Courage of our Aspirations (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:37

What I wanted to talk about tonight is having the courage of our aspiration and how aspiration can really support us when things get difficult, should that happen.

Just noticing this point in the retreat—well into the middle—is a really interesting time. It's all interesting, but it's really like you're all cooking in different ways now. And we on the teaching side are really privileged. Some days it feels like a privilege to hear everything that's going on and see the wide variations.

The sense I get, always around this time of the retreat, is how much it varies for each person. There's a time when you might be feeling there's a lot of insight. You're really starting to see and understand things. Maybe there's a period where the sense of self isn't so strong, or the craving is really letting go, or you're getting a sense of what simple, quiet awareness is, or whatever it is. You think you're getting some understanding. It's going.

And then the next sitting or the next day, you're back in despair. The patterns of heart and mind seem to have come back. Not only did they come back, but stronger than ever and more gripping than ever. And you're more upset about it because secretly we thought it was over. Even if we didn't think it was over, at least we thought we were getting the retreat together. And now it's gone down the toilet again. And we say, okay, just be mindful. Keep going, keep going. And you walk out thinking, yeah, thanks a lot. Don't you guys have anything helpful to offer? You just keep going and the next time it's like, wow, so amazing, so beautiful. It can change from one step to the next, right?

So how do we keep ourselves renewing, refreshing, re-energizing, recommitting over and over again in the times where it feels like it's all gone awry or it's just like, oh no, one more time. I cannot open to this self-hatred one more time.

That's what I want to talk about—really the power, the courage of aspiration. In the last couple of years in my life, there have been many ways to support our keeping going, but tuning into and consciously contemplating my own particular aspiration has been something that has been really helpful and supportive to me, so I'm sharing that aspect.

Starting with a sense of what the Buddha was teaching and offering, really tuning into the vastness of the path and the fact that he's saying it's freely offered to everyone. You know the famous phrase, *Ehi Passiko*

—you too come and see. That's something he said to everyone. Not "this is how it is, you have to believe it," but "this is what I've learned. *Ehi Passiko*, you too, come and see." All are invited. Not just monastics, even though the particular way we've been offering the teachings has come from—has been kept going 2,500 years through—the monastic tradition of nuns and monks in the Southeast Asian Buddhist countries. It's not just for monastics; it's for everyone.

And what he's saying really—I just want to read this because it inspires me—is that we not sell ourselves short with what's possible. This is the Buddha talking in the Saṃyutta Nikāya about the Third Noble Truth. I'm not reading the whole thing, but just part of this particular way of describing the Third Noble Truth:

And one who has considered all the contrasts of this earth and is no more disturbed by anything whatever in the world, the peaceful one, freed from rage, from sorrow and from longing, has passed beyond birth and decay. This I call neither arising, nor passing away, nor standing still, nor being born, nor dying. There is neither foothold, nor development, nor any basis. This is the end of suffering. Hence, the purpose of the holy life does not consist in acquiring alms or honor or fame, nor in gaining morality, concentration, or the eye of knowledge. That unshakable deliverance of the heart—that indeed is the object of the holy life. That is its essence. That is its goal.

I just love that. As aspiration, not as "this is where I am now," but aspiration as really—and that's just one way of expressing it, that's what the Buddha offers. I'm not saying that's what one's aspiration should be. It's unique to each of us. But the sense of his holding that out as possibility—to me, when I feel like I'm just spinning in my stuff, or I'm on retreat too, and there are times on retreat where you're putting one foot in front of the other and going, why? What has this got to do with anything?

And just reminding myself of that potential, of aspiration.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa said—we've mentioned him before—there's a talk well-known in English-speaking countries, a translation called "Nibbana for Everyone." This was in the 1980s or early 1990s, before he died. He was speaking to Thai laypeople and saying, you know, it's come to be believed that Nibbana, freedom, is either just for very rare monks and nuns, or something that only happened back in the old days. That it has nothing to do with people now—it was a nice idea but, you know, forget about it for us. And he's saying no, Nibbana is for everyone.

The short synopsis: Nibbana means "cool." He's saying it's that state of heart, of mind that's cool from the freedom, from the coolness of no kilesa at that moment. Just a moment—and sometimes even Sayadaw U Pandita would talk about momentary freedom. A moment where we just touch the sense of what's possible when there's that real, steady mindfulness and awareness without any clinging or aversion or me-me-me-ing. And we have moments of that, just moments where we get a glimpse. Buddhadasa called it a momentary sense of the coolness of heart and mind, free from kilesa, but with mindfulness and wisdom. He says we all have many moments of that because we couldn't survive without it.

The fire of the kilesas, the burning of clinging and wanting and aversion and the endless—seemingly endless, but it's not—me-me-me-ing. Have you noticed how exhausting that is? How sometimes it really does feel like a fire? And just the sense of ease, of peace, of coolness, really, when that's gone. The word comes from really hot countries where coolness is more a sense of peace. I know in Barre right now, in Massachusetts, you talk about coolness, it might not be the best simile. But the sense of ease—just noticing that, touching it, and thinking this is the potential for everyone.

So just to bring it into the realm of reminding us why the Buddha taught, why we all are continually inspired and motivated to spend our lives both practicing and sharing this—because it's such an incredible possibility for each one of our minds and hearts, and for the world.

This sense of aspiration—talking to someone today in German, *Absicht*, that's aspiration—not a one-time decision but a really incredibly supportive, onward-leading aspect of our path, of our whole spiritual practice, which is really the path of our whole life, not just about a meditation retreat.

So I'll say a bit about aspiration and the difference between aspiration and craving, desire. We can often get confused between those two, of course. Aspiration as a wholesome sense of our deepest motivation, our deepest, really deepest purpose—I'm talking now in terms of our life, in terms of our awakening heart and mind. From this aspect, it could be many things. But it's a wholesome factor. And one can feel when it's wholesome aspiration: it has a quality of uplifting our energy, supporting our energy. It brightens our heart, our mind. It gives a sense of *ah*.

So for me, when I read what I just read from the Buddha, if it tunes into aspiration, it's a sense of *ah*—insp iration. An in-breath, filling the body, filling the mind, the heart with life, with possibility. You can feel the wholesomeness. And it gives the faith, the confidence, the energy to do. Really, the energy to drop into the next moment with total commitment.

But how it can shift, of course, to greed, to wanting—and at times it will—it feels really completely different. Because the attention starts to get focused on the result. So maybe the aspiration is for complete awakening, and that can be really inspiring, uplifting, energizing, brightening. And then another time I could read this, but the mind, the heart is a little bit—or a lot—colored by greed or self-hatred, and not quite seeing it. It's like, well, that's just hopeless. That's impossible. How far am I from that? Really far. And then the comparing comes in, and the sense of looking—one eye on the goal, or both eyes away from here. And it feels different, way different. It can be frustrating. It can be demoralizing. Or you start making the checklist: How much more do I have to do? How far have I gotten? But it's not an inspiring, onward-leading state. It's a suffering, confused state.

You can flip back and forth. Gil Fronsdal has written a little about this, and I like the way he described it.

One way aspiration becomes craving is through expectation. "I've been meditating—how far along am I? Have I gotten there yet? Am I first stage yet?" We measure ourselves through expectation. But at its best,

aspiration has an openness to possibility without a need for anything to happen. To me, this is the most succinct, beautiful explanation: an openness to possibility, to the vastness of possibility, without a need for anything to happen. This is the practice in a nutshell.

This does not mean that we do not act on our aspirations, but that we do not cling to the success, to the results. There is something wonderful in a healthy aspiration that is not dependent on outcome. This isn't something we can just own, but I'm saying it to drop into our hearts and minds. You get the sense of the difference—when the aspiration is alive and yet not dependent on outcome, it gives the energy, the determination to simply take the next step.

A sense of what's really true for each of us, our deepest aspiration, our motivation—I've found for myself, and talking and reading with many other people too, it's not so much something that comes through thinking about what it should be. As soon as there's a "should" in there, it's not really quite the thing. Whatever is a deep aspiration for you tends to arise in an intuitive kind of way. I feel it could come up in the heart, in the mind, often in the silence, in the stillness of heart, in a contented mind. That can happen on retreat, though it doesn't have to be on retreat. But not when we're in the midst of trying and wanting and comparing and doing—just when there's a stillness to get more in touch with ourselves. I'm sure many, if not all of you, are familiar with that.

And what it is for you could be whatever it is—to cultivate compassion, to completely awaken, to be a better person. There's no right or wrong about this. But taking the time from time to time, or just having it in the back of your mind, notice if and when something like that arises. And don't let your little personality trap you into thinking, "Oh no, that's not possible for me. Who do you think you are? This is an ego trip." When the vast, powerful depth of a deep aspiration arises, don't dismiss it.

Say, take what the Buddha says—this unshakable heart, this unshakable mind. Say that arises as an aspiration. I know in my mind the next thought could quite possibly be, "Yeah, right, fat chance." Or, "You think so? Who do you think you are? Maybe the Buddha." That's just the old habits talking. Blah, blah, blah—thank you very much. It's just thoughts arising. But the sense of the power, the depth, the beauty of whatever aspiration comes for you—I feel it's so uplifting, so onward-leading, and so important to honor that, really. To let it in. It's really beyond the personal, you know. It's the personal that thinks, "Oh no, it couldn't be possible." But that quality, whatever it is that comes up for you—just let it in. Let it sit there. And as best you can, simply honor it without putting it down, without going into personal stories.

Sometimes the aspiration can be inspired. For me, it sometimes came from reading the Buddha. But sometimes it comes from talking to someone else who's experiencing inspiration, or hearing about someone else. So I want to share a story of a woman, because this is actually what made me want to talk about this tonight.

Some days ago I was talking to a friend, a long-term meditator and practitioner. She has been involved for many years in what's called the Tibet Oral History Project, which interviews elderly Tibetan refugees,

gathering whole stories of their lives. Some of them are available on the web. She had told me about this some years previously and had shared a particular story—she'd actually sent me the whole interview.

When we were talking the other day, she just kind of burst out again, remembering this woman she had interviewed: Jang Chup Palmo. The depth of her wisdom, the simplicity of her kindness and love and caring for everyone around her, the incredible suffering she'd been through and the practice in her life—it was so inspiring to my friend. And remember, my friend had met this person in person just a few years ago. This is a real, living person, which sometimes is so much more immediate. You might think, "Well, the Buddha, okay, but that was 2,600 years ago—maybe things have changed." But the profoundness, the depth of her wisdom, what she'd gone through, and here she is sitting there, this really loving, simple person caring for everyone.

She said, "That really inspired me. Why settle for less? Why settle for less?" You know, it's really possible.

So I'm going to share this story, because my friend inspired me—she who was inspired by this woman. It's a long story, so I'll just give you a brief synopsis.

Jangchup Palmo was born in Tibet in 1943 to a nomadic family, fairly well-to-do at that time. When she was about fifteen, after the Chinese had been in the country for a few years but when they started to really destroy the monasteries, she and her family and village were all trying to flee to India, as so many did. They got involved in a firefight with some of the Chinese army. Most of the relatives she was with—her parents and siblings—were killed. And she was shot; she had several bullet wounds in her legs and arms. She was fifteen at this time.

She was captured and taken—not really to a jail camp, but to a sort of house arrest. They took care of her and treated her wounds. But she was so determined; she wanted to escape so that she could practice the Dharma. Her family had been quite religious, quite involved with Buddhist practice, knowing many lamas, and she herself had been quite spiritual from a young age. She very much couldn't practice where she was, and she wanted to say prayers for her dead relatives and simply practice the Dharma.

After a couple of different attempts, finally when she was sixteen and had more or less healed from her leg wounds, she managed to escape with one other person. This is in Tibet, in the winter. They managed to escape and flee. It's a whole long story—I'm cutting this short. Through the winter, falling in icy ponds, not having any food, going over passes, encountering others who would support them. One woman took them to her house and completely gave them food for the journey and ways to carry it. Finally she and this other woman managed to escape. They traveled for one year—one year walking around Tibet with nothing, escaping from the Chinese.

They got to Mount Kailash. And when they arrived, she began really wanting to do practice. After a while, her friend said, "It's too much. I'm too cold, there's not enough food, I really can't stay." She said, "Of course, fine, go on your way." But she really wanted to stay at Mount Kailash and practice. Now she's

sixteen, seventeen at this point.

So she starts doing full-length prostrations around Mount Kailash, going on and on, taking weeks and months—just storing a little tsampa and then doing prostrations, going back and getting the food. She's doing this, living in caves for some time, really trying to purify her heart and mind so she can say prayers for her dead relatives.

At this point, she met a couple of lamas who came—realized beings. They were talking to her, asking, "What are you doing?" She described her practice, how she was trying to practice to be enlightened and also to say prayers for her parents. She said, "I felt agonized by the thought that the Chinese had caused us suffering and killed without reason, yet I continued to practice."

The lama asked her, "How do you perceive the Chinese?"

She said, "Well, to be honest, I perceive the Chinese as enemies. They caused me so much harm, and I believe that they're enemies."

He said, "You are doing a great deal of practice, but you know it's necessary to have love and compassion. If you continue to perceive the Chinese as enemies, this does not conform with the Buddha Dharma. You really will never achieve complete enlightenment as long as that's how you are perceiving the Chinese." The lama told her, "If you practice this—love and compassion—the enemy will not be the enemy but like your relatives. If you can love the enemy without any degree of difference, if you can learn to feel no difference, this is what you need for practice."

She, of course, had great faith—she'd been brought up in great faith. So she really took it in and vowed to this Rinpoche, "Yes, I really will practice. I want to do this."

So she's staying now around Mount Kailash for years and years, practicing, just living in caves. There's nowhere else to live.

And she said, I put in tremendous effort to learn. I practiced again and again, really hard. I exercised the practice again and again, even while eating, and finally with the Lama's blessing, and doing pilgrimage and prostrations around the mountain, meditating, and putting in every effort I could, really focusing single-mindedly on this—this coming to love and compassion. I couldn't do it for almost two years.

So I'm thinking, only two years? She couldn't do it? It improved a bit. Then a little bit more. But the thought kept returning—the thought of the Chinese as enemies. So she kept practicing while at Mount Kailash.

And we think, you know—I think, I don't know what you think—but I think, okay, I've been doing metta for a couple of weeks, and I still don't quite love myself. She spent at least seven years there, practicing, practicing, practicing, with this sincere devotion, but also the honesty of seeing. So how do you find the energy? How do you find the determination? How do you find the inspiration to keep going? This is what

inspires me.

She said, I lived at Mount Kailash for many years, practicing Dharma. There was no place to sleep except in caves. And so the interviewer is asking her—she'd been living in the States for many years at the point of this interview—and the interviewer says, after spending seven years, can you help us understand what did you come to understand from that? And she says, if one practices diligently, it certainly is possible to realize enlightenment and help sentient beings. And those two are like conjoined.

But this is what she's saying now, how she is now. The essence of practice: I treat everyone with love. When people appreciate it, there is joy all around. That's the result of practicing the Dharma. However, you may not be able to practice love and compassion as the Dharma teaches all at once. Just know a moment of peace, the possibility.

She says, I do my Dharma practice. I continue to do my Dharma practice that has brought me so much positive results. However, since I live in constant touch with human beings, these days I strive to bring happiness and peace to the people, try to alleviate their suffering and multiply their joy and do whatever I can to help people. That is my work.

That's what I teach people in ordinary words—to love your parents and your family and then spread out to your community and spread out to the country. And then she's really working on developing love and peace between countries. To speak in terms of the Dharma teachings, you must really practice for years and years, which is difficult.

This is a real person. I think she's passed away now, but I got the transmission from talking to my friend, and this kind of thing is like, oh, okay. This is possible. It's possible, and if the mind isn't covered with klesha at the moment, that sense of possibility, of potential—if that's what speaks to you—can really bring an energy of willingness. Not the grasping to be like her, but as she says, okay, years of practice. Can I just open into this moment as it is?

That's really how the aspiration can support us. Not in looking forward, but in really moment to moment mindful awareness—what's happening now—to meet it with fullness of attention, the kindness that comes with a compassionate awareness, and no expectation. Each moment is like an opening into the unknown. We have no idea what way each of our paths is going to take.

And even though I doubt most of us have the degree of physical suffering that she went through, we all have our own particular difficulties and sufferings and joys in our life. It's another kind of personality thing to say, well, my suffering isn't that much, so it's nothing, and push it away. Whatever suffering is occurring, that's the place where compassion and wisdom can land and grow.

So it's like opening into the unknown. I need the aspiration to give me the faith and the courage to keep doing that, moment after moment after moment. And as I said in the beginning of the talk, certainly for me, I think for most people on retreat—and I'm mostly talking about being on retreat here just because

that's where we are—we keep on coming to places where it's difficult, no?

I call it, sometimes it feels like hitting the wall. You're going and going and going, and suddenly it's like, oh no. We hit the wall in so many different kinds of ways, and some walls are harder than others. Sometimes the wall is just a little bit of foam, and you just kind of bounce and can keep on going. Sometimes the wall is really solid brick, and you run into it at full speed, and it's like, whack. "I can't keep going, I'm out of here."

And it almost doesn't matter what the particular content is, although there are different contents. It's just that sense of being thrown back. How do I find the trust and the energy to just open again, land again in this moment?

Ajahn Sumedho gives this teaching—I think people have mentioned it—where he's talking about being in Thailand when he was practicing as a monk in the hot season, and it's really hot, and these little kutis, these little huts with a tin roof. Have you ever been under a tin roof when it's like a hundred and ten degrees out? Man, you cook. This is from personal experience. You cook. And he says he's sitting in there just sweating through his robes, just sweating through his robes. "I cannot bear this one more moment." Have you ever had that feeling—about whatever? He said, "And then I would find that I could."

I love that. I use that so often. "This is just unbearable." And then my mind would go, "Yeah, what's actually unbearable?" And that's not like a snide comment—it's a real inquiry: what's actually unbearable about this? And usually I find it's just that there was a moment of aversion, just saying I don't feel like being here anymore, basically. Then I found that I could.

So there are different ways we hit the wall. I just want to mention a couple of them. There are many more. Just maybe so you know you're not alone, although maybe nobody here will have experienced any of these, in which case I'm just revealing myself. But I tend to doubt that.

One way is simply how impermanence manifests in relation to either the technique of our practice or what's arising in the sitting and the walking—how impermanence manifests, and we don't see it as impermanence, as causes and conditioning changing. We take it personally. If you've ever noticed, when things are smooth, you're with the breath and it's quiet and subtle, it's pretty effortless, there's not much clinging, you think, "Yeah, this is now how it is. This is really how it is." And you go out to walk or you come to another sitting and the mind is just all over the place and there's nothing but thinking. And we think, "What did I do wrong?" Right? Isn't that what we think? "What did I do wrong?"

There's a sutta from the time of the Buddha I like a lot in this regard, with a monk called Asaji who had been really ill and probably on the verge of dying. But he had been practicing a long time and had strong practice, and so the Buddha came and was talking to him. Asaji was sick, afflicted, gravely ill. But he was very troubled. He's saying to the Buddha, "I'm very troubled by regret, by remorse." And the Buddha says, "Why? Have you done unskillful things? Have you done unwholesome things? Have you had bad virtue?"

And he said, "No, not at all." So the Buddha said, "So what's bothering you, basically?"

And Asaji says, "Well, formerly, Venerable, when I was ill, I could keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations. I could calm the body with concentration, with samādhi. But now I cannot achieve concentration. I cannot calm the bodily formations with concentration. Now I think, oh no, let me not fall away." Oh no, I can't get concentrated anymore, I'm losing it. Does that sound familiar to anybody?

And the Buddha basically said, "Asaji, haven't I said over and over that the conditions coming together give rise to the results, and when the conditions change, the result will change?" Formally, you could attain concentration. He's basically saying—okay, this is my synopsis—"Asaji, you're gravely ill. You're dying. The conditions for concentration arising do not exist."

But in my teaching, concentration is not the essence. The essence is insight, the path and the fruit. He's actually saying, don't glom onto that and get all upset because the conditions have changed.

But I like this story because that's just what we do, you know? "Oh no, it's gone. It was all about this."

So that's one way. Just noticing that when things change, instead of taking it personally, notice how the conditions have changed. Oh, it's like this now. We need some inspiration, some trust, some faith sometimes to do that—not to get sucked into our personal story of "I blew it, I'm not good enough, what am I doing wrong?"

Another way this shows up is not just when things change, but when we're really seeing things clearly and it seems like so much that we feel, "I can't see this anymore." Often around this point in retreat, people start saying, "I'm seeing so much clinging—it feels like every single moment, what I see is clinging." Or another person will say that about aversion. Or someone will say it about conceit, or just the sense of self: "It's here all the time, every single moment."

And we'll say, "Oh yeah, great, that's great, you're seeing it." But it feels unbearable, right? "I can't bear to keep seeing this anymore." It doesn't even feel like insight anymore. It just wears us down.

Even though I always say it's true, it's not complete. We haven't quite seen it so clearly before, so when we start to see it clearly, it stands out—that's all we see. Sense of self arising about every single little thing. "Oh my God, I never saw it before." So it really stands out. It's true, but it isn't complete. It's a little bit magnified—or a lot magnified—because of what Sayadaw U Tejaniya said that I love: concentration magnifies experience. And the kilesas exaggerate.

Put those two together, and that's when we go wild with yogi mind, right? When something that's just a small thing becomes huge.

So something that's really an insight—seeing sense of self arising, or how much clinging there is, or how every little thing can seem like clinging—that's really useful insight, seeing how subtle and how frequently it arises. It's magnified through the stillness of some concentration. Even those of you who think you have

no concentration—that's because you have some idea what it should look like. But there's some stillness, some steadiness in the mind. Otherwise you couldn't even sit here for forty-five minutes without going nuts.

So we're seeing it with concentration. But if there's a little bit of aversion or a little bit of selfing, that's the kilesa that magnifies it further. And that's when it's like, "Oh my God, I've hit the wall. I can't look at this one more time."

For me, that's when I can call up the aspiration. Okay, I don't know where it's going, but there's the trust to just drop in. Okay, I can't bear it. And then I found that I could. Just this moment—not the whole future, not the whole past—just this moment.

Or when we see our bad habits, our unpleasant habits of mind, and the patterns that have been difficult, and we're seeing them really clearly but with insight. We say, "Oh, I always get reactive in this situation, and I see how that's driven," and we really understand it. And we have this sense: maybe it's not going to happen so much anymore. Do we really have that hope? First it's a belief, then it's a hope. And then we see it not only happening—with awareness it's happening, so it's more painful. And then we act on it again, still, with awareness.

And we're thinking... do you know what I mean? You can watch yourself doing the unskillful thing, which is actually better than doing it without awareness. Even the Buddha said that. But it's more painful. That's why it's better.

Because... no. I know. That sounds sadistic. It's not. Really.

It's wisdom that abandons the unskillful patterns. It's not an act of personal will. But when we're acting in unskillful ways and the awareness is coming along, we go, "Oh wow. Eating that seventeenth orange, like I mentioned the other time—that actually isn't really bringing happiness. Maybe I don't need to do that." And that puts it down. Wisdom puts it down. But the wisdom has to kind of come along to see how the suffering is being created through the wanting and the aversion.

When we don't see that, that's again like hitting a wall. Not only are my patterns still here, they're worse. I'm more neurotic than when I started. And it's like, what's the point? That's another place where we hit the wall.

Just one other thing I want to mention. Sometimes when we're really opening into new insights, perceptions maybe we haven't had before, or not in the same depth—maybe really an intimation of what non-clinging, what the heart-mind of non-clinging could really be like in a moment. Or an intimation of really the sense of self, the sense of thing, just kind of not arising. You know how sometimes fear will come when there's that little sense of "oh, it could be possible." And that's okay. Fear just comes. That's nothing personal. It's just a habit. That's not what I'm calling hitting the wall.

But sometimes, at different times, you can get a sense of intimation. "Oh, non-clinging is really... the liberation of heart and mind through non-clinging is really radical." It's uncompromising. It's not, "I let go of clinging to anything except this one particular thing I still get to hang onto." It's not like we can abandon all the unpleasant experiences but still feel personally gratified by the pleasant ones.

I remember one retreat, I was suddenly realizing awareness really wasn't picking up the unpleasant—aversion wasn't coming—but the pleasant ones would come in and it was kind of like, "Oh, let's land in that one." That's still... you don't get to have it both ways, you know?

So sometimes there can be, at least for me, I've noticed an intimation: "Oh, so liberation means even that. I don't even get to hold on personally even to that, whatever it might be." And there can just be this little sense of "I don't know if I want to go there." And that's because it's some idea we have. We don't really know, but it's like, "Oh."

So I've noticed for myself, it's like a sense of wanting to go back to the pleasure garden. You know, the Buddha was brought up in all these pleasure gardens and everything, and he left and went on his quest. But sometimes we're out there and we think, "Oh, I just would like to go back, just for a little bit, to the pleasure garden." It's not like we're abandoning all pleasant experience, but the pleasure garden is that sense of feeling fulfilled by it.

Talking to someone today—and I feel that myself—sometimes I wish I could just go back to thinking, "Oh, if I could just go see that movie, it's really going to do it for me." And I'm going to still go see the movie, but we know it doesn't really do it for us.

So this kind of... Chögyam Trungpa called it "a nostalgia for samsara." Yeah, that's a great line, isn't it?

I've felt this sometimes in my practice, at different times, where there's a particular personality pattern or some way I've perceived myself that I wasn't even aware of. And it just becomes clear. It just comes up and it's so obvious, and something about it is just dissipating, going away. And there's a sense of a small death of some idea of myself that isn't even particularly pleasant, but it's comfortable. There's almost a sense of grief or mourning for the passing of some sense of myself—which is just an idea, because that sense of yourself doesn't really go very far. But you start to see through it. And so sometimes that's like, "Ah."

No more. But, you know, we never just stay in one place. You can notice when that's a funny kind of hitting the wall—*okay, I think I'll stop for a while. I don't want to give that up.* But that's just a momentary thought, an idea. As Buddhadasa says, Nibbana is for everyone. And it's demanding for all of us. It's challenging for all of us. We're all going to face, to meet many, many really difficult, confusing moments on our path of awakening.

And these are, in some ways, really important and valuable moments on our path. Because this is where we're really up against the belief systems we maybe don't know we have, or the areas we've gotten

comfortable in but that are really keeping us in our little cage of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, our little cage of what we believe is possible for this personality, maybe without even realizing it. And it's not like we have to break the cage—we just have to see, *oh, that's an idea.* Bring in whatever inspires you. That's an idea of what's actually just happening now. The idea can hang around there, but just drop into what's happening now.

It's impossible not to come up against this. And our path is lifelong and all-inclusive. It includes not just being on retreat—everything in our life, all aspects of our life. Freedom from clinging is uncompromising. Really, there's no part left out.

And I believe that with our most sincere intentions and aspirations, and everything we read and talk about and hear from other people, our minds, our thinking minds, can't really imagine what that would be like. We can only imagine a kind of takeoff from what we already know. I know in my mind I want to know something ahead of time—peaceful, nice, we use all these pleasant words—but we don't really know. We don't know what to aim for. We want a sense of what awakening is going to be like, something I can compare to now that keeps me going, but the only thing I can say about awakening in words is really freedom of heart and mind, freedom of mind from non-clinging. Real awakening is not going to be some state that confirms us and makes us feel all comfortable and secure. It's not going to make us feel good, because it's the sense of *us* that gets seen through. But from the sense of me trying to understand, that's the only way we can think about it.

So along the way, at different times, we're really inspired, really energized. Beautiful things happen, really amazing insights. The heart develops, we're open, we feel love, we feel compassion, we see the change. And then at other times, we're really challenged. All of our views and assumptions—and the ones we don't even know we have—are going to get challenged. It can get to where I love it, usually, when all of a sudden I think I'm really ill at ease and then go, *oh, that's how I thought things were.* That's the view in the background that is running the show right now. Oh, great. Great to see that. It's not how it is.

So to me, this is really why we need to keep finding, in each of our own ways, the energy, the commitment, the determination, the aspiration to just keep putting one foot in front of the other. One moment, one moment, opening to what is without needing to know what it's going to be like, where it's going to go, how our life is going to unfold.

In terms of aspiration, I want to offer this: find for yourself not only what aspiration comes up for you, but explore—and probably you already know for yourself—what helps you in the times of difficulty, or when it's just dry, or when you've lost touch with that inspiration. Find ways to reconnect with what keeps you going.

For me, one of the reasons I read the story about the Tibetan woman is because it really gets me back in touch with inspiration, with aspiration. And for me, calling to heart, to mind, various people, beings that I know—they don't have to be completely awakened, but they may manifest different aspects of beautiful qualities that brighten the heart and mind. And the way it works is that aspect of that person wakes up

that same aspect in our own heart and mind. Finding that connection, different people—like I thought today of this monk I know in Burma. I've known him for about fifteen years. He's just a very simple, peaceful guy, U Jayanta, very mettā-filled. And he's just looked the same for fifteen years.

I don't know, he doesn't look a day older. We go to visit him every year when we're there, and he's just simple and friendly. You feel metta and peace in his very simple monastery up in the Sagaing Hills. I have a picture of him. He doesn't say much—it's not like you get this deep wisdom—but you get metta and peace and love. It's just who he is. I get chills when I think about him. And that's because if I couldn't access that in my own heart-mind stream, it wouldn't inspire me. So when you think of other people that bring whatever aspect alive in you, realize that it's coming alive in you.

I know lots of different nuns in Burma because I go there every year. There are many, many women in Burma who are nuns. And it's not that they're all really super awakened. Being a nun has been one of the not-so-many avenues, especially in the past though it's changing a little now, for women who weren't married or didn't have kids to live a safe and healthy life. And many of the nuns also take in poor orphan girls, or girls whose parents or the monk in their home village have asked the nuns to take because they're very poor, or they only have one parent, or they can't really get an education where they live and the nuns can help them go to school. So a lot of the nunneries function as a kind of safety net for poor young girls.

These nuns—I can think of a lot of them, but I'll just tell you about one. Many of them don't all do what we think of as intensive meditation practice, although some have that deep aspiration. But what many of the nuns do as their practice is Buddhānussati, recollecting the qualities of the Buddha. They do this with chanting and contemplation, every day, every day. And you can feel it brings them really deep faith, a deep kind of inspiration that shines out of them and gives them the energy to do what is often quite a hard life, quite a demanding life.

One nun became a nun when she was sick in her twenties and almost dying. Her parents were about to sell their last things, give their last money to support her and get doctors. And she said, "Forget it, I'm going to become a nun instead, so you don't have to give up your whole farm." She became a nun and she had so much faith that it healed her. This was about not quite twenty years ago. It healed her, and then her sister also became a nun. They came to Rangoon, really excited to become deep meditation nuns. They went to a meditation center, and this is really what they wanted to do.

Then there was a big cyclone in their home village down in the Delta, and the Sayadaw, the head monk of the village, sent them maybe ten or fifteen young girls to take care of. This is very common. So they had to do a complete 180-degree turn. This is Daw Uttara, that's her name. A 180-degree turn—they left the meditation monastery, found some little piece of land that they had to raise money to buy, built a little shacky bamboo hut, and started taking care of these little girls. The girls become nuns, and they all live on donations, alms food, money for their clothes. They're completely dedicated to taking care of these little girls.

So this is a twenty-year project. Their lives just turned around completely. They're totally doing it with complete love and tenderness. I've visited them every year for about the last nine years, and you can see the little girls growing. New ones come, of course—it never really ends. But the tenderness, the care, the love, the friendliness—it's not like, "Oh, we've got to do this and then we're going to go meditate." This is now their practice. And the faith and love just shines out.

They still say, "When the girls are grown, if they don't want to stay nuns, great. But we've given them a grounding in morality, in how to live a good life." They help them go to school, and the schools, by the way, are run by other nuns who have devoted their whole lives to starting these schools, because a lot of poor kids can't afford the government school fees. And so they're helping these kids with all the love in their heart, and this is their dharma practice. They still say, "And then when the girls are gone, we'll go back and do our meditation."

So I think of Daw Uttara. She really inspires me too, with this sense of deep faith, and that you turn around and what life presents you becomes the practice of compassion and awakening.

So that's one way. Find in your own life, maybe a picture, someone you know. I was just talking to James, and he says he gets all teary about Audrey Hepburn. She really inspires him. It could be anybody who has particular qualities of goodness that come out for you. This is just who I happen to know that brings it out for me. It doesn't have to be Buddhist, it doesn't have to be holy—it's just whatever brings out these qualities and you can feel it touches your energy, your aspiration.

So find your own inspiration.

Thank you very much. Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

That unshakable deliverance of the heart—that indeed is the essence of the holy life.

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