Trust & Courage

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:53

I'm not sure how many of you are new today who have just come in to do the last six weeks, but whoever you are, I'd like to welcome you to this sacred space that you're entering into. It's very fortunate that you have come into this place, this sacred space, this exquisite silence that has been prepared for you. Those who are here have, in a way, worked very caringly to prepare this space, this place of practice. And so we welcome you with a lot of metta into this place, and acknowledge that it's a great time of transition for you and for those that are receiving you.

In the islands where I come from, in the Hawaiian islands, there is what we call a kupuna system. It's a system of respecting our elders, having elders in the community that continue to teach the younger ones. It's quite a beautiful way that they've preserved in all of the islands. The schools, the elementary schools, actually hire the older people in the community—the older Hawaiians and the Chinese and the Portuguese and the Japanese—and they have them come and speak to the children about the old ways, the way of respect for the land, the aina, for the elders, for a way of life that has held together a community.

One of the great kupunas of Hawaii, her name is Hana Viri. We called her Nana as an endearing way of addressing her. She was actually the godmother of my youngest daughter, Therese, who I speak of a lot. Therese couldn't be born until she had a Hawaiian name, and it's just kind of a little side story. I was carrying Therese for an awfully long time, past her due date, and Nana had not called yet to give the Hawaiian name. I called Nana and she said, "It hasn't come yet to me." So finally Nana called and told me what her name would be, which is Ihilani, Heavenly Splendor. And that night Therese was born. Nana told me that she would be born that day.

So they're quite powerful beings and they're simple. Many of them haven't even gone or finished elementary school. But they're simple in their ways and their understanding runs deep because of their simplicity.

What Therese learned, one of the lessons Therese learned from Nana and that I learned from Therese and from Nana, is this: when you are going to a new place, when you're going across a threshold into a new place—and mostly in Hawaii it's referred to when you go to the ocean or you go to walk in a bamboo forest or you go to swim in one of the waterfall pools or you hike in any one of the craters—before you enter the place you must stop and really be careful and be quiet and pause and really feel the new place, the new space. The Hawaiians have a way of saying that you ask permission if you can enter that place, that new space. And so then you say, "I enter this place with respect."

So I think this is what is important when we enter a new space, not only for the people who are new, who

are coming in new, but for the people who are already here. We're entering new spaces. We're opening to new places in our hearts and in our minds. It's important to enter with respect, to really pay attention at those places, those thresholds that we cross over.

When I traveled quite some years ago, I traveled to China and went to a place called the Forbidden City. This is the old palace grounds of Beijing. Many of you might remember this if you saw the movie The Last Emperor. It was filmed in that place called the Forbidden City. I noticed that at every entry level, every entryway to a new place, a new hall or palace or pavilion, they had these foo dogs—these dogs that were kind of part dragon looking and part pit bull looking.

I asked once, "What's the significance of these dogs or these symbols?" To make a long story short and putting it in a way that I felt was appropriate for my own life and my own practice, they're a symbol of and a sign and a reminder of paying attention when you come to a place of transition, paying attention when you cross a threshold and remembering that you're entering into new ground—to leave whatever is old behind and to enter with kind of empty hands and an open heart. The dogs, the foo dogs, are there to remind us of that, to wake up, to pay attention.

So tonight I wanted to choose a subject to speak about that could speak to everyone, whether you're just coming in or you are continuing on your journey here. So I chose the topic of trust and courage.

Usually when choosing a subject to speak about for a Dhamma talk, I try to see for myself what I need to learn, what I need to pay attention to, what I need to look into to remind myself of, and how can I bring these ancient teachings that I revere so much alive through my own experience. How can I share that with you? Because I know your time here is really precious. So how can those teachings have meaning for us in this day and age, in this 20th century?

Just reflecting again on the major transitions that we make while we're here in practice. Here it's the halfway mark and it's the beginning for many of you who have just come in. For myself and also for many of you, it's a time when our bodies are changing and aging. It's a time in my own life when this year I'll turn 50. It's when my relationship to career, to an old career is ending and more work in the community, offering of my services in the Dharma, is happening. It's a different relationship as mother, as the children leave. And so it's a time of major transition and a time when a lot of trust and courage is needed. There are so many beautiful openings that can come from this time.

I feel that I'm blossoming in a new way, in a way I've never felt before. And in that aspect, it's kind of exciting. But the difficult part is that sometimes I'm overwhelmed with a great deal of doubt about how I can make it through—about how I can make it through being away from home or being away from my children, or just getting through a sitting or getting through a dharma talk. Will I be able to open? Will I be able to give and to share?

So faith in myself, trust in myself and in my ability to open, can seem like it happens so slowly, almost

imperceptibly. And having trust in that kind of imperceptible, slow opening is really important on the way, on our path.

I used to have a lot of brazen courage, a lot of bold courage to do the things I needed to do in life—to raise kids by myself, to send them to college, to continue on with the spiritual path while doing that. And a lot of times I felt like my boldness came from not knowing, or from a sense of innocence, or maybe even ignorance. I used to be told a lot that I was saved by my own innocence, by my own ignorance, by my own stupidity. It kind of helped me get through.

But now that I've lived a little bit of life and my eyes are more open, I'm not willing to go through my spiritual life with that kind of brazen boldness, with that kind of energy. It takes a gentleness now, a trust and courage that I never had before—a willingness to allow my heart to open slowly and to enjoy the path, the opening, to savor each moment along the way. Because there's so much learning that comes from each moment of opening.

So I began to wonder: how could I fit these two aspects or these two qualities that we need in our spiritual life into the teaching? In reviewing the five of this and the three of that and the seven of this, I saw that there are two powers that are pointed out in the teachings, and they're part of what the Buddha called the five spiritual powers. These five we are speaking of during this retreat.

The first one is confidence or faith. Another way of saying that might be trust. The second is energy, and that could be translated into courage—the courage to bring forth that trust and to use it in our life, in our spiritual awakening. The third is mindfulness, which we talk about every day in the instructions and which is interwoven within everything we speak about here. That's the core of our practice. The fourth is concentration, and the fifth is wisdom—all of which we're touching upon as we do the practice here.

We've all heard this term: leap of faith. In the past, this kind of faith seemed to me like something associated with leaping and not looking—just kind of taking off on a path or on a journey and not knowing where we're going with our eyes closed and kind of blind. But as we go along and we see more things along the way, as we get older, our energy and time are precious commodities and we can't do that anymore. We used to be able to make mistakes and to kind of backpedal a lot and then begin again. But now it's important to walk the path more carefully. It's not a time for wasting.

Recently I was inspired by a writing or an account of a five-day journey by a group of nuns. This is called a *tudong*—I'm not sure where the accent is. But it was written by Sister Jitindriya of England, and it really touched me, some of the things that she said. I'm pretty sure it would be okay with her if I read some of her writing to you, so I'm going to take the liberty of doing that.

It was a journey that she and some nuns took from the Amaravati Monastery in England to a place called Devon, and it took a long time. I'd like to tell a little bit of this story or weave it in because it relates in a way to our own inner journey, and also because we're just always trying to find ways of keeping you

awake during a dharma talk. Because it can get pretty boring to talk about the same old things all the time. I know sometimes stories are completely unrelated to what we're talking about, but it really helps.

This is part of what she says, and it talks about what this *tudong* journey is:

"The journey wasn't all inspirational by any means. In concept and theory and philosophical retrospect, yes, perhaps, but the nitty-gritty of it at times was quite challenging, physically, mentally, and emotionally. But then that is what this kind of walk, or *tudong*, is all about. It's a kind of stripping away of the usual comfort zones that one can retreat into so as to contemplate the sense of insecurity that is thus laid bare in the face of the unknown. This is much of what the monastic training is about—to train the mind to be more fully present with life as you experience it in the raw, creating the possibility for direct insight into the true nature of things. In doing so, one notices how habituated the mind is to control and manipulate circumstances in an attempt to not have to feel the natural pain and insecurity of life."

So she went on this journey, and she and the other nuns stayed in all kinds of places, all kinds of situations.

They never knew what they were coming up against or coming into. They let it be unknown, just as every moment is in our practice, if we allow it to be—not expecting or hoping, not carrying the past into the present or projecting the future into the present.

They stayed in barns and sheds and open fields, on beaches and back lawns, and even a cricket pavilion. They never knew where they were going to land. The food was quite unpredictable. They depended on the kindness of others for their sustenance, and sometimes they didn't have very much. A kind of trust had to develop in their own ability to keep their hearts open and to connect with the kindness of others as they went along on their journey.

Sometimes the landscape was beautiful and comforting. Sometimes it was difficult and challenging. Sometimes it was warm, sometimes bitterly cold.

Here also we have this opportunity to allow these comfort zones to be stripped away so we can open more and more into the unknown—those places where we have felt a lot of diversion in our life, places we went to for comfort, perhaps reading or writing or acting out in certain ways. We begin to see that we can let those go as we begin to trust our inner journey more. Attachments begin to get stripped away, or at least we see them more clearly. We may go through grief, fear, blame, shame in our practice—really come up against them and let them go. Preferences—we begin to see how they run our lives and how we can let go of how we want it to be. We can let go of the projections of how we thought it would be.

She continues: "The idea of going on tudong conjures rather romantic and inspirational images and feelings, for me at least. But reality is never contained or represented fully in ideas and perceptions and remains always unexpected and unknown."

There's a place in the Sutta Nipata that offers this beautiful phrase: "Let there be nothing behind you. Leave the future to one side and grasp not at what remains in the middle."

Can we do this in our practice? Can we allow this leaving behind, this not projecting onto the present moment what we want it to be? When we're on this journey through this sacred terrain, what is tremendously helpful is to drop all of our expectations, to have this willingness to have empty hands and not bring into the moment what we think we need to bring in from the past.

There's a beautiful poem by David Whyte called "Tillico Lake":

"In this high place, it is as simple as this. Leave everything you know behind. Step forward to the cold surface. Say the old prayer of love and open both arms. Those who come with empty hands will stare into the lake astonished. There in the cold light, reflecting pure snow, the true shape of your own face."

How can we do this? One thing that we can let go of, whether we're coming into this retreat new or have been here for six weeks already, is to be careful about the comparing mind. This mind brings in the old, and this is Mara in the moment—the tempter that keeps us from being present. When we compare this moment to a previous practice or discipline or experience, we bring the past into the present moment. It's helpful to simply notice comparing mind, let it come and let it go, not getting lost in the content of it.

So how do we cultivate this trust, this confidence, this faith?

Slowing down helps—for those who are new and for those who have been here. Just slowing down from where you've been before really helps. Taking one breath, one moment, one step at a time.

Having a respect for the power of silence, for the power of inner solitude—this is an immeasurable benefit. Sages of old, women and men of all time, have used the power of silence and solitude to help them see more clearly, to come to this clear lake and be able to see their face clearly, their true nature clearly.

Wherever you are in the practice right now, see if you can take a next step towards even more solitude, even more silence—whatever that next step is for you. Perhaps it's bringing in your reins a little more, slowing down, not needing to write as many notes, not needing to connect with others in the various ways we find ourselves needing to connect because of loneliness or whatever our habit pattern is. Reading, writing—these may have helped us this far along the way.

But see if you can let it go for a while. See if it brings you a deeper sense of silence, inner silence, a deeper sense of inner solitude. Just see for yourself.

Often all of us want to connect with that place, and we don't know how to connect with that place of inner silence. We don't see that it's mostly some practical steps that we can take to do that.

I found in a new book of Mary Oliver that I just got, a poem that she wrote about stars, and it has to do with letting the words of our mind go:

Here in my head, language keeps making its tiny noises. How can I hope to be friends with the hard white stars whose flaring and hissing are not speech but a pure radiance? How can I hope to be friends with the yawning spaces between them where nothing ever is spoken? Tonight at the very edge of the field I stood very still and looked up and tried to be empty of words.

So can we bring ourselves to this new place, the place that Mary Oliver calls the edge of the field? Can we come to this new place and be very still and be empty of words? Can we take that next step in our practice, on our path? Can we trust ourselves enough to do that? Only you know the answer to that. Can you dig deep down to that place of deep trust in yourselves to find that you don't need those places where the words meant so much?

It's usually at this place, at the halfway mark, where there's a lot of papañca around the understanding of no-self—which is completely ironic, because it goes against the understanding. It's kind of funny that we want to understand it with words and we want to know the big picture of it in a macroscopic way. But really we can only understand it in a microscopic way. The true understanding of no-self comes from a moment-to-moment experience, and this is the only way it can be understood deeply.

So can we let go of the words, let go of the questions, and just be with the experience of it, whatever it is?

What can we do to allow a gradual unfolding of this Dharma in us, of this bud in us, of this potential for awakening in us?

There's a way in our practice where there's a ritual that we take sometimes, and it can have an ever-deepening meaning for each one of us—and that is the taking of refuge in the Buddha, in the Dharma, and in the Sangha.

For me, taking refuge in the Buddha really means taking refuge in that potential of awakening that lies within this mind-body continuum, and really taking refuge in the pace at which that opening takes place. Taking refuge in the unhurriedness of it, the organic opening of it, being able to open in our own unique way.

Once when I was in a retreat with Munindra, it was, I think, one of my first ten-day retreats, if not my first ten-day retreat. And it was a retreat that was very, very challenging. All of a sudden new understandings came that were never there before, and many kind of psychedelic experiences came. It was like I was open to a whole new world, and it was kind of shocking in a way.

About the eighth day of the retreat, Munindra was kind of pushing me to keep going and inspiring me to stay up all night and keep practicing and keep practicing and keep practicing. So I just kind of followed his advice and did what I could. But I didn't feel like I was getting anywhere at all. I was kind of stuck in the same place over and over again in this sort of very psychedelic, blissful place.

So I went to him towards the end of the retreat, and he simply said, "When the fruit is ripe, it will let go of

the tree." And it gave me this image for the rest of my practice—that it just takes place in its own time, the ripening of this fruit. You can't be in a hurry.

This is from The Findhorn Garden, a writing from a book about the Findhorn Garden:

Flowers unfold slowly and gently, bit by bit in the sunshine, and a heart too must never be pushed or driven, but unfold in its own perfect timing to reveal its true wonder and true beauty.

So can we have this kind of trust? Can we surrender to this? Can we take refuge in this trust to unfold in our own way, in our own organic way, ripen in this way?

It's said that trust or faith is like a seed. It establishes itself firmly in fertile soil, and it's up to us to make that soil fertile, to give it the watering, the sunshine it needs. But we can't push the growth of the bud from that seed.

Faith has a characteristic of venturing beyond, of aspiring beyond. And so if you look at a seed, if you reflect on a seed and how it comes, there's energy that kind of bursts forth and cracks open the shell and allows what's inside that seed to venture beyond into a whole new world. This is what faith is like.

There's what is called bright faith. In the beginning of our practice we have what's called bright faith. And I'd like to talk about my own development of faith, because it's not a very interesting story, but we just hear so many great stories about the Buddha and about the nuns and monks in the monastery and even mythological stories, and it's kind of hard to relate sometimes because we're just wiping runny noses or changing diapers or the oil filters on our cars. It's not very romantic, but yet we all have the same kind of homing instinct that the Buddha and all the nuns and monks of old had—this instinct to really feel connected with all of life, to know the truth deeply, to understand a peace and happiness that's beyond the peace and happiness that we know, to experience emptiness or nothingness in a courageous way.

So for each one of us, this opening to trust and courage may be different and yet the same.

My own journey on the spiritual path began about twenty-five years ago. When somebody today asked me, "Well, what brought you to the path?" it is easy for me to say that suffering brought me to the path. Dukkha brought me to the path.

And for all of us, this is what brings us here. Suffering is a heavenly messenger to many of us.

When I was young, eighteen years old, I was married into a wealthy family. To make a long story short, it was an arranged marriage where my mother betrothed me to a man I had known for only eight days. It was okay with me simply because I was ignorant at that time, and I wanted to get away from my family. So I said yes.

I went into this marriage, into this political wealthy family in Manila, and I came from a very poor family—lower middle class. When I entered this new family, I was surrounded by wealth, but all around

me was poverty. It was an eye-opening time because I got to ride in a Mercedes Benz in the back seat with a driver who carried a .45 revolver because he was also my bodyguard.

My father-in-law was in the government realm, so I was appointed to a high-ranking position in the Central Bank of the Philippines. I would be driven to work every Friday just to collect my paycheck—I didn't have to actually work. I'm giving you this picture of how it was.

When I first entered this family, I would try to sit in the front seat, and my in-laws would say, "No, this is not proper." I would try to say thank you to the help—I had a driver, a gardener, and six maids—and they would say, "You can't say that. You only say 'well done.' You never say thank you." It was a very new world for me.

So I'd get in the back seat, and the maid would give me, on literally a silver platter, tea and food for the journey, because the traffic in Manila is outrageous and it could take a long time to get to work. Sometimes we'd get caught in traffic jams, and if there was no traffic jam and there was a policeman at the intersection, if he saw my car—because it had a license plate signifying I was from a certain political family—the policeman would stop all traffic so my car could go through.

Here I was, very young, not knowing what was going on, and I would see along the way beggars and desperate-looking old men and women, young boys and girls, very young prostitutes, and little children who I heard would rent babies to carry so they could show them at car windows and you would take pity on them and give money.

I struggled with whether to give or not to give. One time I put my hand out to give some money and they were so fast—they would rip your hand open, and by the time I could get my hand back in the car it would be full of scratches.

This situation really opened me to the dukkha of the world. There was such a disparity between where I sat and what I saw that it ripped my heart out. I tried everything I could to help. I worked in an orphanage, but it didn't assuage my heart.

I was a practicing Catholic at the time, and I would go to church to say novenas, repeating prayers over and over again. I felt like one of these impossible cases. In the Catholic tradition there's a saint you pray to for impossible cases—Saint Jude. I would literally sometimes crawl in the cathedral from the back to the front, because this was the way things were done. I would do anything to know the truth of life. I really wanted to understand.

There came a point when I started taking yoga classes. They were offered at an Eastern Indian home. When I went in and saw their altar, it had many different things—Hindu symbols, and also the Buddha sitting peacefully with a smile, and Christ on the cross. When I looked at those two, I knew what my choice had to be. I didn't want to crawl through the cathedral anymore.

And I wanted to know that place where that smile came from on the Buddha. I wanted to know that place in my heart, not in a church. And I wanted to find the trust to do that.

To make a long journey short, I ended up having this great experience. Near our home was the marketplace where the cooks went to market. They came home one day and told me of this great sight they had seen near the marketplace, and they asked me to go with them. So I went along with other members of the family.

We all went over there and came to the place where plenty of cars were parked. It was kind of like an old village town. We parked the car and went along the pathway that wound around to this place where we could see many people milling around from a distance. It was pointed out to me that in the area above some palm trees, there was this light up above. This light was there in broad daylight, so it couldn't have been a projection of anything because it wasn't projecting onto anything. It was in space.

We came around the corner and I looked up, and I saw an apparition of a woman—a very beautiful woman who looked quite angelic and translucent. She was wearing robes and kind of floating in the sky. I'd never seen anything like this before. Quite a few others were there, so it wasn't a hallucination. This was real. This woman had hands and face you could see through, and her gown was blue and white. They said it was the Blessed Virgin, Mary. She was looking around, turning her head. I think out of shock I fell to the ground and was on my knees looking up.

The words she spoke to me at that time—not out loud, but I felt them—were: "What are you doing here?" I took a long time to answer that question and eventually left the Philippines.

What that apparition was to me, what it instilled in me, was this tremendous bright faith—this faith to believe in the unknown, in something I had never experienced before. This kind of trust to open to what I could never have thought I would have opened to before. It touched in me a place of courage that I could open to, to take steps that I needed to take on my path.

Sometimes each of us on our journey gets this bright faith, or is encouraged by an experience, a book, a person, a place, a reading maybe, that helps us to keep our way, to shine a light on our path. But it's not enough. At some point that light isn't bright enough when we come to a place of real darkness. It's where we need to look to our own experience, where we need to go to a place where we can open to what is called verified faith—faith that comes from our own experience, faith that can depend on our own ability to maybe see the laws of impermanence, to experience the ever-changing moment to moment, to open to that vulnerability that comes with opening to dukkha. A kind of faith and trust that comes from allowing ourselves to open to that deep vulnerability of our hearts that's called dukkha.

And aligning ourselves with those truths—with the truth of impermanence or anicca, the truth of vulnerability or dukkha, and the truth of insubstantiality, the conditioned nature of life that we often refer to as no-self or anatta. Allowing ourselves to align with those truths. This is the threshold that we

come to in our practice. Can we let go of that faith that held on to a person, place or thing and align ourselves with the new truths that we are now experiencing—the truth of impermanence, of vulnerability, of no separate self?

So much faith and trust comes in our ability to let go. Not let go in a forceful way, but let go because it's going. We see it going. How can we hold on when we see it going? Suzuki Roshi says, "True renunciation is not giving up things of this world, but knowing that they go away." That's what true renunciation is.

Sometimes faith is not only surrendering or taking refuge in the Buddha, not just taking refuge in our potential to awaken, but it's taking refuge in the Dhamma, in the Dharma. And what does that mean? Not taking refuge in this big Dharma, this big law, this big understanding of what the Buddha taught. But if we can take a look at it as taking refuge in this moment, in this very moment, surrendering to how things are right now, right here and now. This moment is what is true, whatever is in this moment. It could be anger, it could be grief, it could be rage, it could be shame, it could be doubt. Can we take refuge in that, in that Dhamma, in that moment? It's from that kind of taking refuge in that moment, surrendering to that, that the courage comes to continue. When we can just allow ourselves to go one moment at a time.

There have been many times in my own practice, and that I hear from those I speak with, that our ability to keep going comes from taking one step at a time—literally. During walking meditation, I have found myself unable to look at the end of the path I was walking on. If I was taking fifty paces, I wouldn't even look that far ahead. I would focus only on the next leaf or the next rock, giving myself the intention to be as mindful as possible from here to there—just really short distances, taking refuge in small pieces at a time.

Sometimes when we practice this way, it unleashes tremendous energy that we can ride. We discover that by committing to take one mindful step at a time, we often go much further than expected. The very act of focusing on one step with complete awareness generates momentum that carries us forward.

True faith is verified faith. It unleashes incredible power, energy, and courage—bringing forth the strength to keep us moving, to keep us going. This requires a particular kind of quiet effort, the effort that emerges from courage itself.

I recall a beautiful teaching from the writings about Don Juan that spoke of effort and the energy we invest in our practice. It was one of those Zen-like teachings that cuts straight to the heart: "It's up to you. You can take the energy that you have and put it into complaining or blaming, or you can put it into your practice, into liberation. It's up to you."

When you notice yourself blaming or complaining, you can remind yourself: "Can I put this energy into liberation instead? Into taking the next step with mindfulness? Into taking the next breath with mindfulness? Into opening to this anger or blame with mindfulness?" The choice is always ours.

This choice, this humility that opens us to such possibility, is truly rare. Yet we all possess the ability to

make it.

Sister Jetindriya's writing concludes with these words: "The journey is not really finished."

And indeed, it never is. Each moment offers us a fresh opportunity to take refuge, to surrender, to find the courage to continue—one breath, one step, one moment at a time.

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