The Courage To Live Your Aspirations

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 56:22

Over the last ten days or two weeks that we've been here, we have heard a lot about what the full potential of our lives is. During this time we have been making a conscious effort to awaken, to come out of the dream or the fog-like state that we often live in. And even though at times the steps may feel small, each step is a step towards freedom.

By doing this practice, we have been nurturing our commitment to awaken—a commitment to living our lives in alignment with our hearts' and minds' deepest wishes. Soon we'll be faced with leaving here, and it's important to look at how we can continue to nurture this commitment. How can we take this practice and what we've been doing here and first let it become a support in our daily lives, and then let it become the way in which we live our lives?

When I first began doing this practice, the main criterion for me was that it be a practice that assisted me in my daily life, that brought some clarity to the situations I encountered. Tonight I'd like to speak about extending this practice that we've been doing here sitting on the cushion and extending it into our daily lives.

I'd like to begin by speaking about the seed itself—the seed of aspiration or the knowing or sensing of the full potential of life. It's so vital to our practice and how we live our lives. It can at times be extremely energizing and helpful to our practice to reflect on why we practice and what it is that has so inspired us to come here. What are the deepest aspirations of our hearts and minds?

By doing this we allow these aspirations to become a strong motivating force in our practice and in our lives. In understanding what is motivating us, we can come to see how to nurture this. Then these aspirations become something that we can use daily in our life. When we're faced with making a decision, it can be a reference point. For myself, having the aspiration to awaken, I can look and see: in a moment where I need to make a choice, will this help me to awaken, or is it based upon greed, hatred, and delusion?

I'd like to say a little bit more about the word aspiration itself, because it sometimes has funny connotations in our society. We live in a culture that's very good at setting goals. We may have a lot of training in how to reach these goals, and oftentimes these goals are something that we've intellectually decided upon. They may come out of cultural norms in our society and our desires, and may be related to a career path. It could be as if we pick out something that we want to do in life and then decide, no matter what, that's what we're going to do.

So often this is based upon some external kind of fulfillment, and the mind becomes constricted around the goal—what we want to achieve. In a sense it's a closing down of the mind and losing any sense of what's skillful or unskillful.

I'd like to share a story about one aspiration that is based on external fulfillment. Apparently there is an award that is given out each year called the Darwin Award, and it's given to the person who did the gene pool the biggest service by killing or injuring themselves in the most extraordinarily stupid way. This is the story about the winner for 1997.

His name was Larry Waters of Los Angeles, and he's one of the few Darwin winners to survive his award-winning accomplishment. Larry's boyhood dream was to fly. When he graduated from high school, he joined the Air Force in hopes of becoming a pilot. Unfortunately, poor eyesight disqualified him. When he was finally discharged, he had to satisfy himself with watching jets fly over his backyard.

One day Larry had a bright idea. He decided to fly. He went to the local Army-Navy surplus store and purchased forty-five weather balloons and several tanks of helium. The weather balloons, when fully inflated, would measure more than four feet across.

Back home, Larry securely strapped the balloons to his sturdy lawn chair. He anchored the chair to the bumper of his Jeep and inflated the balloons with the helium. He climbed on for a test while it was still only a few feet above the ground. Satisfied it would work, Larry packed several sandwiches and a six-pack of Miller Lite, loaded his pellet gun—figuring he could pop a few balloons when it was time to descend—and went back to the lawn chair. He tied himself in along with his pellet gun and provisions.

Larry's plan was to lazily float up to a height of about thirty feet above his backyard after severing the anchor and after a few hours come back down. Things didn't quite work out that way. When he cut the cord anchoring the lawn chair to his Jeep, he didn't float lazily up to thirty feet or so. Instead, he streaked into the LA sky as if shot from a cannon. He didn't level out at thirty feet, nor did he level off at one hundred feet. After climbing and climbing, he leveled off at eleven thousand feet.

At that height he couldn't risk shooting any of the balloons lest he unbalance the load and really find himself in trouble. So he stayed there, drifting, cold, and frightened for more than fourteen hours. Then he really got in trouble. He found himself drifting into the primary approach corridor of the Los Angeles International Airport.

A United pilot first spotted Larry. He radioed the tower and described passing a guy in a lawn chair with a gun. Radar confirmed the existence of an object floating eleven thousand feet above the airport. LAX emergency procedures swung into full alert and a helicopter was dispatched to investigate.

LAX is right on the ocean. Night was falling and the offshore breeze began to blow, carrying Larry out to sea with the helicopter in hot pursuit. Several miles out, the helicopter caught up with Larry. Once the crew determined that Larry was not dangerous, they attempted to close in for a rescue, but the draft from

the blades would push Larry away whenever they neared. Finally, the helicopter ascended to a position several hundred feet above Larry and lowered a rescue line. Larry snagged the line and was hauled back to shore. The difficult maneuver was flawlessly executed by the helicopter crew.

As soon as Larry was hauled to earth, he was arrested by waiting members of the Los Angeles Police Department for violating LAX airspace. As he was led away in handcuffs, a reporter dispatched to cover the daring rescue asked why he had done it. Larry stopped, turned, and replied nonchalantly, "A man just can't sit around."

This is not quite the kind of aspiration that I'm talking about.

When I'm using the word aspirations, I often think of the energy of rising up—rising up to inhabit our full potential, the qualities that we inhabit in doing so. It's not a state of becoming but an embodiment of that which we aspire to. We don't become more loving—it's not a creation—but through the purification of our aspirations we may embody love more deeply. It's not about reaching out to be something, but rather revealing that which is already there, which has only been obscured. In this way it is a realignment of our lives to be in accordance with the deepest level of our being.

Another way that helped me to understand aspirations is the way Hozan, the Zen master that I sit with, used to speak of them. He often talks about uncovering our deepest vows. This has seemed to me to be really true—that as I sit and meditate, there is a sense of uncovering that which has been covered. It's covered over by habits of mind, emotions that carry us away, or thoughts that we get lost in. Essentially they get covered over when we identify with something in a way that starts to create a small, separate self.

Through our practice we're able to see through the delusion of these states, to become less enchanted by our desires. In letting go or simply not being moved by them, our deepest vows become revealed.

It's crucial that we nurture these aspirations, or they become some ideological concept that can drive us crazy as we fail to live up to them. In this way they become just another way to beat ourselves up, to tell ourselves that we're not good enough. They become that brutal "should" in our mind that we have a way of torturing ourselves with.

At the beginning of this year I was in Northampton, and as I was walking down the street there was a street musician there. In his box he had a sign that said, "May your suffering last as long as your New Year's resolutions."

When our New Year's resolutions become that brutal "should," we lose our inspiration. Or else we may just leave these aspirations to wither and die, and we begin to listlessly move through life, shying away from anything that may awaken us.

Growing more and more numb to life itself, this disconnection from our deepest aspirations can lead to states of guilt and remorse—feelings we may not fully face until the time of death arrives. Then we might

look upon our lives with profound sorrow and despair.

Just recently, a friend of mine who works in hospice care shared a particularly moving experience. A woman came into the hospice after sixty-five years of marriage, and as she was about to die, she told her husband that in all those decades together, he had never been able to show his affection to her. Now, facing her death, he was completely present for her and couldn't stop expressing the love he had carried all along. In some way, he was very fortunate to have this opportunity.

Many times death comes without our knowing it's about to arrive, and we don't have those final moments to express what lives in our hearts. But hopefully we can learn to be connected in such a way that we don't need to wait sixty-five years to offer our love.

Both Carol and Sharon have spoken about how important our intentions and actions are, about the law of karma, and how what we direct our minds toward is what we will bear the fruits of. If we keep looking toward unwholesome, habituated patterns of greed, hatred, and delusion, this is what we will come to bear the fruits of. But if we can realign our hearts and minds with that which brings us closer to freedom, understanding, peace, and harmony, that too is what we will bear the fruits of. This obviously makes it very important what we incline our minds toward.

We can look right now into our own hearts and minds to see what it is that we aspire to, what's meaningful to us. And we can be honest with ourselves. There's no right answer. Each person's expression is probably quite unique. And yet when we look into our spiritual journeys, there's probably something quite universal in our ultimate aspirations.

In our own language, we may find something like a desire for greater happiness, peacefulness, understanding, or the aspiration to be liberated—to be free. It's important that we let the voice be our own, not what we think we should aspire to. It needs to be something that speaks to us in our own language.

Recently someone expressed it to me as "getting out of their own way." It can be something very simple. As Sylvia mentioned the other night, the Dalai Lama says, "My religion is kindness." A simple statement, and yet when we look at what kindness truly is, it's not simply being nice to someone. True kindness requires that we live deeply, that in a simple moment of kindness we bring to bear the qualities of wisdom, love, compassion, and equanimity. It requires a full presence of being.

It may be that our aspirations are not immediately apparent. It may take some time to understand what is fully motivating us. We can be so used to listening to the chitchat of our minds that we fail to give the heart space to listen from an intuitive level. Rather than forcing some outside concept, we can silently listen within. Through our practice, we begin to allow the spaciousness in which our hearts can be heard. We can then begin to live our lives from this place.

For years, I would usually begin my sittings by saying, "May I be liberated for the benefit of all beings."

There were many times when this seemed very dry to me, and I would wonder, "What's my problem? Don't I want to be liberated?" Then one day I noticed that even though there was some dryness with these words, they directed my mind to this place of intuitive knowing. There was a felt sense there—maybe there were no words to express it, but it could be clearly attuned to.

There's a quality of courage that is needed in moving toward our aspirations. We need to move beyond the inertia that sometimes settles into our lives when we fall into sustaining the status quo. We need to move beyond our self-preserving tendencies and be willing to stand naked in the light.

I know there have been many times in my life when I came directly into contact with the feeling of smallness, when I was faced with a situation that challenged me deeply. One such time, I was involved in a meditation center and had only been there a very short period when I was asked to manage the center. It was a big job with a lot of responsibility, and I remember so clearly how I would have this feeling of just being a very tiny little person in a very big job. There were times when I wanted to crawl back into my hole, times when I didn't like what I had to do. In many ways it forced me to let go of my preferences. This was possible through remembering what it was I was doing and why I was doing it. By keeping in touch with what was motivating me, I had a bigger picture than just being involved in satisfying my preferences.

I suspect many of us have at various times in our lives been put in positions where we really felt challenged. There's no question that it's a challenge to wake up out of our habituated patterns—they've been around a very long time. Sometimes it's seemingly more comfortable not to try than to try and feel as if one has fallen short.

I know when I was a child, I would often begin things and then the fear of failure would stop me. It was as if I was afraid that if I tried, I might discover that I really was no good—or discover what my shortcomings were.

During my teenage years, there were two people who really inspired me to have courage in following the aspirations of my heart. I came into contact with these two people at a very difficult time in my life. I had become very disillusioned with the world and all its seeming injustices. I was quite angry and felt quite alienated. At that time I was having trouble going to school—I would walk up the steps to the school each day, and then a part of me just couldn't face it again.

And so I would go and I would sit by the river. And it was a very pretty river with lots of trees around it. And yet in the background was the city was right there and the hum of the city. As I sat there each day, just watching the river flowing and the comings and goings of the life there, there were these two people that were frequently there.

By the standards of society, these people would probably be termed failures. One of them was a bag lady, and the other was probably something we would call a bum. The bag lady would come every day and she would pick up treasures that she found that other people had discarded. The bum would come in his

ragged clothes and he would just sit on this bench and he would bring with him a bag to feed the birds. He'd sit there and he'd feed the birds for hours, and sometimes people would come along and he'd just have a chat with them.

What I really started to sense from these people was that they had some kind of peace and tranquility. They had something which I didn't see in a lot of the other people around me. I just looked at them one day and I thought, "If this is the worst that can happen to me, what do I have to lose?" I felt in some way that they were my own heavenly messengers, that they brought to me a message of having courage to begin to understand life, to follow my heart.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese woman who's been the leader of the Democratic Party in Burma for a number of years, was once elected to rule her people, but she was never allowed to do so because of the military regime there. She spent many years in house arrest or having very limited visitors being able to come and see her. Around her, people were subject to immense suffering, torture, and death. And during this time, she's never stopped by her fear. She says about fear: "Fearlessness may be a gift, but perhaps more precious is the courage acquired through endeavor. Courage that comes from cultivating the habit of refusing to let one's own fear dictate one's actions. Courage that can only be described as grace under pressure." And for those of you who know her, you probably realize how much she really is a symbol of grace under pressure.

So often our deepest aspirations get covered over by our fears and beliefs about ourselves. If we're in any way harboring a belief that we're not good enough, each time that we acknowledge our aspiration, we're also facing this underlying belief. So working with our aspirations, we also have to work with the compassionate heart. It does no good to beat ourselves up over and over again for believing that we're unworthy. But through the understanding we gain in our practice, through seeing deeply into the way things are, we no longer have to believe our beliefs. They're simply a case of mistaken identity. In this way we can see that it needs to be a combination of recognizing and acknowledging our deepest aspirations and using the practice to realize them.

For example, if we have the aspiration to be loving and then a moment later someone makes us angry, we could start to believe that we're really an angry person. Yet if we continue to be with the anger and see through to its impermanence, we can see that it's just the passing state and not who we truly are.

We also need to learn to work with our aspirations with wisdom, or they become our bondage. If we're not careful, we can end up with a compulsive, striving energy. If our aspiration is to be free and we are grasping at this, then we have only cultivated the habit of attachment. We are moving into the world of becoming, leaning into our aspirations in a way that constricts the mind around a fixed idea. It can be a very noble aspiration, and yet if it strengthens the idea of self, it will only cause more suffering.

We can see this in "I want to awaken. I want enlightenment." Nobody becomes enlightened. Enlightenment is. Nobody becomes awakened. Awakening is.

When we end up tightening the mind around our fixed ideas, we actually end up causing harm to ourselves and others. I know there's been times in my own life when this aspiration hasn't been done so skillfully. Some years ago I was living in a spiritual community, and for the most part it was an extremely happy time in my life. I felt like I could really dedicate my life to that which I believed in. I worked wholeheartedly in this community, but then something got caught up in the wholeheartedness. There became identification with the work that I was doing, as if through doing this work I was proving myself, I was creating some sense of self-worth.

There was an endless stream of work, and I started to find it difficult to say no to it. I became known in the department that I was working as "deva slava," or divine slave. I really ended up pushing too hard, working too hard, and harming my body in doing so. This was just because there wasn't skillful means in the holding of my aspiration. I wasn't bringing in the wisdom.

But it's natural that through our practice our aspirations become purified. We may have very noble aspirations and our means are still clouded by delusion. We begin to see how not only do we have aspirations but we have ideas about how aspirations will play out—some sort of agenda. And this is suffering.

An example of this is that as we sit, we may have ideas about what good practice looks like. We may think that when we are clearly seeing the arising and passing away of our experiences, that this is good. As we sit longer, it may begin to happen that things begin to move faster, and we begin to only see the endings of things. It has that sense as if everything's slipping away, that there's nothing substantial to hold onto.

But the truth of it may be that our practice is going to a new level. Yet by wanting what we consider to be good experience, we start cutting ourselves off from the way things are unfolding.

One of our jobs in practice is to learn to hold both our deepest aspirations in a way that energizes our practice and still have acceptance and surrender to the unfolding of our paths or the unfolding of the Dharma. It is the holding of two sides of a coin. We point ourselves in the direction of our aspirations, and then with wholeheartedness and dedication we simply do the best we can, responding to life as it is through skillful means.

Nyanaponika Thera talks about crossing the ocean of life. He says, "To cross the ocean of life and reach the other shore safely, skill is needed in navigating its currents and cross currents. In adapting oneself to those inner and outer currents, however, one must always be watchful. The currents can be powerful at times, and one must know when it is necessary to resist them. Sometimes right effort has to be applied to avoid or overcome what is evil and to produce and preserve what is good. At other times it is wise to restrain excessive and impatient zeal and revert to a receptive attitude, allowing the process of inner growth to mature at their own rate. By wisely directed adaptation, we can learn to give full weight to both sides of every situation, to the duality in our own nature and in the objective circumstances we face. Only by confronting and understanding the two sides within one's own experience can one master and finally

transcend them."

Learning to recognize when our zeal becomes unbalanced—we experience it in our practice when we are pushing too hard to get somewhere, perhaps wanting some painful state to be finished with, noting it so it will disappear. We need to open and accept that which is, and our aspirations give us the energizing quality to do this. In the heat of the pain or the difficulty, we can simply remember why it is that we are doing this.

The Buddha spoke very simply about how to nourish our Dharma aspirations. He said there are four qualities necessary to do so.

The first of these conditions is being in a suitable place to live—a place that allows us to step out of the busyness of life. It's a place of refuge, of seclusion, a place where we have a sense of safety. It needs to be a place able to support a wholesome lifestyle where we can live ethically. For many of us as householders, it may not be that our house is totally silent, but it can be a place where we can work and share intimately with others, where we can respect others and feel respected by them. It's a place where we can begin to engender the qualities of love and compassion.

The second condition is to associate with good people. I'm sure we all know the difference between being with people who are on a destructive path and being with people who have like-minded aspirations. When we're with people who live carelessly, it's easy to fall into step with them—we may not want to make waves, or we simply begin to have our mind clouded by what they're feeling or acting. But when we keep company with good friends, people who inspire us, it really helps to give us support. These people can help let us know when we're getting off track, when we're starting to do foolish things, and they often bring great inspiration into our lives.

When I was practicing in Burma, I was sharing a room with a Swiss woman who had ordained as a nun. She had such strength and commitment to her practice that each time I walked into the room where she was, I was reminded instantly to be more mindful, to be present, simply by her presence. I'm sure we've experienced this support as we sit here—in times of great difficulty it's been the people sitting around us that have really helped us hang in there with it.

Sometimes I think we tend to overlook that taking refuge in the Sangha is the third of the Triple Gems, so it was obvious that the Buddha placed great importance upon this. It's really helpful, just in the same way that we've come here together to do this retreat as a sangha, to have some form of sangha in our daily lives. Perhaps we are part of a sitting group, gathering together regularly with our peers. In this way we can get strength from them, and it can help to provide steadiness and inspiration.

Some of us may find we're living in an area where there aren't so many practitioners. It might be helpful to find people we can communicate with, even from a distance, where when we're in a time of struggle, we can simply call them up and get some form of reality check, some form of inspiration.

Oftentimes in coming together as a sangha, there can be difficulties. It's not always easy. But instead of waiting for the perfect Sangha, we can use the situation we're in to further our practice, to use it as practice. In the same way that we've been working with difficult states here, we can work with difficult people within our Sangha. Here we may have found that if it's not one thing, it's another, and at home we may find if it's not one person, it's another. We can simply learn to work with these situations.

The third condition the Buddha spoke about was being able to self-regulate and guide our lives. This involves living in alignment with the truth, the teachings, the Dharma, and using our practice to do so. This is about the energy and effort we put into our practice. It's about being able to accept whatever limitations we may have.

We so often want to be the invincible ones, but these bodies, minds, and energy all have their limitations. It's learning through skillful means the times to move like a warrior and the times to simply sit and breathe gently. It's about finding what supports the continuation of our practice and having the energy to do so.

This might mean making a commitment to sitting on a daily basis. It might require getting up a little earlier or going to bed a little later, or asking for support from family members to help care for our children to give us this time. The length of time can vary for each one of us according to the conditions in our life. It's far better to choose a time that is realistic than to day after day not be able to stick with your commitment.

A few years ago—quite a few years ago now—I made a commitment to sit for two hours a day: an hour in the morning, an hour in the evening. Then one day I had a very busy day, followed by a dinner party, lots of conversation, and a few drinks. When I got home, I hopped into bed. Just as I was about to doze off, I remembered I hadn't sat.

I dragged myself out of bed and went to my cushion. I sat there for that hour, bobbing and weaving, imagining how I could curl up on my cushion, totally fantasizing about being asleep. If we looked at this on the level of what constitutes good practice, we'd probably think, "Why bother?" And yet, here I am many years later, and out of all the sittings I did in that period, this is the one that really sticks out in my mind. It does so because it truly was honoring my commitment, hanging in there with that commitment even though it was difficult.

This also brings up the point of not judging our sittings. As we move back into daily life and it becomes more hectic, we might find—if we sit at the end of the day—that we're just replaying the day, that there are lots of thoughts, maybe obsessive planning for the future. At that time, this was what my sittings often looked like. Yet just by continuing, it wasn't long before I started to feel a little more spaciousness in my life during chaotic moments. I wasn't quite so quick to retaliate with anger when things happened that I didn't like.

Sitting is not the only way to continue our practice. We've worked extensively with walking during this retreat, and walking can continue to be a strong anchor in our lives. We do a lot of it, and we can simply let that be a time of practice. IMS is full of hallways, and through my daily life, I'm often moving through these corridors. So I started making it a practice to remember each time I hit a hallway to walk—to simply walk.

I've also found that when walking down a busy street with many things to do, if in a moment I can just remember that what I'm really doing is walking, I can feel this great weight of the world drop from my shoulders, and I'm simply walking. It's certainly easier said than done—the remembering is the difficult part. I used to judge myself fiercely for gaps in mindfulness, noticing each time how long it had been since I had forgotten. Then one day I shifted this to celebrating the remembering, and suddenly there was joy and delight, and once again the opportunity to be present.

Strong emotional states can also become a reminder or wake-up call. When anger arises, we can take a momentary look at what this feels like—not being swept away by the anger, but instead exploring the state both in mind and body. If you happen to be in a phase where you're experiencing many strong emotional states, you might pick one of them and work with that—maybe a state such as blame. Each time you hear in your mind that you're blaming someone or blaming yourself, just let this be a reminder to look within and see what's happening.

Relationship has also been a strong component of my own practice, serving both as a mirror to cultivate mindfulness and as a practice of loving-kindness. At times the mirror can be difficult to look at. People closest to us often trigger responses that normally don't get touched, and we can use these moments to understand what we hold onto and how we get hooked.

Having a partner inspires me to move toward living from a place of less grasping, clinging, and desire for control—moving toward a place where love is unconditional. This means letting go of the expectations I may have of wanting my partner to be a certain way, respecting him in his own process. Sometimes respecting someone we love's process can be quite difficult. When they're in pain and suffering, can we simply be there for them without trying to make things right? Sometimes I've found it easier to sit with my own pain than to feel it in others. It often brings up feelings of powerlessness, feelings of futility. So I'm learning to be with these feelings while still honoring my partner's space.

One of my favorite lines that I've ever heard Sharon say, which she writes in one of her books, is: "To love someone is to be totally present for them." Relationship has been for me one of letting go over and over again—beginning to see how attachment kills the potential for love, having the courage to love with nothing to hang onto, knowing these conditions are impermanent and loving anyway, using relationship both as purification and as offering.

Also in our daily lives, we can work with honoring the precepts, taking them to heart—not blindly following them, but letting them be an alive, vital element in our lives. We can learn to work with them in

a way that brings reverence and sacredness to life, respecting and caring for ourselves and those around us. There may be one of the precepts in particular that we feel drawn to work with. I'm sure the precept around false speech could keep us busy for many lifetimes, and we'd still have more work to do.

We can discover where we draw our lines. We use the precepts to become more aware of our intentions and motivations, and to be honest and intimate with ourselves—using the precepts as our foundation for living and relating with the world, cultivating thoughts and actions that come from a place of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion.

The fourth condition that the Buddha spoke about was previous good work or actions. This returns us again to the law of cause and effect. It's said to be a rare and precious opportunity for one to be able to hear the Dharma. If we look around this world at the vast array of conditions that one can be born into, there are many different lives we could possibly have without having this possibility of hearing the Dharma.

And then it's considered even more rare and precious to be able to practice the Dharma, even just to be able to sit here right now. At this time there are still monks and nuns who live in Tibet in monasteries, and they don't have the same opportunity for practice due to the conditions that are present. So all of these conditions can help to remind us of the laws of cause and effect.

In order to grow a garden, certain conditions need to be present. In order to come to understand our own hearts and minds, certain conditions need to be present. When we look at these conditions that are necessary, it may come to mind that something in our lives might need to change in order to support our heart's deepest wish. This can be scary, and yet if we let the practice guide us, what we find is that we are simply letting go of that which is not serving us. In this way we begin to simplify our lives.

I know there was a time in my own life when the practice really began to affect the way that I lived, and I no longer had the same interests as many of my friends. Some of my friends found this quite difficult, and some of them started to fall away, while others became more interested in what I was doing. At this time my husband Edwin was not meditating, and he would watch me day after day as I would go and sit. Then one day he decided to go to a retreat with me, and since that time he's become very inspired in his own practice, even to the point of spending time ordained as a monk.

Yet there was a point when I was not really sure how this was going to affect our relationship. I would go away for months at a time to practice, and I would imagine that during that time he would fall in love with another woman. And yet in my heart I knew that I had no choice but to meditate. I could feel the effect that it was having on me. It took courage to do that, and it felt like a risk. And yet I found that there was the faith and the courage to do that, made possible through the practice itself. The practice itself had this sense of guiding me.

The interesting thing about the aspiration to awaken is that as it is combined with the growing wisdom

from our practice, it keeps returning us to the moment, to the here and now. We realize the possibility of awakening is nowhere other than right here.

In the very first retreat that I did with Hogen-san, a Zen master, he introduced me to koan practice. He describes koan practice as being the ultimate question which in itself is an answer by which one can cut off one's own karmic ego head and be born anew. So the first day that he gave a koan, I was very excited, and I was sitting with my koan, and then bingo, there came an answer. So excitedly, I hurried off to his room to tell him. I gave him my answer, and he got this very puzzled expression on his face, and he says to me, "What was the koan that I gave?" As I repeated it to him, he gets another puzzled expression and he says, "No, I never gave that koan." So I sheepishly exited from the room.

The next day he gave another one, and I felt very determined once again. When he said it, it sounded so profound, and so I thought, "Yes, I'll sit with this question." I was sitting there, and after a period of time, I realized I'd forgotten all about the koan. Then I realized I'd forgotten even what the koan was. So I once again went sheepishly back to his room, and I told him what had happened.

He looks at me, and he ever so slightly rolls his eyeballs. Then he says, "Just go and sit perfectly." I listened to this. I took it in. Then I was a bit puzzled. I said to him, "You know, you've just given me a future." He gets a very puzzled expression. He says, "What? How did I do that?" I said, "Well, if I'm going to go and sit, it's going to take some time to sit perfectly."

Then all of a sudden in the room there were just these two blazing brown eyes penetrating into me. And he said, "Perfection now!" I bowed and left the room.

So this is a poem by the Buddhist nun Rangetsu:

First steps on the long path to truth.
Please do not dream your lives away.
Walk on to the end.

Having the courage, the patience, and the perseverance to continue on our way, moment by moment allowing the inspiration and the energy of our aspirations to guide us to freedom. It is our heart's involvement in our practice, letting ourselves be wholeheartedly engaged in waking up moment by moment.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in his teaching about aspiration, says: "We must have a pure, honest, and warm-hearted motivation. And on top of that, determination, optimism, hope, and the ability not to be discouraged. The whole of humanity depends upon this motivation."

Remembering that what we do in this life affects the world. What we hold as dear to our hearts has the potential to touch the hearts of others. We can let our aspirations be not just for the benefit of ourselves, but for the benefit of all beings.

Just in closing, I'd like to read an expression of the aspiration that has really touched me very deeply.

And this is from Shantideva. It's called the Seven Branch Prayer:

May I be a guard for those who are protectorless, a guide for those who journey on the road. For those who wish to go across the water, may I be a boat, a raft, a bridge. May I be an isle for those who yearn for landfall, and a lamp for those who long for light. For those who need a resting place, a bed. For all who need a servant, may I be a slave.

May I be the wishing jewel, the vase of plenty, a word of power, and the supreme remedy. May I be the trees of miracles, and for every being the abundant cow. Like the great earth and the other elements, enduring as the sky itself endures, for the boundless multitude of living beings, may I be the ground and vessel of their life.

Thus, for every single thing that lives, in number like the boundless reaches of the sky, may I be their sustenance and nourishment until they pass beyond the bounds of suffering.

So let's sit quietly for a moment.

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