Aspiration and Courage

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:21

So tonight I want to just offer some thoughts about reconnecting, motivating our aspiration and courage.

At this point on the retreat, I'm talking to various people and it's totally the normal time. Some people may be starting to notice that this practice can be challenging. Have you noticed that? And not in the way you expected it to be, which is really the main challenging part.

This is really normal. The first most obvious way is just that second week, third week, the hindrances come up, as John talked about last week. I don't want to go into those a lot, but that's just really kind of basic what happens. The way I think of it, it's like a two-year-old having a temper tantrum. You're saying we're going to sit and walk and pay attention to what's happening, and it's like, "No, I'm not going to, and you can't make me. I'll get angry, or I'll get into desire, or I'll just get restless or sleepy or doubt." We just kind of go, okay, okay, fine. You have your little tantrum. We keep on going. We keep on sitting.

So that's the least of it. The hindrances are the least of it. That's obvious, even though it's a lot of suffering.

There are lots of ways, but what I want to talk about tonight is some of the ways it starts to be challenging: really our ideas, our views, maybe not quite realized, our expectations of what practice is or how it should be going or what's good—they all get challenged, one way or another. And we tend to take that personally and not recognize quite what's happening. And it's really difficult, which is why I want to talk about aspiration.

Just a couple of simple ways. I could give the whole talk just giving examples of how that happens, but I don't want to do that because you each have your own examples. But just two simple ones that I've noticed from talking to people the last couple days.

One way is sudden change in the practice. You're going along and you think finally the mindfulness got more steady, or the mind got more calm, or things were happening fast, or whatever. In your mind, there's the view that this is good—definitely it'll be more pleasant. We never think it's going well when it's less pleasant. So it's more pleasant, or it's more easeful, or it's matching some idea you have. And then suddenly, through no fault of yours, it changes. It just changes. You're going along fine. You didn't do something wrong. And suddenly the clarity's gone. You don't know what's happening. Everything's flying all over. That calm and peace is restless.

How many of us go, "Okay, that's what's happening now"? For a moment we try that, but secretly we're trying that so it goes away, right? No, that's what's happening. Then we think, "What did I do wrong?" That happens.

Another way that people are seeing too, and we will more and more, is you're going along and you're seeing things—you're seeing impermanence, say, in different personality patterns. Or just take something simple: the habit of wanting. Just wanting to be first in line for breakfast. And seeing that, and the suffering of it—the awareness really sees through it, feels the suffering of that wanting. In that moment it lets it go. You think, wow, I really see in all the ways in my life I need to be first, the whole nine yards. Yeah, I really got this.

I understand it. The suffering of craving, of my personality patterns. And, you know, that's great. Really, there was wisdom seeing it.

And then the next day at breakfast, you're dying because you've got to be first in line. And you go, "Why? I saw this. I know this. It's over. Why is this happening again?" Or you come back to another retreat and you go, "Again? This? Again? Didn't I go through this to a great degree of suffering the last time? I got it. I've handled this." Apparently not.

But you get a sense of what I mean, right? I'm not just talking off the top of my head—how we suffer from that, not so much from what's happening, but from the idea that it shouldn't be this way. Somehow I did something wrong in practice, or I understood it. Why is it back? There's a way we take it personally. And then what comes? Doubt. Huge doubt. In yourself, or in the technique, or in the Dharma, or in what we're telling you, or in whatever. And then the whole thing can start to spin.

It's not going to stay that way. This is normal. But I just want to speak to it, because what really could be starting to go on here—this is different from just the hindrances which come up—is in each of these simple examples, the big suffering is, of course, not wanting to be with the unpleasant, wanting the pleasant. That's almost always the bottom line, identifying with it. But it's also our views. Maybe we don't quite recognize they're in the background—views of what practice is supposed to be, how it's supposed to work—and then unrealistic expectations.

This, I think, is big time. Certainly for me. Our tendency in this speedy culture is to expect results quick, quick. We're not getting it. This is a whole life process. And that's already quick. If you look at how the Buddha talked about it, he's talking about eons of lifetimes. We'll just stick to one. But Sharon always talks about the first year IMS was opened and they got mail addressed to the "Instant Meditation Society." That's kind of what we think. Okay, I saw it. I got it. It's over. Let's move on. What's new? What's interesting? Greed again? No, I'm not interested in greed anymore. I got that one.

I'm making this sound simple, but I think it's really the radical nature, the profundity of what the Buddha is talking about—what real freedom from suffering is. We talk about it in the Buddhist context, but I'm not an expert on any other religion.

The little bit I know of other traditions suggests that at the heart of any mystical aspect of religion is the same kind of radical nature—seeing through the normal, culturally conditioned habits of our mind on a

very deep level.

As I think I said the other night, or one of us did, the Buddha always said his teachings are kind of taking us against the stream of the current, against the main part of society—not everyone, even then. And of course, externally, just coming and doing this is really not the normal thing in the big picture.

What I want to talk about now is how we're coming up against the wall where our expectations aren't being met, where our ideas that we don't even know we're holding are being challenged. And this is so unsettling to us. It's in the really subtle—well, sometimes they're gross, but they're also very subtle—habits of our mind that are creating the suffering moment to moment.

So the Buddha's teaching is radical. Radical in looking at this. It encompasses all aspects of our life. His teaching that the real freedom of heart-mind is in a moment, or altogether, when the heart-mind consciousness is free from the greed that is clinging—whether it's taking the form of greed or aversion—and free from the delusion of not recognizing accurately, of taking it personally.

This he laid out in the Four Noble Truths, which I'm just going to name—it's a whole bunch of talks in itself. The radical nature of the first truth is the fact of dukkha, of the unreliable, unsatisfactory nature of all phenomena, all existence. It doesn't mean everything's bad or unpleasant, but not reliable in terms of lasting satisfaction. Everything.

Just even looking at life that way—wow. Most people don't even want to think that. And it's so radical, because it's not just the unpleasant things, it's everything. That's a whole other talk.

The second truth is the cause. As you know, the Buddha named the cause of our suffering, the cause that he is offering us tools to understand, and the understanding will free us. The word in Pali is *taṇhā*, which literally translates into English as thirst. This quality of craving can manifest as greed wanting something, or as pushing away the unpleasant. And it's not about the object—it's about this quality in the heart-mind, in the consciousness, just this leaning forward, this pushing back that clouds and distorts pure perception.

The real suffering of it, suffering in the moment, is that it keeps us from recognizing accurately. But what it really keeps us from recognizing accurately, when it's present and unrecognized, is the liberating truth of the pure heart and mind, that radiant nature of heart and mind. Someone read that quotation about the potential of recognizing the non-separation—that it's not me against the world, that Ubuntu that I read from Desmond Tutu last time. The sense of connectedness. The real pathos, I think, of craving is not only that it's unpleasant in the moment, but that we hold on to it and it's what keeps us from recognizing the truth. And the truth liberates. It's not that we have to figure something out.

The third truth is that there is an ending of this dukkha, of this unsatisfactoriness, of this moment-to-moment suffering that arises in our heart in a moment and ends in our heart in a moment. This is often called nirvana, and it's often described by the Buddha as the mind-heart in which greed, aversion, and delusion are not arising. Even the arhat, the so-called completely enlightened model, is one

in whom even the tendency for greed, hatred, and confusion to arise has been cut off at the root. It's completely gone, not arising at all.

But along the way, even as Sayadaw U Pandita would say, a moment of mindfulness when those *kilesas* are not present—I'm going to use that word *kilesa*, I don't have to keep saying greed, hatred, delusion, and I don't like "defilements," so I'm going to keep saying *kilesa*—when they're present and unrecognized, we can't see clearly. But in a moment when they're not, and there's mindfulness, wisdom, we can call that a moment of freedom. We can taste that. We can recognize, as we go through our practice here, a moment of clarity, and then the next moment the wanting comes up, the aversion comes up, the sense of it's all going wrong comes up. And that's why the fourth truth is the path—the way of practice, the way of life to work with this, to come to understand it. Because it's radical.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho, who for him the Four Noble Truths was really his major practice of his life, exploring it. This is just one little thing:

Living the Four Noble Truths as a daily practice and understanding them as a profound reflection provides a context for your entire life. But to sincerely live in this manner is not easy in modern life with its conflicting push-pull forces and confusing cultural messages as to what is valuable.

And I think this is where—and I don't think it's just modern life, because the Buddha wasn't living modern life, and he was saying the same thing. But as Bhikkhu Bodhi said, it's a lot harder, he said, in an age of easy pleasure. And that might be different from the Buddha's time. I like that: in an age of easy pleasure, the values of really understanding the Four Noble Truths, of renunciation and compassion and wisdom—it's a harder sell. It's a harder sell these days.

So what I'm saying is that the radical nature of the Four Noble Truths, and the subtle habits of reaction in our mind—the second noble truth, the craving, aversion, and wanting coming from identification with anything—these are so familiar, you could say. They just feel like the way things should be. It's cozy, like an old bathrobe you put on. That's just where we take refuge. And we recognize it sometimes in big things, but not when it comes around and starts to impact the way we assess or think about our practice.

And this is a sutta I love. Actually, I think Bhante referred to it—the two darts—the other night, where we hit ourselves with the second dart, aversion to something unpleasant. Well, the Buddha goes on in that sutta to describe how these habits of aversion and clinging and delusion are moment to moment arising and strengthened through this not recognizing what goes on, the ephemeral nature of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral sensation, just coming and going.

So he says very simply, whenever there's an unpleasant and the person beats their breasts and laments, as Bhante said, then it comes to be an underlying habit in the mind of resistance to unpleasant. It just feels normal. You go up to anyone—not just on the street, anyone here—you say, "Your hand hurts and it's unpleasant. Shouldn't you move away?" Yeah, right. Why should I stay with this when I can move my

hand? Give me a good reason. And you can't really give a good enough reason when there's that mindset going on. But anyway, it becomes the habit.

And under that underlying habit—this is the Buddha again—of resistance to the unpleasant, the only escape a regular person, a worldling, knows is to go for some pleasant sense experience. That's the only escape an ordinary person knows from the unpleasant. So you experience something unpleasant, and we go to some pleasant experience. In the world it could be pick up the phone, turn on the TV, have some ice cream, go to your video, whatever it is. Here it might be the pleasant fantasy. Doesn't matter, but just to see—and to me that's so sad—that the only escape a normal person knows from unpleasant is to lust for pleasant. And so that becomes a habit, he says, that underlies the mind, this craving for the pleasant experience. And then he says when that's going on, in terms of neutral, you don't even notice neutral—what? And so then delusion underlies neutral, just to say that.

So this is one example. We can see it in the big experiences, like my little story I made up of craving to have breakfast. We can see it, and then we're surprised when it comes back again. But as the Buddha was saying, as Ajahn Sumedho was saying, we're noticing a moment or two of this real mindfulness, really seeing through, being able to hang out for a moment of awareness with the unpleasantness of craving. Wanting in itself is an unpleasant experience. So what do we do to get rid of it? We get the thing we want. Is it the thing we want that's making us happy, or is it that the craving went away? Check it out.

You can just sit and be with craving, craving, craving, craving. It'll eventually go away. I promise. Because everything does. Keep paying attention. Often you feel that sense of peace. Oh yeah, because the craving's gone. Yeah, it'll come back. But anyway, so we see it in those big moments.

But we may not recognize—well, we won't, because there are so many mind moments—how familiar these underlying habits of mind are. It's unpleasant. It's like that informs, for so many of us when there's not wisdom, it informs our worldview, really. When we're not quite aware, what we think is good, what we think is bad, what we think is good practice, what we think is bad practice. And when you hit one of those moments I mentioned in the beginning—it's going along fine and suddenly it all goes wonky and you think, "What did I do wrong?"—most of us, the mind's just going to start coming up with analysis. It just does that. That's okay. We can recognize that.

But mostly, we sort of recognize it while we're also in it. And the analysis itself is going to be informed by—if we don't quite recognize it—the worldview. You're looking at it through the lens of pleasant is better, unpleasant is worse. Something's wrong, you know? And so already the confusion is distorting the analysis, and we go deeper and deeper into confusion and doubt.

That's why I can say I really got this. Tejani is the one who first pointed it out to me, but I see it so clearly now, and it's such a relief when I can recognize that once my consciousness in a moment, my awareness is... I can be aware there's doubt, aware there's aversion or greed, but you know how sometimes the mindfulness really notices aversion, and you're really noticing it.

You can feel that the attention, the mindfulness is clear. You can trust that. Other times... not so much. There's aversion, but you can also feel—as someone said today—that you're embodying it. It's really here. Or doubt. Or greed.

When you know that, the thing that really is so freeing to me is to know that whatever thoughts are coming, whatever analysis, whatever you're trying to figure out is moving through that lens of kilesa. You can't rely on anything it says. It may be true, it may not. You can't trust whatever assessment comes up because it's through the lens of kilesa.

Knowing that, for me, it's like a huge relief. "I've got to figure out what to do. What's wrong with my practice? It's not like this..." Oh, you're totally in kilesa. It feels like this. All I can do is just sit and walk and notice as best I can and trust that steady awareness takes care of itself. "No, I've got to do something. I've got to fix this. That's not good enough." So just knowing that—okay, I just can't rely on anything the mind says right now. It'll keep on trying, you know. But I recognize I can't rely on it. That's really so relieving. If I could hand you that, I would love to.

Because what I want to explore tonight is this: when we're in that phase of running into this kind of hitting the wall—not just that it's difficult, but you're feeling that sense of something being shaken up, something untrustworthy, you don't really know where to stand, your assumptions aren't matching reality, your unrecognized views of practice are being challenged—it's really unsettling. And usually it's unpleasant. What's occurring may also be difficult in itself—physical pain, emotional trauma. You just don't feel like you have a handle on anything. For a moment, it changes.

But the point I want to talk about tonight is something that over the last few years has become more and more helpful to me, something I didn't used to call on so much. At these times, rather than trying to figure out how to practice correctly—because it's through the lens of kilesa, you can't tell—you just keep going steady. But also, tune into and reconnect with your deep, real motivating aspiration in your life, in your practice.

There's no right or wrong here. You can't do this wrong. It's a way of beginning with reflection, but it's not intellectual thinking—though that may be how you start. And there's no right way it should feel. But when I find myself feeling shaky, worn down, low energy, trying to remember to practice but maybe thinking "why?"—or maybe it's just dry and dead—then I just take a moment. Really just get quiet with yourself. It can go differently, but start by remembering or tuning into your aspiration: how you began your practice, why you're doing it now.

Let me backtrack and say what I mean by aspiration. Aspiration is a form of intention, a form of motivation. The intention that arises in any particular moment with any particular action of thought, body, or speech—that's one kind of intention. Aspiration is something more overarching, a broader sense of deeper purpose. What's really important to me? It can become a support, a reference point. It gives us a sense of resolution and courage to keep being present for a larger purpose than what's immediately in

front of us.

For example, not even particularly dharmic, but we all know this—if you have children...

There's plenty of times—assuming you're a halfway decent parent—when you do something that wouldn't be what you would normally want to do, or that's really hard for you, or scary for you. But you do it without question, because it's for the well-being of your child, out of love for your child. You get a sense of what I mean? It's a bigger purpose, not just the moment-to-moment thing.

So in terms of aspiration in our practice, it's about tuning in—and this can change as we go through practice, as we have deeper understanding, as different things motivate us. But how is aspiration different from craving a goal?

The thing with aspiration, the way I'm talking about it, is that it's supportive in terms of turning our heart, mind, our consciousness toward the wholesome. Say, for example, at times my aspiration would be to really free the heart and mind from kilesa, to be of benefit to all beings. Those are the words. When there's a moment that my heart and mind are really in touch with that—wow, that might be a potential in this world—when it's truly an aspiration, the mind isn't looking forward, leaning forward, one eye on the goal. Because then you feel that sense of tanha.

Tanha can be for awakening, or it could be for an orange. It's the quality in the heart-mind that makes it tanha, not the object. And so you can feel when it's not this wholesome aspiration—when you feel that narrowing, the frustration, the "I could never do this, I'm a piece of garbage." That's not aspiration. That's wanting and aversion.

But aspiration may be this sense of: Wow, is that really possible? And thinking, for example, the Buddha often said, "If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so." Just think that. And so then it comes back—aspiration brings a sense of brightness, of lightness to the heart, to the mind. It can energize. It just says, you know, okay, I can be with this another moment. That's how aspiration is different from expectation, from wanting—which leads to doubt, frustration, and self-involvement.

You can flip back and forth, but explore it and see. All of us—none of us would be here without some sense of aspiration. And as I say, the words I just said as an aspiration can really inspire me at some point. Or I could be lost in an aversive, self-judging mind state, and I hear that and think, "Yeah, fat chance. Who do you think you are?" Then that's not working at that moment.

So I want to say: find ways. As you go through the days, it can be a kind of wise reflection to take time, at various moments, to just reconnect with what your aspiration is. It may be words, or it may be—and this is what I've been doing more and more lately, and it really helps—it turns the mind to the wholesome, takes me out of just the self-identification, and brings in this real sense of: yes, this is the potential of this path. It does go against the stream. We need support in our aspiration.

So with wise reflection, you can bring in a sense of what helps you reconnect with that. For me—and I'm just going to give some examples, you find what's true for you—at times it's different people I've met who are manifesting different aspects of purity of heart-mind, or different aspects of devotion. These rekindle that aspect in my own heart-mind. I mean, we're not inspired by somebody externally. We're inspired because it's touching that wholesome quality in our own mind-stream. Otherwise, it just misses. We don't know what they're talking about.

So one of the ways is just remembering. When I'm with something a little bit difficult, and I'm thinking, "Ah, I'm sick of this already. Let's move on to something else"—I just remember I really have a commitment to awaken, not just for myself, but to be of benefit to some beings in this world. That gives resolution, a sense of willingness to hang out with it another moment. It broadens things. If it's just for me, okay, a little aversion is good enough. It's not too bad. Let's move on. But if it's for all beings—no, that isn't good enough. That little bit of aversion comes out in something I say, and I can see it reverberate in the other person. Which is, you know, me and the other—not different.

It's not okay. But not okay in a way of not judging—rather, it's a recognition that we must come back and be with it.

I remember something Ajahn Sumedho was talking about when he was in his early years in Thailand as a monk in his robes. You've seen what the robes are—they're not cool. And in the heat of Thailand, in the hot season under a tin roof, you just cook. I've known this from personal experience; you cook. And so he was sitting there, just sweating through his robes hour after hour, day after day. He said, "I just couldn't bear this another moment." And then he'd find that he could. Just that—"I can't"—and then he'd say to himself, "What's so unbearable about this?" I often will say that, just for a moment. Okay, I can be with it.

That sense of tuning in to the aspiration—not just for myself, but for greater benefit in the world—that brings the courage, the resolution, which is one of the paramis. This quality of willingness to do what is wholesome. So that's one way.

Another way, as I was saying, is thinking of different people at different times who can inspire wholesome qualities of awakening in us. I'm going to tell a couple of stories, but you'll have your own, whoever it is. And it doesn't have to be Buddhist. It doesn't have to be that the person is totally perfect. If we're waiting to be inspired, to have our aspiration renewed, only by a completely awakened, perfect person—well, few and far between, huh? But wholesome, beautiful, awakened qualities—there are really a lot more of these, here and there, if we open to notice them and then take them in. It can really inspire us.

So, a couple of little stories.

I've been going to Myanmar every year for at least a month since 2001, and so I've come to know many nuns. There are many, many nuns in Burma. Most of the ones I know are relatively simple people. This one woman, Daw Uttara—"Daw" is just an honorific; women are Daw, men are U—she became a nun

when she was around twenty because her health was really bad. She came from a farming family, a little bit poor, not really poor in Burmese terms, but she was really sick. She realized her family was about to sell everything they had, including their house, to pay for her doctor, and she didn't want that. She'd always kind of wanted to be a nun anyway, so she became one.

And she had so much faith. She said she had really long, beautiful hair, and when she shaved it, she sold it. Then she used that money to buy her first Buddha rupa, a Buddha statue. Many of the nuns I've met—their main meditation practice is actually Buddhanussati, recollecting the qualities of the Buddha. That brings them great faith, great inspiration. It's not my practice. I think it's beautiful, but it doesn't do that for me. That practice doesn't do it for me. But being around the nuns who are doing it, seeing this quality of devotion and faith, how they bring that into their lives—that helps to deepen my aspiration to purify the heart-mind.

So Daw Uttara was a nun, and she moved from her home village down in the Delta after a big cyclone when people lost their land and their lives. She was living around Yangon, and she and her sister nun went to a meditation nunnery. They really wanted to meditate. Not all nunneries or monasteries are meditation ones, but that was really what she wanted to do.

But her head sayadaw, her teacher in her home village, called and said, "No, there are these ten orphan girls. We're sending them to you to take care of."

Many nuns do this—take care of poor girls and orphan girls from their home village. There's no safety net, no other place for them. Sometimes parents send them because it's the only way they can get an education, or they'll be taught good values, or they'll simply be taken care of. So these young girls are sent, and then the nuns take them in. They become little nuns, and the older nuns care for them.

So Daw Uttara and her sister did a U-turn.

Her commitment was to awaken, to meditate. But now she had these ten little girls—now there are fifteen or twenty. And what I saw was how she made this complete U-turn. Not like, "Okay, I've got to do this; I'll make the best of it." But rather, a turning grounded in faith, in devotion: "Okay, now this is the life. This is what life is presenting, and this is the path of awakening." No question about it. And you can see there's so much love and so much friendliness and so much care for these little girls. It's not an easy life. But just to witness that.

When I think of her—I'm not saying everything is all perfect—but when I see that willingness to embrace whatever is coming with a heart of devotion and stay true to one's commitment to awaken, but then recognize, "This is what it's about right now: loving and caring for these little girls." She says, "Okay, when they're grown, and if they don't want to stay nuns, that's fine. But they've had these years where we've really taught them how to be a good human being, and we've kept them safe. They don't have to go out on the street. They can choose whatever life they choose, but they've had a really good foundation. And then

we can go off and meditate."

So that's one way. That inspires in me that sense of faith and surrender. It inspires me—and that's what practice is. Not about getting it the way I want, but this willingness, this ability of total trust and surrender to how things are right now.

Sometimes I think of just a person, just their being. There's another monk up in Sagaing, Ujjayanta. Very simple. He's the sayadaw of a very small monastery, only about three or four monks, up in the hills of Sagaing. We go to visit him every year. In fifteen years, he doesn't look like he's aged a day. He lives this quiet life, and he just... he doesn't know too much English, but you walk into the place and it just feels peaceful. He's a real metta being. That's all. It's not like we have these great wisdom discussions about the Abhidhamma. Just this simplicity—metta, metta, peace. I just love being there. We go and hang out, sit with him, visit, and after fifteen minutes there's nothing really to say. He's had his visit, so then we go on our way. But I have his picture on my desk. I'll just look at it, and it sparks that in me, and that deepens again my aspiration, my willingness. Okay, let's keep on with this practice. Let's keep on with this awareness. It turns the mind to the wholesome.

Here's another example, completely outside of Buddhism—a daily life one. Actually, it was just last week. One morning I was listening to the news. As you can imagine, I can get downcast. Sometimes just listening to news or seeing how things are, I think, "What am I doing on this planet?" I feel like everything is the opposite of what seems important to me. I don't know—I was telling Guy this story, and it didn't really go over with him, so maybe you'll also think this is weird. But anyway, this was it, last week.

The last piece of the news was about a big ceremony in Moscow. They were unveiling a new statue, and over 200,000 people came to this grand ceremony. The statue was huge, as they do in Russia—five meters tall on top of a giant pedestal—honoring Kalashnikov, who died a few years ago. Kalashnikov, who invented the AK-47 and other such lovely weapons. They were really honoring him as someone who brought honor to the fatherland with his creativity and his integrity, on and on—all these people celebrating.

But that's not just about Russia. I mean, that kind of thing is not abnormal. And they said he wasn't around to see this, but he had been a little disappointed. He was proud of what he did, but he was a little disappointed that some of the people who used the AK-47 weren't the right people—like drug cartels used it, criminals used it. He wasn't so glad about that.

I'm just kind of listening, thinking: what world am I living in? And actually, that left me feeling somewhat dejected. It was not deepening my aspiration in that moment—it was more like, *huh?*

But the same day, not much later, in my email inbox came a daily writing from a Christian mystic society. And it was talking about Gandhian nonviolence. The same day. I thought, you know, I just want to read a little of it because it reminded me: oh yes, *this* is also here. We just have to open our eyes and see it.

So I found myself reading where they were quoting Mahatma Gandhi: "Love is the strongest force the world possesses, and yet it is the humblest imaginable. Living a nonviolent life is no easy task. It requires courageous love drawn from the very source of our being."

Then they were quoting Thomas Merton on our dualistic mind—how we see evil as very cut and dried. This is good, this is evil, and the only solution is we've got to eliminate all evil. But Merton says: "Nonviolence, on the other hand, comes from an awareness that I am also the enemy, and my response is part of the whole moral equation. I cannot destroy the other without destroying myself. I embrace my enemy just as much as I must welcome my own shadow. Both acts take real and lasting courage."

And then there was Gandhi's coining of the term *satyagraha*, because "passive resistance" didn't capture the active and powerful nature of nonviolence. *Satyagraha* combines the Sanskrit word *sat*—which translates as being or truth—with *graha*, meaning holding firm to, remaining steadfast in. So *satyagraha*, nonviolence, is translated as truth force: holding steady to the truth coming from within, or soul force.

And that brought to mind Martin Luther King. Having read a lot about him, I know that "soul force" is really the language he used for the whole depth of nonviolence—this courageous, incredible way of meeting horrific circumstances from an inner place of love that is only possible when it springs from connection with truth. Whether you want to call it God, or we would want to call it Dharma—just the way things are, reality as it is.

When we're connected with that, in a simple moment when there's no *kilesa*, the thought of harming doesn't arise. The notion that the only response to difficulty is aversion or harming—it becomes so clear that's not true. In that moment, you know.

And again, this soul force—there are people doing that, living from that, acting from that in the world now. John Lewis, the longtime representative in the House from Georgia, who in his autobiography talks a lot about soul force. He was one of the original members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which led the Freedom Rides in 1959 and 1960, and helped organize the March on Washington in '63. This sense of people now in the world still connecting to and acting from this depth of understanding.

The reading continued: "To create peaceful change, we begin by remembering who we are in God"—this is Christian language, but who we are in truth. Gandhi believed the core of our being is union with the truth. From this awareness, nonviolence flows naturally and consistently.

So again, just this sense for me of finding in different places—and I write them down and I'm saying them to you—because it re-inspires in me my own aspiration. And that aspiration is, in terms of my practice, just to find the courage, the willingness, the humility in a way, just for this next moment to show up. Not to figure it out, but to actually have the courage to know we're not going to figure it out. It's exactly not about our figuring it out—it's just the opposite. It's about freedom from clinging.

This freedom of heart and mind is absolutely uncompromising. There's not some part we get to exclude. And so as we practice, as our minds become more subtle, as we land in our views—it includes all views, all our ways of understanding. Even with our most sincere intentions, our sincere practice, we're going to be surprised, undone. We have to be, if the practice is working.

That's why when you're having these difficult times, we know the practice is working. You think it's not, but we know it is. If everything's all nice and safe and secure the whole time, going just as you like it—no, it's not really happening yet. So with our most sincere intentions, we can't imagine what it's supposed to look like, how it's supposed to be.

We want to know ahead of time. We want to know the path. We want to chart ourselves on the path, right? We want to know exactly where we are, even if that makes us feel like garbage because we're not where we think we should be. And even if we've read the path, you've read the progress of insight, you know it all—that just makes it worse. Because you never really know where you are, and we want to know. And you can't. You just can't.

So these times of confusion, they're really valuable. They're important moments in our path of awakening. Because what's required—we want to know where it's going to be, but what's required is this commitment, this willingness, this determination, this *adhiṭṭhāna,* which is just a moment of: okay, I can just be with this now. Like when Annie talked about it the other night, as Joseph calls it, "the sword of wisdom," where you just go, "not now." It's not with aversion or clinging, but it's a kind of collecting of the energy. Okay, I can just be with this for a moment. That's what's required—just to be with what is, this full commitment to open into the unknown.

It's not going the way we think. We have no clue where we are. We've lost a sense of path. We're not feeling safe and secure. Great. Just take a moment and say, "I can just be with this now." Trust in the awareness. Trust in that simplicity of just meeting what's happening.

Awakening, enlightenment—it's not a self-improvement project. It doesn't make us feel all better about ourselves and secure and safe. And I know, the sense of self... it's not like there's a self we're getting rid of. But the sense of me—when I try to imagine what it is, of course we imagine from the sense of me: I'm going to feel so good. I'm going to be floating down the street, the essence of Kuan Yin, the goddess of compassion. In a subtle way, it's kind of feeding us, confirming our sense of me.

Now, non-clinging—it's radical, it's uncompromising. The sense of me is what gets seen through. It's not what gets confirmed. And so at some point, all of the subtle holdings are going to be challenged. And sometimes it's scary, and then it'll be, "Oh wow, it's so freeing." And then, because these habits are so pervasive, the next day you thought you were free, they're back again. Okay. I thought I couldn't bear it, but then I found that I could. It's like this now. How can this be? What's happening? It's like this now. It's like this now.

This is really the courage, the determination to just moment to moment to moment open into the unknown.

I found without continually coming back and seeing what helps reconnect with my aspiration—there are times, for all of us, we just don't have the energy to do it. I mean, it's like that. But find what helps you, what re-aspirates, re-inspires, re-reminds you of what's really important to you in life.

So again, for me, I'll end with one more story. A friend was just telling me—a friend of mine and a long-term meditator yogi has been involved for some years in what's called the Tibet Oral History Project, something that the Dalai Lama actually asked her to do. What she does is she interviews Tibetan refugees, really elderly Tibetan refugees in India, in the States, wherever—just to get their stories, just to get it down. Not necessarily teachers or nuns or monks, just all different kinds of people.

So she actually gave me the whole interview. I'll just pick some highlights of this particular woman, an elderly woman. She interviewed her when she was seventy, in 2013. She's living in the States now, has been for many years. This is one of those stories where you read it and you think, well, this is the kind of stuff you read about Milarepa, or what people did in Tibet—these old, fantastic practitioners. But today? Couldn't possibly do that. And so this is her brief story.

She came from a nomadic family, well-to-do. When the Chinese were invading in 1959, they were trying to flee with her whole family. They got involved in a firefight, and her family was killed—many people were killed. She was shot in the leg. She was captured and taken back to her village and kept under house arrest, just living in her village.

But she had this deep commitment to escape, to get to India. Her deep commitment was that she wanted to be able to offer prayers for her parents. One must offer prayers when parents pass away, and there was no opportunity to perform prayers there. She also wanted to study and practice the Dharma. That was her deep commitment.

So she managed to escape. The whole long story—it took her almost a year. She's wandering. Some people help her. She's freezing. She doesn't have food. But she manages a year wandering around in Tibet without much to eat. It's a year after she was wounded, so she could walk okay. She gets to Mount Kailash with a friend. She's not in India—she's at Mount Kailash. And she really wants to practice.

So she stayed seven years at Mount Kailash, living in caves and practicing the Dharma, doing prostrations all around Mount Kailash. She ran into a lama who showed up after she'd been there a while. He sounded like he was really a tough lama—not like, "Oh yeah, you're doing a good job, keep going," but a radical sword of wisdom lama that really inspired her practice.

Let me share a couple of things he said. He says to her, "You really have to cultivate love and compassion as well as wisdom to really awaken. So how do you relate to the Chinese?" She said, "Well, to be really honest, I feel like they're my enemy." And he says, "Yes, of course you do. And you're doing really good

practice. But you keep practicing like this, and the enemy will not be the enemy but like your relatives. If you can love your so-called enemy without any degree of difference—if you can learn to not make this difference—this is really part of what you need to do to really be free."

So she goes, "Okay." Well, she put in a tremendous effort to do this. It was really hard. She's not saying it was easy. It was really hard. "I exercised again and again, even while eating and doing pilgrimage and prostrations around the mountain, meditating, putting in every effort I could, concentrating single-mindedly on this. I couldn't do it for almost two years."

Imagine—just like, "I couldn't do it for almost two years." But somehow she did.

So now she's in the States, an old woman, just describing her experience. She said, "I can't really talk in great detail about the Dharma and the practice because no one really will understand. It's so subtle. But what I understand is the important benefit of peace. Through practicing peace, one realizes that the problems I suffer are also felt by the other person. When I face difficulties like illness and pain, when I feel happiness—I feel that is also felt by the other person. The suffering I experience is felt by the other. Whatever I feel, the other has the same feeling. If one understands that perfectly, the feeling of wanting to harm another person, of being spiteful and other things, just disappears automatically."

That's the sense of it—in a moment of wisdom, the hatred doesn't arise. That's just how it is. You don't make that happen. Take it as moments, not as you have to be that way completely. That's how I do it.

But she's really seeing that, you know? This is how she lives. And what my friend said when she met this woman, what she was really impressed by—before she heard her story—was just her great kindness. A great sense of love. She came in and the woman was just doing whatever she could to make my friend comfortable, offering her things, and this very simple, down-to-earth kindness and wisdom. You can feel that sometimes in people.

So that's another story that inspires me. This is a real person, not reading about Shabkar in the eighteenth century.

See what's true for you, what helps you. If this is helpful—to re-inspire, to reconnect to your aspiration, to give you energy and courage and uplift to open into the unknown again for this next moment.

I'll close with this from Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, quoted by the Dalai Lama. This is a vast bodhicitta aspiration, but it brings up that inspiration, that energy in me. So I'm reading it for myself, because it makes me really happy:

And now, as long as space endures, as long as there are beings to be found, may I continue likewise to remain, to soothe the sufferings of those who live. The pains and sorrows of all wanderers, may they ripen wholly on myself. And may the virtuous company of bodhisattvas ever bring about the happiness of beings. May the teachings—the only remedy for suffering, the source of every bliss and happiness—be nurtured and

upheld with reverence, and throughout a vast continuance of time endure. May precious bodhicitta take its birth in those in whom it has not taken birth, and where it has been born, let it not cease, but swell and increase ever more and more.

Let's just sit a moment.

Thank you for your patient attention.

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