Devotion To The Truth

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:29

Tonight I'd like to talk about an attitude of bringing to practice that I've been finding very helpful lately, sort of a shift at times. And that's the attitude of devotion and surrender.

This fall in August and September, I spent a few weeks in southern India in an ashram where Ramana Maharshi used to live. He died in 1950, so he's been gone a while, but he's widely considered one of the more realized beings to live in this century. I mean, who knows, but he's widely considered to be that. And still many, many people go to the ashram today, of course, with various motives, as we all come to our practice. But the ashram is really there not so much as a kind of honoring him as a person. They really try to set it up in a way that informs one with the willingness to practice, which is basically self-inquiry—to realize and rest in the truth for oneself rather than to just go out of devotion to this man who used to live there. But of course all kinds of people and all kinds of behaviors are there. It's a lovely place.

What inspired me to want to talk about this tonight was a little experience I had one night. They have, as is a very Indian custom, a big hall where every evening there's about an hour of chanting in the Tamil language. At one end of this hall is a big marble tomb. The word they use for a tomb like that in India is samadhi—his final samadhi, they call it. And it's a common practice to circumambulate it.

So we were sitting, listening to the chanting. While they're chanting, some people sit along the walls, and anyone can come and go. It's very informal. People will come in, maybe bow to the samadhi, walk around it, and sit down. Many times people come in and do full prostrations, or a little bow, or they're lying on the floor for five minutes, or just casually walking around—the whole range.

I was just sitting there practicing awareness, being with the chanting. At the end, one of the male chanters was an older man who's actually the president of the ashram. He's a very kind man. He got up, and I just happened to see him. I hadn't even noticed in all those days that he was one of the chanters. He just got up—the dinner bell rings—and he got up to go help serve the dinner, which he does for the hundred or so people who are there. They come around and serve you on banana leaves. You sit on the floor with a banana leaf, and they come and slop the food on the leaf, and you eat it. He would be one of the people who would come around serving, just very simply.

He got up and I happened to see him. There was just such an air of humbleness, of simplicity. He just walked around the samadhi. No bowing, no prostration, nothing. Just this simple walking around and then out to do his duty of serving the dinner. Somehow there was something in the way that he walked—I realize it could be total projection, but I'm aware of that, and it doesn't matter. There was something in the way that he walked that felt so humble, so simple, and so filled with devotion. Just simple devotion. Now I

don't know whether it was to Ramana, to his memory, or to the truth, but the whole air of the ashram is devotion to truth rather than to Ramana as a person. There was that quality of humble, simple devotion. No big airs, no big prostrations. Just walking around and going to serve his meal.

That just went right in somehow. Because I felt the difference between myself earlier, having walked around that samadhi. It's one of the things you do mindfully, you know, doing my mindful walking the way we'd walk back and forth here. But the difference between his devotion and love, the simplicity of his love for the truth, really contrasted with my devotion to wanting the truth. And it's a vast difference. You might have once in a while noticed a subtle wanting the truth creep into our dedication to practice.

That's really all I had to say in this talk, but five minutes is a little short, so I will elaborate on this theme for some time.

It really had a profound effect on me, actually, that moment. It stayed with me for the last two months. It comes and goes, but it stayed with me. And all I need to do is remember that sense that seeing him brought up in my own heart—of practicing simply out of love for the truth. Without any "in order to's" or "so that's" or "because I want X, Y, and Z to happen" or "because what's here now isn't good enough"—or fill in your own blanks.

That wholehearted loving of the truth is a transforming approach to bring into the simplicity of our day-to-day mindfulness, our moment-to-moment mindfulness. And in order to practice even for a moment in this way requires—yes—surrender. I hate to say it. It requires, just in a moment, wholehearted, total surrender.

It doesn't have to look like anything.

For example, at the ashram, people would come in from all over and really throw themselves on the floor in front of the tomb or in the meditation hall. You could feel a sense of devotion in them. They would sit there for a little while, get up, and go on with their lives. Meanwhile, the president was just doing his chanting, walking around the tomb, going in to serve dinner, being kind to whoever came, running the place day after day after day—without any big sense of making himself somebody special. And it's so easy to do that when you're the head of something, when people come from all over the world and say, "Wow, you're the president." Yet he was one of the most simple, humble people there.

So how do we approach our practice day to day, moment to moment—our walking, our sitting? When we feel the breath, when we notice that peace and calm has suddenly changed to contraction and tightness, when we notice that quietness has suddenly given way to random scattered thoughts—or maybe not so random, maybe obsessive—what then? When the nice, calm energy that we were so aware of not getting attached to has changed, and we realize that somehow we weren't attached to the energy, but obviously it meant something really profound in our practice. And its being gone also means something missing that's really profound.

Are we able to surrender into meeting whatever's happening with our fullness of attention? Not so that we can get back to something. Not in order to finally rest in truth. But simply out of love for awareness itself, simply out of devotion to the truth in whatever way it's manifesting in this moment. Whether we like it or not really doesn't make any difference. Whether we understand it, whether we have a frame of reference, doesn't make any difference.

That level of surrender—not of giving up, but of surrendering into presence out of real devotion for the truth. Obviously, what we have to give up is all our ideas, all our desires, all our preconceptions. Only in a moment, not now forever. Just in a moment, because if we think all that way ahead, it's impossible. Then there's me having to give up all my desires. But just in the moment—can we surrender into a situation that's difficult, not difficult, confusing, or beautiful without even the slightest exception? So that there's no "I'll surrender this far, but this last piece can't go."

It's tough, isn't it?

And when we actually approach it out of love, rather than out of wanting—which is even kind of gross, but let's face it, it is wanting, it's grasping, some subtle clinging for what we're going to get—the devotion, the love, really makes the surrender already happen. But it's so easy to hold on to one last "what if."

A friend sent me this story about a man who went for a hike. While he was walking along a steep path, he slipped and started to tumble down the mountainside. At the last moment, he grabbed a branch growing from the side of the mountain, but he could not get a foothold to climb back up. He became frightened and pleaded, "Lord, please help me. If you get me out of this predicament, I'll do anything you say. Please help me."

Just then the clouds parted, and a voice said, "Did you say you will do anything?"

The man answered, "Yes, Lord, I'll do anything."

And the voice said, "Okay. Let go."

And the man said, "What? Are you crazy? I'll be killed!"

Now that's our place of surrender. Real surrender. And if we could let go out of love for the truth, rather than out of getting what we want—that's a moment of devotion. Yes, it's scary. It's unnerving. It gives us nothing to hold on to. It gives us no set path that we can absolutely trust.

Of course, we know that certain things tend to happen, that other people have walked this path. And one of the reasons we're here as teachers is so that when something weird starts happening, you come in and tell us, and we almost always say, "Oh yeah, that's normal"—almost no matter what. I don't know whether you believe us or not, but we say that, and you go, "Okay." Maybe they don't believe us. But we mean it. We wouldn't lie.

Almost everything's normal at some point or other. So there's a path, but it's so vast that you can't absolutely count on anything. And that's why total surrender is necessary. It's scary, but also in that moment of opening the heart and mind and letting go into devotion and love, it's exhilarating. It's freeing. It brings in such a vitality of life, of really being present, that holding to our plans and preconceived notions just can't allow.

The image that comes to my mind is something a friend told me, again from this place in India. The ashram is at the base of a mountain, a sacred mountain. This friend climbed up to the top—a lot of people do—and they climbed in the middle of the night so they would be at the top just as dawn was breaking. There are lots of monkeys in this area, and the monkeys apparently up at the top are a little more wild. The ones at the bottom are basically craving personified—you hear a rustle, you see food, they're on you. They know. But up at the top, a little more wild.

The image this friend described really comes to me with this sense of surrendering, abandoning our toeholds in the moment and just surrendering into what's happening now. He said these monkeys, these wild mountain monkeys, they're up at the top on these rocks, on these trees, and they just launch out from whatever they're holding onto—a rock or a tree—just as if they could fly, completely trusting that they'll land on a branch or a rock. And they do. But they're not sitting there checking it out. Where's the next toehold? If I go this way, can I go that far? They just launch out and land.

To me, there's that sense of complete trust, vibrancy, total aliveness in the moment. And that's really the surrender I'm talking about. It's not the surrender of, "Okay, fine, I'll lie down and whatever happens, happens, because I can't do anything about it anyway." It's the surrender of totally vital, wholehearted presence. There's nothing like it. And it could be called love. It could be called devotion. It brings in a unity of being that allows us to transcend our identification with the personal, whatever aspect that's taking at the moment. It allows us to open into a radical acceptance of this moment right now as manifestation of truth—the only one that's available right now. And only when we can really open into it, launch into it like those monkeys, can we perceive, in a way, ultimate reality.

I think in the first talk I ever gave, I used this quotation, and I still love it, so I'm going to use it again. Talking about really taking refuge in whatever's arising right now as the truth: "Radical acceptance is the radical acknowledgement of the presence of truth at this very moment. The only thing to do is to do nothing but accept truth in all things, as all things, at all times, in all forms, in all ways."

This, in a way, is our practice. The "all"—in all forms, at all times, in all ways—is accentuated because that's the only way through, this total devotion. It's another angle of non-grasping; I'm sure you've got that by now. It's only in the totality of it that truth can reveal itself. Just that slightest holding on—"I can't let go because I'll be killed"—that slightest holding on is what blocks in that moment the perception of ultimate truth. The wholehearted surrender into it is what allows the unitive nature to reveal itself.

Obviously this isn't easy or simple; we all know that. It's such a habit, such a deeply ingrained fear, that we

need some kind of safety net. We can't just launch out like those monkeys without some little sense that there's some way we're going to be able to keep ourselves safe, or familiar, or hanging on to the known in some way. But that safety net is what imprisons us. It's what keeps us roaming back and forth in the little box of the known, the little box of "me," the little box of my ideas about who I am, about what is possible, about what truth could even be. We think it's a safety net, but it's a prison. Yet it feels so safe and comfortable, and at times it's so subtle, that it's really hard to have the trust to let go of it for a moment, to venture outside of it.

For me, that's why the sense of love, of devotion, is so helpful—even more than trust in a way—because devotion or love, in my own personal experience, has an energetic power that is stronger than fear, stronger than the need for a safety net.

And the safety net here on retreat can be as simple as what's comfortable. How much sleep I need. How we're relating to food. What would happen if I ate less? What would happen if I skipped the chocolate cake? What would happen if I didn't take a nap after lunch?

Things that somehow don't enter the realm of what's possible for me.

I remember the first three-month retreat I ever sat. At that time, all the work meditations were assigned—you didn't have a choice, you didn't sign up. And about every month they rotated the assignments. So just when you settled in and had your schedule all going, suddenly you'd go in and discover you were the lunchtime dishwasher for the next month.

My safety net, my sense of comfort at that time, was that I could get through the day and do the schedule if I had my little half-hour nap after lunch. And that seemed quite acceptable—until they rotated the jobs and I had to do lunchtime cleanup. Another safety net I didn't even recognize at the time was that I had to look like a good yogi, so I wouldn't dare go in and say I couldn't do that job, that I wanted another one. I didn't even recognize that was a personality safety net. People had to like me.

So I said, "Oh no, what's going to happen? I have to do this cleaning and there's no way I can get through the day without my nap after lunch. It's just going to be hell."

And of course, you can imagine—it was amazing to find out that it didn't make any difference at all whether I had my nap after lunch. From the first day it just didn't matter. It was completely something in my mind. But I think I would have gone through that whole retreat without even thinking to question that it was necessary, that it was possible for something to be different.

It can be more subtle than that, of course, but we get a familiarity with our habits, a familiarity with aspects of our personality, things that can't change—even sometimes very suffering aspects of our personality. Who would I be if I didn't feel worthless? That's not a possibility. Losing my sense of self. We hang on.

So something that can jar that is really helpful. A friend of ours this summer told a Zen story that kind of jars that sense of seeing how we look at things. It was about a Zen master and a very wrathful samurai who came to visit him. One wonders why the samurai came to visit, because he started abusing the Zen master from the moment he arrived, calling him, "Oh, you're just a pig, you look like a pig, this zendo looks like a pig"—just abusing him.

The Zen master let him go on, and finally the Zen master said, "Well, but you are a Buddha."

This brought the samurai up short. He thought of himself many ways, but a Buddha wasn't one of them. He said, "Me, a Buddha? Why do you say that?"

And the Zen master said, "Well, a pig only sees pig. A Buddha only sees Buddha."

So it jars our preconceived notions, what we want to hang on to, what we're comfortable with. If we want to just see pig, okay, we're welcome to do that if that's more comfortable. But the willingness to let go of that, whatever our preconceived notions are, and just surrender into this moment from love, without hoping for result—to wholeheartedly meet what's happening just because it's the truth in this moment, not as some kind of self-confirmation: "Yes, my practice is getting better." And that's so tricky. "Now I am experiencing this deep, open-hearted devotion"—just to notice when we are.

An illustration of this point, again from Ramana Maharshi: One of his devotees remarked to him that a certain fellow devotee must be very well advanced on his spiritual path because he meditated for eight to ten hours every day. So this guy would have been very impressed with all of us.

And Ramana replied, "Oh, he meditates, he eats, he sleeps. But who is meditating, eating, sleeping? What advantage is there in meditating for ten hours a day if in the end that only has the result of establishing you a little more deeply in the conviction that it is you who are meditating?"

Now, before you fall back into "I am worthless because I think I'm meditating, and that's just the proof of it"—of course there are times when we are very firmly established in the sense that I am meditating, I am developing concentration, I am feeling such open-hearted devotion, I am surrendering fully into the moment. Of course that's going to happen. That's our human condition. And there are times when we are meditating in order to develop concentration, in order to open the heart, so that I can finally rest in the pure nature of awareness and forget this whole show.

Whatever our "in order to" is, whenever there's an "in order to," I am very firmly placed behind it, so it seems.

But luckily for us, the whole gestalt of mindfulness practice is that all we have to do is have the willingness to keep looking. Look at that I who's meditating so faithfully. Look at that I who feels worthless. All we have to do is keep practicing surrender, keep practicing simply the devotion that lets us meet a moment fully. And when we practice with love, we naturally begin to see through this solid sense of I.

So please don't think, "Well, I'm meditating ten hours a day, but I still feel like I'm me, so the more I meditate, the worse that's going to be." That's not the point I was trying to make with that quotation. Just to notice when we're meditating from I, from wanting—even wanting enlightenment—and when it's just love of being present. Even when we hate what we're being present with, we can still—it's weird, but it is possible—love just awareness itself, even when what's happening we could really do without.

Seeing through this sense of me, the personality patterns, whatever our safety net is—it changes from time to time, the comfort level. Of course it's not always comfortable. Of course at times it's unsettling, confusing, takes us onto unfamiliar, uncomfortable ground. For myself, I'd say in the years of practice, it continues to be in many ways like a series of small deaths, really. And sometimes with the accompanying sense of loss, of grief that goes along with death for us humans.

And if I would try to place a rational explanation on what it is that feels like it's dying—you know, this piece of my personality feels like it's dying—it doesn't really make sense. I mean, it didn't even make sense to me. I won't even try to make it make sense to you. But it's really been over the years, over and over, that opening into a sense of real dying, of real death. And coming out the other side of it to a space of greater ease and freedom and greater ability to love—just to love the truth, to love things as they are, not so wrapped up in some idea of who Carol is or what practice should look like or what I think is possible.

It's interesting when we run into these places in our practice, and I think we all do, though they can be different. A place just before that sense of death, that sense of real letting go of some idea we've had about ourselves, or of something that we see we're going to have to let go of to keep practicing—and this huge resistance comes up. "No. If freedom means this goes, I don't want freedom." Do you know that space?

And sometimes the "this" is something so mundane. I remember one time my teacher told me I had to start noting "pleasant." I was having some kind of rapture, some kind of pleasant experience, and I went back and went into a total temper tantrum resistance. Because I knew, really, that I liked that pleasant thing, and noting "pleasant" was really going to cut the attachment. I mean, all I had to do was note it once to know that. It was going to cut the attachment, which gave me some sense of—wow, it wasn't even that strong, but just a sense of being. And I had a total conniption, a temper tantrum, a three-year-old fit.

Before I finally said, "All right, I'll just note pleasant." Pleasant, pleasant. The whole thing falls away. And lo and behold, it's not like, "Oh, life is so gray and miserable." It's like, "Oh, yeah, right. Equanimity. It's really lovely." Peace, spaciousness, presence. It's something so small, really. And we can just go to the wall resisting. "No, if that has to go, forget about it. I want to stay in suffering."

Sometimes it's not mundane. Sometimes it's something really profound—an understanding we have of life, or we think we have. Often for me it will come up around a sense of how I feel attachment in relationship, or to family, or to friends. And it's more an idea than a reality, but the idea that if I really open into choiceless awareness or into love, then the specialness of that attachment is going to go away. And I don't want life without that.

It's a common question that comes up, more often when we're teaching at a class—not so much when we've been on a long retreat, but when people are just beginning to come to the Dharma and the idea of non-attachment. You say there's no attachment, so that means we can't have relationships? And what about love for our children? Is it some kind of cold practice that says we can't be attached to our children? All these what-ifs. And of course that's not the reality when we really open into devotion or love for all beings.

It happens to include our children, our partners, our families, ourselves.

But I'm not making light of this—it's a profound kind of wall we can come up against. No. If this goes, if freedom means I don't have this anymore, I don't want freedom. Of course, that's just another thought. Here we can notice that we keep practicing and we see it's different from what we thought. But these places of resistance, of "no, this can't go, this is who I am," or "this is what makes life worth living"—this is a very important place in practice. And this is where that true surrender, that devotion to the truth without an "in order to," comes in.

From Pema Chödrön—I think she has a great way of putting things: "To live fully is to be always in no man's land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again. From the awakened point of view, that's life. Death is wanting to hold on to what you have and to have every experience confirm you and congratulate you and make you feel completely together."

So that's not happening, is it? You're not finding every experience here is making you feel completely together. So that's good, see? Even though we say the yama mara is fear of death, actually the mara is fear of life—life meaning that holding on, having every experience congratulate and confirm us. You can feel the difference when we're practicing so that the practice can confirm us. You can feel that sense of solidity, that sense of clinging. And in the moments when we're just giving our heart to it, without holding back, you can feel the vitality, the aliveness, the spaciousness, the lack of sense of self.

Now, interestingly enough, the attitude of devotion—wholeheartedly giving one's being to, of love, which is non-clinging—it's another way of coming at non-grasping. In the heart of this attitude, it allows the true nature to shine through.

I want to read this from Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, who was a wonderful Tibetan teacher, describing this. He says, "A method for becoming quickly accustomed to the unfabricated state of awareness—unfabricated, unconditioned, uncreated state of awareness—is to have devotion for enlightened beings and compassion for unenlightened sentient beings. Devotion and compassion are both love. And in the moment of love, the empty nature dawns nakedly."

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He goes on to say, "If in this moment"—the moment of love, devotion, compassion, metta, whatever different words you want to put—"if in this moment one can look inwardly, it is like the sun unobscured

by clouds. The nature of emptiness is nakedly manifest in the moment of devotion, in the moment of love." In fact, it's the same: devotion, love, naked empty nature manifest.

And he goes on to say, "Yet in the beginning you need developed or fabricated devotion because natural, unfabricated devotion or uncontrived compassion doesn't necessarily occur immediately"—if that happens to be your experience, that it doesn't always occur immediately.

And of course, as with devotion, as with anything, there are ways we can remind ourselves of devotion as an attitude. As with the compassion practice, as with the metta practice, sometimes people will say it does seem so contrived to cultivate the boundless quality of heart, of loving-kindness, of compassion through such a formulaic practice. It's quite common that people feel a dissonance between the method and the so-desired-for result. But it's just looking at the fact that sometimes total, unfabricated devotion and compassion don't just arise spontaneously every moment, but we can incline the mind, incline the heart. And so a lot of that is our practice here.

I'm not going to talk about—I mean, there's a whole practice of the bhakti path, of guru devotion, and I'm not talking about that at all because it's both not what we're doing here and it's also not my personal experience. So I'm really talking about aspects of love and devotion within our mindfulness practice here, including the compassion and the metta practice. I'm not discussing them specifically because Marcia talked about karuna last night and we've talked about metta, but know that those are aspects of love, of devotion.

To think of devotion in the beginning, in terms of cultivating this open-hearted love, there are ways that it can seem quite dualistic, but we can use skillful means. The whole sense of devotion or love or inspiration inspired by a teacher—as for example the Buddha—is using what starts as a sense of duality and separation as a skillful means. The Buddha or the teacher or the being, whatever being inspires us, becomes a catalyst for the open-hearted surrendering of our sense of wanting, of separation, of "what if"—a catalyst, an inspiration to really fully open into this moment.

It's commonly used in the Theravada tradition at times when people's motivation is low or they're really discouraged or dragging through practice. Often our teachers would encourage us to reflect on the qualities of the Buddha or the qualities of an awakened being who inspired one. And I found that this can be a skillful means if it's used not to create a sense of distance or separation—"Oh, the Buddha or whoever was such an amazing enlightened being and that's impossible for a poor dumb cluck like me." That's not the point.

Not to hold on to the separation, but rather, by reflecting on and tuning into the awakened aspect of the Buddha or a being we know, it ignites the awakened aspect of our own heart and mind. Instead of increasing a sense of distance, it brings us back into the unity that comes about through devotion.

A little poem from Lalla, a woman who was a mystic in the fourteenth century in northern India:

When the mirror of my consciousness became clear,
I saw that my family and others I love are the same as me.
The "you and I" thought does not occur.
The entire world is God.

The entire world is God. The "you and I" thought does not occur. That's the skillful use of devotion—to come into the sense of vastness, of unity. The love, that totality of devotion that allows for naked awareness to manifest like the brilliance of the sun. We move from the personal to completely beyond any sense of personal.

The Buddha used devotion in this way, but he was very clear that we not get stuck having our devotion fixated on a person, on a being, because that continues and creates the sense of separation, of something to gain. There's a story where one monk was quite enamored of the Buddha. He would just sit in the discourses and stare at him like he was in love with him, basically. And finally the Buddha had to snap him out of it and said, "It's not me. Stop staring at me. If you see the Dharma, you see the Buddha. It's about the Dharma, it's about the truth, it's about your own awakening. It's not about me."

So it's very clear that we can use devotion and inspiration, but if we get stuck there on the personal, then the clinging comes back in. And you can tell, because there will be more of a sense of separation, more of a sense of wanting. Love and devotion is not wanting. They're very different—vastly different.

There's a story conveying the same thing from present-day times. In India today, the whole tradition of guru devotion and guru worship is really, really strong. It's quite a kick to be in the country, actually, because that's definitely not the culture I came out of. And being in Tiruvannamalai, where Ramana Maharshi's ashram is—that's really the center of that town. As I was describing, there's a lot of devotion to him as a person. But it's also sort of a great mecca for all kinds of gurus and babas to come. They're all different. There's always conversation in town about this baba who came or that guru who arrived. It's fascinating to see this sense of guru devotion. But a lot of times, it's really in service of that sense of separation—this person is going to give it to me.

There's a story I really like that I read about Ramana himself, who very much drew devotion from people. If you read about him, he taught a lot in silence. Just his presence and his emanation of the truth would often wake that up in people's hearts and minds. But of course, people also related to him in all different ways, and there was a strong element of personal devotion.

One story I read was in a book written by one of his longtime disciples, a man who lived in the ashram from the early twenties and thirties, was one of Ramana's attendants, did a lot of the construction work, and was just very close to him, living there for years and years. Finally, at one point, Ramana just knew the moment when this man's heart and mind was beginning to open up, to awaken, to not be so fixated on him. And he basically said to him, "This being, this body—this is not the truth. This is not Bhagavan," as he would call himself. "It's not me. But it's with you always. So now it's time for you to leave and go do your

practice."

And so this man, Annamalai Swami was his name, left and went about five minutes' walk away. Now there's an ashram there, Annamalai Swami's ashram—it's really just five minutes from Ramana's ashram. But he went there, stayed for the rest of his life, practiced intensively, and never saw Ramana again. Never saw him again, though he was living five minutes away. Ramana basically banished him and said, "Forget about this body, this being. The truth is always with you. Now go discover it for yourself."

And another example of when we don't quite make that transition, when we do get fixated—this summer I was in Italy for a week or two, and we went to Assisi, where St. Francis of Assisi lived and practiced. If you know anything about him at all, he's from the twelfth century, I believe, and he was renowned for his love and simplicity, his sense of brotherhood with all life, with all nature. He lived a profoundly simple, loving life—the birds landing on his finger and all of that. But really, to have this sense of sisterhood, brotherhood—he would talk about sister bird, sister death even. No sense of anything separate or shut out. That impressed me.

So we went to Assisi. And over all these centuries, his manifestation of truth is what so deeply inspires people—it still, over these centuries, deeply inspires people. But somewhere, somehow, something seems to have gone a little askew. Rather than recognizing that what he touches in people is that truth in us, some people seem to have gotten sidetracked onto a sense of veneration of the man himself. Because you go there and so many elegant, elaborate structures have been built to honor and be devoted to this man whose life was a statement of simplicity. It was really amazing to me.

We went in, and there are at least two humongous—I don't know if they're cathedrals, I don't know the exact term—but really huge structures with all kinds of artwork and many floors. The top floor with the most beautiful parts we couldn't go in because they were quite damaged in the earthquake a couple of years ago. But the one that really struck me: just on the bottom floor of this place, which was so huge you'd keep getting lost, right in the middle there's this tiny stone chapel. That is the actual chapel that St. Francis used to pray in. It's this teensy little rough stone thing from the twelfth century, lost in the middle of this gigantic cathedral built to honor St. Francis. And the place was packed, and of course there were rows and rows of souvenir stalls outside—St. Francis T-shirts and little... I didn't really get this, but it looked like little gray nun's habits for children, for girls. It was really bizarre.

And you get the sense—we often think of that as devotion, but that's not really the quality I'm speaking of as devotion. I don't mean that cynically, really. There's a love and respect that has led to all these elaborate structures being built, that draws people there. The legend, or what one has read or felt about St. Francis, is touching that spark of truth in people. But then it goes askew and gets onto him, venerating the person long gone—twelfth century, he's been gone a while. It's the simplicity.

So in our practice here as well, giving ourselves to it with devotion and knowing, it will go askew. Some wanting will come in. Some sense of looking for results, some sense of comparing—all the pitfalls, you

know them all by now—will come in. That's okay. That's okay. Just remember: in the moment of love, in the moment of surrender, in the moment of devotion, the empty nature dawns nakedly.

We can become more attuned—I'm sure you have already—to really feel in our experience the difference between the moment of love and the moment of clinging. Sometimes it's subtle. But if you're feeling a little stuck, a little wanting, a little frustrated, or something's askew and you don't know what, sometimes I just try to get big with my awareness and check in attitudinally. Is my practicing from love? I don't even say the words, but really—is my practicing from love, or from wanting, or from self-aggrandizement in some way, needing to feel better about myself? Just check in and see.

And just a couple of things that are more conscious doings that sometimes can help me to reconnect with the surrender, the devotion, the love of truth rather than the wanting of truth. These are just various things. If they help you, great. If not, let them go.

Taking the refuges—taking refuge in the Buddha, in the Dharma, in the Sangha—is so powerful for me. Saying it and really meaning it in the beginning of the day, the beginning of a sitting, in the middle of a hard time in walking. Taking the refuges as a reminder: all right, I take refuge in the Buddha, in awakened enlightenment. I take refuge in the truth. I take refuge in the Sangha. I'm not taking refuge in this thing that I want or in having a certain result. It just opens me into surrender again. Sometimes.

Sometimes it gives enough faith, enough willingness to act, that I can jump off the mountain in that moment like the monkey and land in the middle of whatever's happening—without needing to flinch away or hold back or have an escape route or a safety net. This willingness to act comes not from forcing, but from appreciation, from love.

Carlos Castaneda wrote that for sorcerers, this willingness could be called discipline—but discipline to meet the moment. He says that for sorcerers, discipline is the art of facing infinity without flinching. Not because sorcerers are strong and tough, but because they are filled with awe.

This is the courage to fly off the mountain and land in whatever is happening now—out of awe for the mystery of the truth of the Dharma, knowing that we'll never understand all of it. We can give up trying, and that release lets us really surrender into the middle of it.

Nature can have the same effect on me. Just going outside into the woods, no matter what the day is like, and opening up the senses to nature. Letting it come in. That sense of awe and mystery, of love and devotion, often returns from that simple act.

Conscious reflections on gratitude work similarly—which to me feels very close to the awe and beauty I find in nature. Gratitude to the Dharma itself. Gratitude to the whole lineage of people over the last 2,500 years who have suffered and practiced with discipline and commitment to keep the Dharma alive in this world, so that we can all be here now. Gratitude for the circumstances in my life that have allowed me to practice the Dharma, that have even allowed me to appreciate it.

The last thing I want to mention that really helps to open me to a sense of devotion, of love and surrender, is reflection on bodhicitta. Pema Chödrön describes this very simply as the noble or awakened heart—a tenderness for life. If you think of it that way, it's not quite so grandiose. A tenderness for life that awakens when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. In fact, when things are difficult, that's precisely when bodhicitta can be awakened.

I want to share what she says about it:

"It manifests as tenderness, basic compassionate warmth. When we walk around like we're expecting to be attacked, we block it. When we release the tension between this and that, the struggle between us and them, that's when bodhicitta will emerge. Bodhicitta is available in moments of caring for things, when we clean our glasses or brush our hair. It's available in moments of appreciation when we notice the blue sky or pause and listen to the rain. It's available in moments of gratitude when we recall a kindness or recognize another person's courage. It is available in music and dance, in art and in poetry. Whenever we let go of holding onto ourselves and look at the world around us, whenever we connect with sorrow, whenever we connect with joy, whenever we drop our resentment and complaint—in those moments bodhicitta is here."

I find that just the willingness to start a sitting or a walking with one moment of reflection on bodhicitta, one moment of willingness to say, "May my practice be for the benefit of all beings"—you don't have to believe it. Just have the willingness to incline the heart and mind in that direction. It's a lot like metta practice. It has an effect, a profound effect. It brings in the vastness of what we're doing beyond any mere sense of benefit for ourselves, because it takes the self out of it.

It gives us a stamina, a resoluteness, and a connectedness to life—an appreciation of life that could be called love, that could be called devotion. No matter what's happening in your experience, it makes it all worthwhile. And it gives us the courage and the willingness to open up our hearts and be here again for the next moment.

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