Aspiration and Courage

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 57:56

I want to offer some reflections on aspiration and courage.

At this point in the retreat, I'm really struck by how much everybody goes through. How difficult it is sometimes. And despite all the instructions and all the lists and everything we talk about and the upliftingness—there are times for everyone where there's lots of insight and it's really going well—then it seems to cycle around again. You're just kind of spinning in your neuroses, it feels like. You think, "Here we are again, and it's into the fourth week. What did I do wrong?"

And that's just the lighter side. But seriously, what everyone goes through at different times in your own way, it's quite challenging sometimes, isn't it? Difficult, tiring. And it takes, I think, enormous courage to keep showing up again and again—not just today, not just in this retreat, but for our whole path of awakening, for our whole life.

What I want to talk about tonight, in terms of something that can support our keep showing up, having this moment-to-moment courage, is something that helps me a lot: to keep refreshing, renewing my deepest sense of aspiration for why I'm doing what I'm doing, in terms of this whole path of awakening.

When we are in the difficult time, even if yesterday it was all flowing and it was so clear that there's no self, or everything's coming and going, or there's no point in putting in effort—it's just all happening by itself—when it feels like that, it feels like, "Well, now I know. This is how it is, and it's going to be like this for the rest of the retreat and probably the rest of my life." And it probably isn't the first time you've had that experience and that thought. And if you're lucky, it's the next day before that falls apart. Could be five minutes later. And it's like, "Oh my God, again, this."

Sometimes we can see in whatever particular personal experience of suffering is coming up, we can see the three characteristics. But then it starts to spin and we start to get sucked down into the vortex. And this is for everyone at different times—it's as if we're back in the story and the "me" and the suffering and "what did I do wrong." Can you relate at all?

So, some things about aspiration. The first thing, to remind us when we're really in this struggle and it seems to come down to me doing it wrong and what can I do to fix it: remember that this path, this whole path, is vast. Hold it in the framework of the Four Noble Truths.

When I'm spinning and thinking, "Oh my God, I'm back in self-hatred again, and if I really knew better..."—just to open up a minute, even if it's an intellectual reminder, to remember that whatever arises is held within the Four Noble Truths. There's not some experience you have that's somehow outside the

Four Noble Truths, and if you get rid of that, then maybe you can begin to discover what the Buddha was talking about. Everything can be held within that framework.

Just widen out and see: it isn't just about me fixing this pattern of my mind and being less neurotic. We're really here to understand the Four Noble Truths—that this is dukkha, the cause of dukkha is tanha, craving, that there is an ending of craving, the sure heart's release, the ending of suffering. Whether it's a momentary release from craving, which even Sayadaw U Pandita talks about as a moment of mindfulness, as a moment of freedom, or it's the complete ending of greed, hatred, and confusion, which is the arahat—both of those are on the path. And then the Eightfold Path of our practice, of how we live our life.

Just to remind ourselves: even if it seems we're struggling in a bubble of me and mine and what's wrong with me, that's just the particular expression of some aspect of the Four Noble Truths. Remember the vastness of what we're doing.

The path is vast, all-encompassing, and as the Buddha said, we are all invited. Ehipassiko—you too, come and see for yourself. It's not only for monastics. It's not only for people who have some kind of really special circumstances in their life.

The truth is true for everyone. Everyone here has some kind of incredible deep aspiration, or you wouldn't still be here. Whatever got you here, you wouldn't still be here into the fourth week. It's for everyone.

So to remind ourselves that the potential for awakening is available to each of us in any particular moment of our experience. And that's not just some kind of a nice idea. That's really the essential heart of, I hope, why we practice. Don't shy away from that. Or let yourself fall into some sakkaya ditthi, personality view, of "okay, yeah, for somebody else—for me, if I could just get through the six weeks without committing some horrible thing, that'll be good." Really let it in. This is what this path, this practice is about. And as the Buddha said, if it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so. He didn't just say it's possible for this person over there. Ehi pasiko—you too come and see.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who we've spoken about, gave one talk that was translated into English. I just want to mention it very briefly because I love the title: "Nibbana for Everyone." This was a talk he gave to Thai laypeople quite some years ago, where he was saying that in Thailand at that time, Nibbana had come to be thought of as something only accessible in previous generations, or only to monastics. But he was saying Nibbana means cool, basically. So he said that in any moment the mind stream, the heart stream, is freed from the torments of greed, hatred, and confusion, it's cooled. That's the coolness, he says. He talks about momentary Nibbana the same way that Sayadaw U Pandita talked about a moment of mindfulness being a moment of freedom.

His whole talk, which I'm not going to go into more now, is really saying Nibbana is for everyone. We all experience many moments every day of this coolness—the heart and mind that's cooled, not burning with

the fires of the torments. We need to notice this. He said if you didn't have moments like that, you couldn't bear it. We couldn't survive. This is what keeps beings alive, he says.

So this is, to me, both very inspiring—it can feed aspiration—but it's also, in a way, daunting. Or it's a... I don't know, challenge isn't the right word. But if I really let it in that this is true and accessible and open to everyone, it can inspire in me a really deep aspiration. And it doesn't allow me to fall back into personality views that are almost afraid, or somehow thinking I'm not worthy to really honor, to really have such a deep or profound aspiration. If we don't really think we want it, then it's okay if we don't get it, kind of thing. I'm not good enough, so why should I try? So let's not really look—if you know what I mean.

So I want to talk about really taking the time... Bonnie and Sally have both mentioned aspiration. I just want to talk about it a bit more to bring it home, because I've been finding in some of these last years in my practice that consciously tuning into this quality of aspiration—in my own particular mind, heart, stream—consciously tuning into it, feeling it not just on an intellectual level but really tuning into it, allowing it to inform our moment-to-moment decisions, allowing it to give us the courage, the energy to keep going, to keep showing up on the path... I've found this to be enormously supportive, and something I didn't think about or do so much in the early years of my practice.

This sense of aspiration, as Sally talked about a while ago, is kind of like the overview, the large-scale intention—not just moment-to-moment cetana, but a wider sense of what's really, truly, deeply most important to you in your life. Really take the time. You may know, you may not know, but tune into that for yourself. And it's not just a thought. The thought might... you may know when there's a thought, or maybe a thought of what you think ought to be your intention. But when you really tune into the aspiration, for me it's a kind of felt sense, kind of like a gut level—oh yeah, that's really what's most important to me in this life. It doesn't mean other things aren't also important, but this is kind of the bottom level, you could say.

And this sense of overarching aspiration really helps set us on a path. It's what we return to again and again, what keeps us on a path. But it's not something that's just a one-time thing—okay, that's my aspiration, I'm here to awaken, that's it—and then we forget about it. We have to keep connecting with it, moment by moment. It becomes, hopefully, a support, a sense of strength, something to remind us in our moment-to-moment choices and decisions. Because every moment is changing.

So first let's say, now, tonight, tomorrow, through this time, let yourself—when it comes up in your mind, in your heart, or you just have some sense, yes, whatever it is—I'm not here to say what it should be for anybody. But say an intention is: I really want to awaken for the benefit of all beings. Okay, that's the bodhicitta, the bodhisattva motivation.

But say that intention comes up in your heart, in your mind. For many people—not everybody, but so many of us—there is this tendency of self-doubt, of putting oneself down, thinking "I'm not worthy" or "I'm not able" or "someone else, but not me." You know what I mean? An intention that profound could

arise, and the mind goes, "You're right—who do you think you are to be having such an aspiration? First, you can't do it," or "You're just being..." whatever way your mind goes to dismiss yourself.

Don't listen to that. That's just aversive habit of mind. That's just falling into some view of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, of personality view. Don't listen to that. Really honor what comes up in your deep sense of what's most important to you in your life. And that can change, of course, as our life goes on, as our understanding and wisdom deepens, as our compassion grows—whatever. That can change, change form. But just for here on retreat, when you let yourself touch it, whatever stuff the mind has around it, don't pay attention to that. Really honor that intention.

And that's all. You don't have to make a big deal of it. It's not an ego thing. It's different from "I'm so great, I have this intention." It's just an aspiration that comes.

One way—the way I, for myself, can tell the difference between when aspiration turns to wanting: aspiration could be a sense of what is possible. So say the aspiration is really to free the heart and mind from the torments of greed, hatred, and confusion. That's a vast aspiration. It's also a sense that that's not how it is right now. It can be a sense of what's potential, right? So that could certainly turn into a goal. And then I'm sure you remember us saying again and again that the practice is about totally being here now, not goal-oriented. How does that work together?

When it's an aspiration, it's not like one eye on the goal—"I'm here, and how can I get there?" It's a sense of, "Wow, it's a possibility." And it's a wholesome, beautiful quality. You can feel it. It brings a kind of brightness in the mind, an uplift, a sense of energy, a willingness to do. You could say *saddhā*, faith, bringing *viriya*, the willingness to do. And what do we do? We don't have one eye on the goal, saying, "What can I do to get there?" What we do is completely open and surrender into this moment. Just this moment now is the path.

So aspiration—you can feel it's supportive, it's energizing, it brightens and uplifts. When the habit of mind switches to wanting or greed, which it will because that's just its habit, it kind of switches. Then it's like one eye on the prize, so to speak. "How am I doing? How am I doing?" And instead of feeling this uplift, you can feel—as with greed, as with wanting—the tendency of the mind-heart starts to get more narrow, more contracted. That can come as some sense of frustration, or a sense of expectation, or a sense of disappointment—all that stuff.

So that's useful to notice. Not something wrong, but it can be really helpful. "Wow, I'm really feeling frustrated. It's just not happening. Here's greed, and I'm really here to get rid of greed. What's going on?" Oh yeah—greed. That's what's going on.

And then the aspiration can come back to give us the courage. "Oh, okay. Greed is like this." Honestly. And in that moment, the frustration shifts. It's like a sense of, "Yes, I'm willing to show up for this."

So aspiration is a powerful force to keep coming back to, to keep finding ways to refresh, revitalize, and

remind yourself. Because when we can really use this aspiration—this sense of what's most important to us, maybe our deepest, strongest purpose in life—that's a reminder. It can serve to allow us to collect and focus our energy through the vicissitudes of our life, through the different choices we have to make.

We're able to do or be with things that we never would have thought possible just from our little sense of self and personality. The sense of aspiration gives a great courage and quality of resolution, determination. Adhiṭṭhāna, which I think Sally also spoke about, is a real strength of intention where the energy of the mind-heart comes together. Just do it. Determination is really like the Nike thing—just do it. In fact, U Tejaniya used to hold up the Nike swoosh when somebody was having trouble. He'd just hold it up and say, "Just do it. Just get up. Just feel what's happening. Just get simple. Just do it."

To give an example, one thing that helps me keep refreshing or encouraging my aspiration is sometimes wise reflection—tuning into beings that I know or that I've read about or that I see who are somehow inspiring. The way they are living their life or manifesting certain beautiful qualities can touch that same wholesome, beautiful quality in my own mind and heart, rekindling my being in touch with aspiration, with what's important.

So I wanted to give an example of determination, of how the clarity of aspiration can lead to a real sense of determination that can take one through very difficult aspects of life. This is from an autobiography I read of a great Chinese Chan master who died just a few years ago. I know some of you knew him very well—Master Sheng Yen. I had the good fortune to sit with him for only two short retreats, but I was enormously inspired by his being, by his wisdom, and also by his kindness, his relational quality, his simplicity of being. He was a great Chan master in Taiwan with tens of thousands of followers, which you didn't realize because I met him in the West and he just seemed so simple and accessible. And then you find out he's huge, just huge in Taiwan. He wrote an autobiography called *Footprints in the Snow*.

He became a monk early in life. He had a very difficult life of great privation and poverty, and he became a monk in mainland China during the twenties or thirties. It was a very difficult life, but he was quite dedicated to being a monk through the World War and then through the Civil War. Then in 1949, when it was clear that Mao was winning the Civil War and that all the monasteries were going to be destroyed, the only way he could get out of mainland China—he had no money, he had nothing, and he was still a monk—was to join Chiang Kai-shek's army, and then they would take him to Taiwan. So he did that. He did that to get out of mainland China.

But once he got to Taiwan, you couldn't just say, "Okay, thanks. I think I'll withdraw from the army now. It's been nice." He said he was really basically stuck there in the army. He was disrobed. He said, "But in my heart, in my mind, I'm always a monk." He had to spend really years and years, over ten years, in a very difficult situation in the army there. He said he managed not to have to do any killing, but he had a very deep commitment to vegetarianism, for instance. But the food wasn't vegetarian.

This is his sense of determination, but also how to be flexible. In his heart, he was always a monk. One of

the monk's rules for him was to be vegetarian. So mostly he'd eat vegetarian to the point of almost starving, because that wasn't the food. But when it would come to the point where he was really going to starve, he ate meat. He really had this flexibility of discerning wisdom, asking what's the appropriate action here, but still relating to that truth: in my heart, I'm always a monk. And when he felt that he had done actions that he felt remorse for, actions that weren't the sīla he really wanted to support, he would, in his own way, make amends. He did lots of prostration practice as a way of purifying his karma.

He said finally, after a long time, he did manage to find a way out. And he said, "Looking back, I realized that if I did not have a very strong determination to actually return to monastic life, I probably would not have succeeded. Getting out of my particular branch of the military was nearly impossible."

This is the kind of thing that you can't see from the beginning—his aspiration to be a monk and to live that way. But we don't know what events are going to happen in our life or what's going to turn out, really. We don't know what will happen tomorrow. So aspiration isn't about planning out how everything's going to look. We don't know.

But it's really the beacon, the deep-seated root of what will be our guide. And then we have to find the flexibility and the discerning wisdom to move within the circumstances of our life, but always returning as best we can to our aspiration.

He said that after he got out of the military, one of the first things he did was seven years of solitary retreat. I thought, wow, finally.

He was elderly when I met him and really one of the more inspiring people I've encountered. When I think about him, it brings a sense of brightness to my mind, to my heart. We don't always have to generate all the brightness, all the wisdom ourselves. Sometimes we're spinning in our stuff and we can't find it within. But it's okay to bring to heart, to mind, somebody or something that can reignite us, that can get us back in touch with some quality of wholesomeness, some quality of uplift that really feeds our aspiration.

When I think of Master Sheng Yen, my mind doesn't list all these qualities—it just feels this brightness, this inspiration, and a kind of real metta that I felt from him, a real commitment to what is possible in a life. Just leave it there. You don't have to go on to the next thought: what is possible for him but not for me because of this or that. No—just leave it there with the inspiration.

It's so helpful to keep doing this, because as I said, we need to keep finding ways to support what I'm calling the courage, the willingness to say, okay, this too, again, for the ten-thousandth time. Just now? How can I have the courage, the willingness to show up for this and recognize that whatever's coming up now is part of the path? Just because it doesn't look like I think the path ought to look. Just because I feel like I'm spinning in my story and I'm not getting neon lights—that's okay, honey. You're understanding anicca while you're going through this. It doesn't usually telegraph itself like that. You just feel like, aye, aye, aye, again.

And then you come in to one of us teachers and we say, yes, but you weren't feeling that yesterday. And you think, oh, shut up. I'm feeling it now. I'm going to feel it forever. Don't give me this "you didn't feel it yesterday." It's really happening now. And you go out of the room.

So this is where we really need to find our inspiration to keep going. At this point in a retreat, where you're really working so sincerely—everybody—there's, I think for all of us at different times, periods where I call it hitting the wall. We hit the wall in different ways. I'm not going to even try to list them all. I'll just give a few examples. But for whatever reason, we think this is it. It's kind of like, give me my walking papers. I'm gone, for whatever particular thing is going on.

Sometimes—and this is a big one—as I said, we've been seeing clearly, and then our so-called painful, neurotic, bad habits come up again. The self-hatred, or the spinning in fear, or that memory again of what that person did in the third grade. I thought we went through this already fifty-five times. And again, I have to feel it. I felt it. I know it. It's over—but it isn't over. Here it is.

So then the only conclusion our little minds can come to is: I'm no good. I can't do it. It's not working. And it's all about me, because we're caught in the cage of self-judgment at that point. We're taking it all personally. It's all about me working my way through it.

Sometimes we know what it's like not to have that particular pattern happening. We've felt the freedom, those moments of the coolness of no kilesa. So when it comes back—I don't know if it's like this for you, but for me it can be like a double whammy. Not only do I have to feel it all again, there's also the thought: I'm more aware of how deluded I am feeling all of this. I'm actually feeling quite clearly how caught I am, and how unable I am to get out of this.

And so on top of all of that, we add the hopelessness of: oh my God, the more I practice, the more neurotic I get. And if it's like this now, just wait till I go home—because I'm not even getting triggered much here.

Wait till I have to go see my family. You know, that can just spiral and spiral.

Okay, that's one way of hitting the wall.

Sometimes, for all of us, something opens up—an emotional pain, a trauma memory, physical pain—that we haven't really quite felt before to that extent, or opened to before. It can be both scary and frightening, or just painful. Just that sense that this is unbearable, there's no way I can be with this, the mind says. I can't bear this. Sometimes it's just afraid of how bad it's going to be. Sometimes it's like shock: "No, if freedom means opening to this, never mind. Let me just shut it down." But that's just a thought coming through. It comes through a lot, but it's just a thought coming through.

This sense of "I can't bear it another moment"—I think of something I heard Ajahn Sumedho say one time, which comes into my mind a lot. It really helps me. He was talking about practicing in Thailand during the hot season—and it's hot in the hot season. There's the kuti with a tin roof, which I've experienced. You

bake. Go in a little hut with a tin roof when it's 120 degrees outside and see how you feel. Hot, that's how you feel. And in all his robes.

He said, "I'm sitting here sweating through my robes in the hot season of Thailand with the mosquitoes, and my mind is doing whatever it's doing. And I think, I cannot bear this one more second." Have you ever hit that place? "And then I'd find that I could."

I love that.

So I'll be sitting, thinking, "This is unbearable. I cannot be with this one more instant." Oh, yes I can. It's just an instant. Then I'll say to myself, "What's actually so unbearable about this moment right now?" And this is a serious question; it's not putting myself down. When I ask that question, it piques the interest again. The mindfulness returns: What is actually happening right now? It's not saying I should be able to bear it or not. It's just a shift of attitude in that moment.

But what makes this shift possible? Remembering. Just remembering our bigger aspiration from time to time.

Another way we get really caught in what I call the cage of sakkāya-diṭṭhi is when our view of who we are or what should be happening on retreat becomes rigid. Winnie talked a lot about the kind of background agendas we come into retreat with, and we're going to keep hitting them over and over. You know you're hitting one because you're frustrated that something isn't happening. That's always a great sign. "Oh, I'm hitting up against some agenda, some expectation. Great, let's see what it is." Bring it up into the light of day so it's not working in the background.

But when change is occurring and we're taking it personally—and we all do this—there's a great sutta I like from the Buddha about a monk named Asaji, who had been a very good monk. He was practicing a lot and he came to the Buddha, very sick, afflicted, gravely ill. I think actually he was dying. He was telling the Buddha that he was filled with remorse, and the Buddha said to him, "But if you have nothing for which to reproach yourself in regard to virtue, Asaji, why are you troubled by remorse and regret?"

And Asaji says, "Formerly, venerable sir, when I was ill, I was able to tranquilize the bodily formations." In other words, he could really cultivate concentration and get calm. "But now I do not obtain concentration. And so it occurs to me, let me not fall away." He's not being able to concentrate his mind and he's freaking out. "Let me not fall away"—he's basically saying, "Don't let me fall away from the path. I can't get concentrated."

Sound familiar?

And the Buddha said—it's a whole long discourse, and I'm going to spare you the full version. First he talked about impermanence, about the impermanence of the body. Bodily formations change, and so the conditions change, the results change.

He talks about impermanence of vedana—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—when the conditions for the pleasant change, it changes.

And then he said also, "Remember in fact that in my teaching, concentration is not the essence. People who think concentration is the essence of the teaching, when the concentration can't arise, they think they've fallen away from the path. But concentration is not the essence of my teaching. The essence is insight, the path, awakening."

And so he's saying to Asaji, "Yeah, the conditions are changing. You're really sick. You can't cultivate concentration now. That's how it is. But that's not a falling away from the path."

So this is the sutta. Everything's the path. Seeing concentration can arise. Seeing the causes and conditions have changed. Seeing the impermanence, seeing the impersonality of that. That's the Four Noble Truths right there. And the freedom in the moment—oh, it's like this. Of course I can't concentrate. I'm dying, for God's sake. I can't concentrate.

That's a moment of freedom, that the bubble burst, the clinging, the sense of self trying to do something burst. And of course, Asaji became one of the arhats.

So just to know, it's not just us spinning around in this. The same at the time of the Buddha, the same with nuns and monks who'd been his disciples and followers for many years. We can get caught in this little bubble of "it's all about me and me doing and falling away" instead of seeing the big picture. Whatever's occurring, we see it through the lens of the Four Noble Truths. There's the potential in that moment for a moment of awakening, a moment of freedom, a moment of coolness, whatever it is that's happening. And it doesn't mean in the next moment the conditions change and we're back spinning again. Not to take it personally.

Two other quick ways we sometimes get caught. One is something Sayadaw U Pandita used to call "stopping within," which is basically this: it's going really nice, things are flowing. Either you're really focused, it's smooth, everything's happening, it's effortless, it's just going. We don't have to put in effort and you don't need to put in effort. And something in the back of the mind goes, "That's good enough. I could live with this." I'm exaggerating a little. It's kind of subtle, but there's some way we go, "Yeah, okay, that's good. It's better than I ever thought it could be. I'll take it." Something puts down, "Okay, that's enough now."

He calls that stopping within. The energy over time can start to decay, or the interest isn't quite so strong. Of course it'll change—we know that. But just to be aware, we've said, "Great, good enough. I'm on cruise control for a while."

Another way that I see a lot is this: actually, a lot of insight could be happening, really getting a deeper sense of anattā, of the out-of-control nature of things. Quite a lot of people are experiencing things where you're really feeling the out-of-control nature of things. But often that's accompanied not with "Great!

Not-self is occurring, out of control. I'm so free! I'm so happy!" Instead, all the defense systems, the self-personality stuff kicks in, trying desperately to control. There's this real sense of struggle. Or some idea of impermanence comes in and the mind goes, "If that's what freedom's about, I don't want anything to do with it."

The mind thinks, "What about if there's no self—what about loving my family? If there's no clinging, how do I care for my children?" All the stuff that the mind makes up about the future. It's not actual experience, but a fear of what it might be.

And it's almost like we want to go back to the pleasure garden. When we were talking about the Buddha's life, you know, maybe there were times when he was out there in those six years eating one grain of rice every two weeks, where maybe he thought, "It could be nice back there with those lotus ponds. What am I doing here? This is what it's about? Let me go back. I'm not ready to give this up yet."

Chögyam Trungpa called that "nostalgia for samsara." I love that phrase. We know we're suffering, and yet we just want it back. It doesn't quite make sense, but over my years of practice, several times in long retreats—I can't even say exactly what it was—but it felt like a series of small deaths. Not aspects of my personality I wished away, but more like views that I was believing about who I was, about my personality. And they would just start to melt away or be seen through.

Even though it was liberating, there could be this sense of nostalgia for something going away that was familiar. That's comfortable, you know, like in that Peanuts comic from when I was a kid, with Linus and his old blanket. Your old cozy, smelly, holey blanket, but it makes you feel good, so you slip into it. A kind of nostalgia for whatever it is—a certain sense of self—even though in the going away, in the seeing through it really, seeing it was never real to begin with, there's quite a freedom. I find that interesting, that nostalgia for samsara.

These are just some examples, but I'm offering them not because there's something wrong when any of these are happening. Rather, I want to remind us that the path is lifelong and all-inclusive. And a lot of the time, we don't realize the understandings that are coming. It's not all in thought.

On retreat, there are times when emotions are coming and going and changing rapidly, and they're all really intense, and you kind of believe them all, and it's exhausting. And we'll say, "Oh, so things are changing." But it doesn't feel like you're getting that insight. It just feels like you're getting thrown all over the place. But on another level, on a deeper level, perception is shifting. Perception is starting to get clearer, to see things more the way they are. It doesn't always make it up into the thought world the way we want it to. So these are extremely valuable and important aspects of our path—in retreat, out of retreat.

Remember, nibbāna is for everyone. And as far as I can tell, except for incredibly rare exceptions, it's very challenging. It's demanding for everyone. In some ways, I would say, freedom from clinging—the

heart-mind that's free from clinging—is absolutely uncompromising. It's not free from clinging except for certain things. Freedom from clinging is just really freedom from *all* clinging.

And with our most sincere intention, and everything we read, and us yakking up here all the time, and ten million instructions, the mind of thinking—of what we know—can't imagine what that uncompromising, radical freedom of heart-mind is like. Whatever we can imagine is limited by what we know, and by what the imagining is. It's impossible. But we want to know ahead of time. We want to aim in the direction of what we think it should feel like. And then when this other stuff comes up that sure isn't what we think it should feel like, we get caught again in our expectations. Or we get caught trying very sincerely to take all of the instructions and figure out which is the best one to apply right now to get to freedom from clinging, or to feeling better, or whatever it is.

But we're all caught up in really what's required of us. The full commitment, the courage, isn't to fix it or figure it out. In those moments when we see we can't possibly know, it's the commitment, the courage to just—in this moment—open. Surrender. It's like this now. Totally open into this moment as it is. Not for anything. But because this is all there is. This moment.

As Dōgen said, "If you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?" Right here. This moment.

And so, to do this again and again—that's what we're all doing here, again and again. We get lost in our stories, in trying and figuring out and applying things. And then, for me, I need to call on my aspiration at this point. When I can see I'm confused, when I'm trying to figure things out, I really connect with opening to truth. For the benefit of all beings, just drop into the moment. And the next moment arises as it does.

It's a really radical trust in the path of awakening. It takes its own path and wends its own way for each of us. Each of us has a different path. It shows up differently. That's why comparing makes absolutely no sense. Of course, that's not going to stop us, as you know. Bonnie was talking about *māna*—we'll keep it up until the last possible moment. By God, I'm going to compare until I die! But it makes no sense because everybody's path, everybody's conditioning is slightly different. And we all have to go through what we have to go through.

So it's about finding the courage to open into this vulnerability, into this kind of love and trust of the mystery of now. For me, more and more over the years, it's become a sense of reconnecting with my aspiration—that brightness of heart, mind, energy that just gives me the courage to show up again. And so I want to encourage you to find ways for yourself. We're all different. What helps you reconnect with that for yourself?

For me, one way is remembering—as I said, just remembering inspiring beings. Another way is when I see that I'm in my story, to widen it out and see that this particular moment of suffering is not just my moment; it's an expression of the human condition. Whatever particular suffering any of us are

experiencing, we're brothers and sisters in that with so many people in this particular moment of life. Opening it beyond the personal—the personal as an expression of all of us, humanity, not separate. That gives me strength to be with it more.

Also, I find when I'm just being with myself on retreat, sitting, walking, going through something, and I'm not really thinking of my aspiration or that real sense of practicing to awaken but also to be of benefit to beings—I'm just doing my thing, practicing, something's hard, and I'm with it for a while, and I think, "Okay, that's enough. I can get up now and go do whatever." And then it comes to mind: "You know what? Just be with this. It's not just for you, but maybe if you're really with it, it might be able to benefit somebody." There's a whole other kind of strength, a courage—like, "Okay, right, let me sit down and be with this again." And it's not like a should at all. It's this really uplifting energy of "Right, let's really understand it." It's a kind of compassion, a kind of love, a *mettā*.

And again, seeing that the attitude with which our mind-heart meets any particular experience is also really helpful. Sogyal Rinpoche says, "If you cultivate the correct motivation within your own experience, it turns into *bodhicitta* all by itself." So the way I think of that is: How does the mind-heart meet this present moment of your experience? Non-aggression in the mind-heart's relationship to a moment of our own personal suffering is the expression of the intention of compassion.

So just playing with that—as difficult as this moment is, just surrender into it for an instant with non-aggression. You don't have to love it. We don't love the things that are difficult. You don't have to like it. But as Ajahn Sumedho says—he calls *mettā* just being with what's difficult without creating anything around it. That seems more possible to me. I'm not going to love my knee pain. But I can just be with it without creating anything around it. Non-aggression, just meeting this painful experience, this sense of self-hatred, this self-blame, this fear—just like this now. It's just like this now. That's manifesting the intention of compassion, and it strengthens the more we do it.

So as I said earlier, one of the things I do to help me reconnect with aspiration when I'm not finding it in myself is to use wise reflection. This is a way we can use in different ways. One is to consciously think of beings I've known who inspire me, like Master Sheng Yen.

It doesn't have to be some amazing master either. It can be just someone you know who manifests great generosity at times, or courage, or compassion. Thinking of that person really lights up that energy in my own heart and mind.

Or if you're a devotional type, as Bonnie was describing the other night, then sometimes thinking of a sense of the lineage—whoever your teachers have been, their practices, going all the way back—just holding that in mind can sometimes really brighten the heart-mind.

I've spent a lot of time in Burma, a lot of time with different nuns at various nunneries, many of them quite poor. These are mostly village women, you could say living a simple life, a poor life, and they're

dedicated to living a virtuous life while also being very generous. Many of the nuns take care of young children. They all have a very—well, not all. I mean, there are good nuns and bad nuns, good monks and bad monks, just like everything. But the sincere nuns, and there are many of them, have a very devotional nature. For many of them, Buddhanussati, reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha, is a very profound practice.

Now for me, I'm not that type. That particular practice doesn't inspire me. A guy talked about it the first night—it really inspires him. We're all different. But I can be with those nuns and see how inspired they get from that reflection. And that inspiration, that love and devotion, lights up something in my own heart. I can appreciate that energy, and it touches a kind of devotion to the truth, which is the way it manifests for me. So it doesn't have to be exactly your way, but letting in the different beautiful, uplifting qualities that we see in people is a profound way, I find, to touch into aspiration, to remind yourself.

I'll tell a little story of another nun who inspired me—Sumanachari. We knew her for several years. There's a group of us that goes every year, and friends donate some money that we offer to these nuns. She was the head nun in a smallish nunnery of about twenty-five nuns—again, poor. When we first met her, like so many of the nunneries, they had no electricity, no decent clean water, just a tiny little building. The building had gotten bigger over the years, and she'd been there quite a while. She came by one day because she knew that we sometimes—I mean, we would offer money anyway, every year—but she came at the end of our time, very earnest and sincere.

We'd always thought of her as a little depressive, a little pulled in, just going along. But our friend Aria speaks fluent Burmese, so we could communicate well. She was saying that she hadn't been able to be at ease in her heart and mind all year because she saw that many of the poor children in that area—and there are many, both young nuns and little kids—had to walk far away to another school started by another nun, about a forty-five minute walk. But in the rainy season, that was too hard for the really little children. So she had this deep wish to start a school for these very small kids. She had nothing, but she asked if we could donate some money just to start it.

We didn't really think she could do it, but we thought, well, we could give three thousand dollars. So we did. We came back the next year, and it was amazing. I've seen this so many times now. It's amazing. With that money, all of the nuns had moved into one little house. They'd given up all their space. She'd used that money to build lean-tos—just roofs, open air—and lots of desks. She had one hundred and fifty little students by then. That means she has to hire teachers, regular teachers at regular salary, all from donated money. These are nuns who live on total donation. She's not the only one who's done that—there are lots of nun schools that do the same. But she had pulled this together in a year.

She came back and she was bright. Her face was radiant. She was exhausted—and she's been more exhausted every year since. But she said, "I'm so happy. My citta, my heart and mind, is at peace. I'm able to just give all that I can to take care of these young kids. It just makes me so happy."

When I think of her, Sumanachari, she's really an ordinary person who manifested this great love and devotion and generosity, year by year by year. I know many like her. So just thinking of people you know who embody these qualities—see how it lights up your heart and mind. And then you can say, okay, let me come back.

Let me be with this moment of back pain for the benefit of all beings. And mean it. Let me just surrender right now.

So just coming back to your aspiration—sometimes you'll feel it deeply, sometimes it seems superficial, but keep it up. It sinks in. It gets deeper. It starts to spread out. And you'll see how it gives us the courage and the determination and the resolution to keep showing up, even when we don't understand, even when we don't see the path before us. We really have to trust that what's occurring now is what it is.

I want to end with two things from the Buddha. Two things he said he never lost sight of: not to shrink from the struggle, and not to rest contented merely with wholesome states of mind. He says it is this unshakable deliverance of heart, of mind, that is the goal of this holy life—its essence, its heartwood, and its end.

Don't settle. Don't settle for anything less.

Thank you for your kind attention. May our sincere practice together today—and these six weeks or three months—be a cause, a condition for our own awakening from confusion. And may the merit be shared with all beings everywhere, that all beings may be freed from suffering.

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