoning attachment to it. The mind is a dynamic process. When the mind is stuck on what has arisen, it is rigid and limited. But the mind that is letting go moment after moment keeps opening to the emerging flow." Just opening into the moment. Opening into the moment.

Now Mingyur Rinpoche: "We give attention to the object of meditation to support the recognition of awareness. The target is not the object. Awareness is what's being cultivated." Remember, we've talked about this when we talk about choiceless attention. It's the steady attention, the steady awareness that we're cultivating, not the object. And if you're doing metta or samadhi practice, even though the object is ostensibly steady, it's really the steadiness of awareness that we're cultivating on the one object.

Back to Mingyur: "We recognize the quality of the mind, not just the phenomena perceived by the mind." So we've said that there's whatever's arising in the knowing of it. We begin to recognize more and more the knowing, the quality in the mind. Mingyur continues: "Discovering our own awareness allows us to access the natural steadiness and clarity of the mind, which is independent of the conditions and circumstances and independent of our emotions and moods. Awareness does not increase or decrease whether we are happy or sad. We don't attain awareness; rather, we learn to recognize it." The same thing Ajahn Sumedho just said. "And again, as we cultivate a sustained recognition of awareness, we start to recognize that awareness itself is inherently calm, no matter how turbulent the mind. This allows us to discover a sense of peace and stability that is not dependent on the presence or absence of pleasant or unpleasant feelings."

So you get a sense of this—just opening, exploring, exploring this awareness of what? Of whatever's arising in this moment. And for me, it's really helped. I'm not being aware of this pain so it gets better. I'm not being aware of this pain to get more concentrated. I'm being aware because this is what's occurring now.

And when you're really focused on the object, you don't notice the mindfulness, the awareness. But the more and more we really begin to trust—okay, awareness with whatever's occurring, whatever's occurring—then we start to recognize, as Ajahn Sumedho says, how conditions come and go. We start to get, at moments, just an intimation of this potential of ease and peace that is not dependent on what's occurring. But as soon as we're being aware *so that* we can feel that, it's moved again into wanting, leaning forward. And you can feel the difference.

So I just want to talk a little bit about this sense of really just loving awareness as awareness—not to get anywhere, just to surrender into the unknown of this moment, because that's all there is.

There's a story I've told often before, but it's been a very helpful image for me, even though it's about someone else and is, of course, complete projection of my mind. But it works anyway.

I was staying at Ramana Ashram, Ramana Maharshi Ashram in southern India at Arunachala, Tiruvannamalai. It's a big ashram, very well run, and there's a building that has in one part what's called his samadhi—different from how we use the term; it's the marble tomb. One of the things people do is circumambulate that. That's the practice. And in the other half of the room, separated by a small barrier, you can sit and do whatever you like.

Every evening, for half an hour before the meal is served, the people who live and work and run the ashram—the women and men—come and sit and do Vedic chanting. Many of the people staying there come and just listen.

So I was there one night listening to the chanting. And at other times, of course, I'd walk around the samadhi. It was really interesting to see and be part of all the different energies of the people walking around. Sometimes you could just feel the wanting—maybe more in the Westerners, because I could relate to wanting to really see what Ramana was talking about, wanting to really be free. Other people were prostrating with such devotion. Others were walking around talking with each other, not paying any attention at all. But it's this walking around the samadhi—it's the practice.

So they were doing the chanting this evening, led by the president of the ashram. The way meals work there, you sit in rows—I don't know how many people at one time, maybe a couple hundred. They're very clear about who belongs; they know if you're meant to be there. And when it's your day to leave, you couldn't get in to eat because they know you're not there anymore. It's amazing how they know who you are.

You line up sitting on the concrete floor in rows facing each other. For a plate, you have a banana leaf—no utensils. And the people who run the ashram, led by the president, come by with big pails and give you the food. He does this every night, the president. He comes and serves everybody the meal.

So they were doing the chanting, and now comes my projection. At the end, it finished, and he got up—just so simple. He got up and walked around the samadhi, and it just felt very simple and present. Then he went off to serve the meal.

To me, this is an example of the simplicity—the simplicity of awareness and presence. Not having to do some big showy thing, not needing some amazing, interesting experience that's worthy of awareness. You can see how much I've projected, but it's really helped me so much—this sense of the shift from wanting and needing awakening, the shift from wanting to understand, to just the simplicity of total awareness with what's happening now.

You get up, you walk around the samadhi, and you go serve the people there. Whatever's going on in your mind and heart, you take it with you. To me, that's like this shift from wanting something to simply loving awareness.

And whatever's occurring now is all we need to surrender into, to open into, to bring us back, to help us

re-recognize awareness. You don't need anything else. Just opening into the unknown of what is.

It's radical, really. When you find yourself somehow in a struggle, when stuff isn't good enough, and you come to us, we just say, "Well, just look at continuity through the day." And you think, *No*. But just get up and brush your teeth and walk into the hall with full loving awareness of that.

Awareness doesn't care if it's aware of how the toothpaste feels on your teeth or if you're having some incredible, beautiful bliss experience. Awareness isn't better or worse depending on the object. And so the simplest, most simple activity—just completely surrender into it with awareness—brings us back to recognizing awareness.

Every aspect of our phenomenal life exhibits the three characteristics. They're not more or less present in something really painful or something really beautiful or something really mundane. Anywhere we can see.

So it's really this willingness to just open into what's happening now.

Whatever's coming up is the moment.

From Dogen Zenji: "Truth is not far away. It is ever present. It is not something to be attained since not one of your steps leads away from it. When you have thrown off your ideas about mind and body, original truth can fully appear. Zen is simply the expression of truth. Therefore longing and striving are not the true attitudes of Zen. If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?"

I love that line. I tell it to myself so frequently. If you can't find it right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?

So nothing in our life is excluded. The path is lifelong and all-inclusive. And the total commitment is this surrendering into the unknown. Again and again, we don't get to have some "so that." If I do this, then this will happen. We keep renewing our commitment. We don't know how it's going to show up in our life—we can never know. But this sense of commitment, this sense of really being fully present with how it is, then the wisdom, the trust, the faith arises to help us see how in what is now we can keep opening to the truth. This is the real resolution, the determination, the depth of motivation that can come as we keep renewing and looking into this.

I want to tell you a story to give you an example of this resolve, this deep commitment—an awakening that can come not out of getting where you want to go, but from how you meet each moment and use each moment of a difficult life by surrendering into it and seeing what emerges.

Perhaps you've heard of Master Sheng Yen. He was a wonderful Chinese Chan master who died perhaps ten years ago. He had a very large following in Taiwan. I met him in Switzerland at a retreat, and then he had a place in upstate New York where I did another retreat. I only sat a couple of retreats with him, but I found him a wonderful being—really wonderful, with deep, deep understanding, very relational, very

kind.

He was leading a retreat in Switzerland, and we didn't quite understand—he's like the Dalai Lama of Taiwan. He was hugely loved and had a gigantic following, and we had no clue. He came to teach in Switzerland, and there were just eighty of us. It was amazing he came to do it. He was just wonderful.

He wrote an autobiography called *Footprints in the Snow*. Let me give you a brief synopsis of his life, because when we met him, he was quite elderly.

He was born in mainland China in great poverty and became a monk at a young age. He wanted to be a monk, but being a monk didn't guarantee any kind of easy life at that time in China—this was probably the 1920s or so. He practiced deeply, but he suffered greatly. He was hungry often. Life was very, very hard.

Then the whole civil war came in China, lasting from around 1925 up until 1949, when Mao and the communists were finally about to win. Throughout all of that time, life was enormously difficult, but he remained truly devoted, committed to his life as a monk.

In 1949, when it became clear the communists were about to win, it was also obvious that being a Buddhist monk was no longer going to be possible—he might not even be allowed to live, let alone continue his practice. At that time, Chiang Kai-shek had gone to what was then Formosa, now Taiwan. Sheng Yen knew he had to get out and reach Taiwan, but there was no way.

He had no money. He had no way. And the only way he could get there was to join Chiang Kai-shek's army. Then they would take him to Taiwan.

So he joined the army. He'd been a monk for something like twenty-five years at this point. And he joined the army. They took him to Taiwan. But then he couldn't simply say, "Thank you very much, I think I'll go now. Nice of you." He was a monk, but he couldn't just get out of the army.

So he said, "I was in the army, but in my mind, I am a monk."

For ten years, he was in the army. But he said, "In my mind, I am a monk." And he never deviated from that. He did what he had to do. And he said that somehow, very fortunately, he was never put in a position where he had to kill people or do harm. You think perhaps karma takes care of such things.

He was essentially a vegetarian as part of his way of being a monk. Well, that was impossible in the army. But he would avoid eating meat as much as he could until he was almost starving. Then he would eat some meat. He lived like this for ten years with this deep resolve: I am a monk, no matter what.

At that time, nobody got out of the army. There weren't ways of getting out. But somehow—I won't go into all the details—he did happen to meet on a week off a Buddhist master who was living there, and he connected with him. And somehow he managed to get released from the army after those ten years.

Immediately he went into seven years of solitary retreat under the tutelage of that master. And he said that even later in his life, he always did many prostrations because that was one way of really purifying his mind and body of all the unwholesome actions he felt he had to perform while in the army.

But he was the most beautiful, deeply realized being.

So externally, it is what it is. But his commitment—I am a monk—and then being fully present, not resistant, but fully present with the situation as it presents itself. How do we surrender with awareness into this and see what presents itself? It really inspires me.

I'll end with two things, one from the Dalai Lama and one from the Buddha.

From the Buddha: "This holy life, bhikkhus, does not have gain, honor, and renown for its benefit, or the attainment of virtue for its benefit, or the attainment of concentration for its benefit, or knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end."

This unshakable deliverance of mind. Don't settle for anything less—without striving, with total trust. If you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?

And the Dalai Lama, speaking to some Western nuns and monks: "One day you will become bodhisattvas in reality. So whatever obstacles there are, however long it takes, do not be discouraged."

And it always just comes down to loving awareness in this moment. We can always do that.

Thank you for your kind attention.

---

*Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.*