From Aspiration to Faith

Patricia Genoud-Feldman · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:01:46

Yesterday morning we were all invited to express our aspiration for being here in just a few words. I imagine you remember this moment. It was very inspiring to hear all the different expressions of aspiration that arose in the room.

Each of us has come here because we have a sense of aspiration—one that may be very clear to some of us and not so clear to others. But somehow that is what brings us to a path, to really undertake a journey where we begin to understand the workings of the mind and the opening of the heart.

We may have expressed it in very different ways, and yet I had a very felt sense of a similar expression: that we all yearn to experience ourselves a little closer, that we wish to experience a life closer to one of peace, that we wish to feel more whole, or to know ourselves better. All these different expressions, in one way or another, reveal a truth—and that truth is universal. It is a truth based on our own understanding, not on some belief that depends on outer conditions or anything outside of ourselves. And I think today you really sense the coming inward, truly emphasizing this closeness to yourself.

There is a story. A Zen master was invited to a great Catholic monastery to give instruction in Zen practice. He exhorted the monks to meditate and try to solve their koan, their Zen question, with great energy and zeal. He told them that if they could practice with full-hearted effort, true understanding would come to them.

One old monk raised his hand. "Master," he said, "our way of prayer is different than this. We have been meditating and praying in the simplest fashion without effort, waiting instead to be illuminated by the grace of God. In Zen, is there anything like this illuminating grace that comes to one uninvited?"

The Zen master looked back and laughed happily. "Well," he said, "in Zen, we believe that God has already done his share."

It is quite valuable to remember that we can relate to our aspiration during our stay here, to deeply know that this aspiration can change over the days, that it is not fixed in any way. As clarity and wisdom and understanding grow, there can be a change in the direction we have set for ourselves.

I remember that my initial aspiration when I began practice years ago was to end suffering. Just like the Buddha, I had a path where I was noticing suffering. Growing up in Africa, it was so palpable—everything around me was a manifestation of dukkha, of suffering, in one way or another. Since I was a very little girl, at a very young age, I remember setting this aspiration for myself: to end suffering, my own and that of the world. A great aspiration for a child.

When I began practice, it was during a month of retreat. As the days went by, I really had to acknowledge that not only was suffering not diminishing during the practice, during that month of retreat, but in reality it was increasing. As I was getting closer to myself, there was less distance. One day I questioned what had gone wrong. And I realized that absolutely nothing had gone wrong—quite the opposite. As I was meeting my suffering, a greater sense of freedom arose, and that released a sense of trust, enabling me to really allow the suffering to be the aspiration itself.

When we have this kind of understanding, suffering may be the proximate cause for greater faith. It releases our faith, our trust.

It is important that we don't fix a goal, whatever the duration of time we're spending here. The goal is not what it's about. We may accomplish some understanding, but it is not realistic if we place an aspiration where the goal is really to understand from the position of wanting to achieve something, rather than from the place of living the practice. Often that is what happens—there is such wanting that we miss the moment, and then the aspiration is lost.

So it is living the process, a very dynamic, endless opening to the truth of now, that will reveal the greatest understanding. What this means is that we move, we shift, from that position of knowing what we believe to perhaps not knowing. And in that space of not knowing, there is the possibility for wisdom to emerge.

What really manifests then is a greater sense of possibility. When there is a sense of trust that we tend toward something greater—greater than ourselves, perhaps. By that I don't mean something outer, in outer space. I mean something greater than what we think we're able to do, greater than what we think we're able to achieve. To not hold a belief in our capacity is exactly the end of limitation. Not holding any belief enables us to turn toward the mystery, toward the unknown.

In a way, we know very clearly that this is what is happening in the present moment. The thrust of the practice is just revealing this space, the truth of now, and how much we hide ourselves from this truth. The learning process is one of deepening this truth of the unknown.

It is an attitude of mind, of heart, that requires one quality—which you've probably guessed I'll be speaking about tonight—and that is the quality of faith, of trust, of confidence.

I remember when I began on this path, I started in the Tibetan tradition and gave myself a lot of time for practice.

I would go to Asia in the early 80s, following teachings from a Tibetan master who has since passed away. My teacher was Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and every year he would give us teachings. It was very inspiring to receive teachings from him because he was definitely a wonderful, great master.

But one morning, just after four or five days of teaching, he suddenly told us that this would be the end of receiving the teachings that year because he was called by the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. This was a

master who was giving the Dzogchen teachings to the Dalai Lama. So the whole sense of purpose had suddenly vanished. It would be like if all of us five teachers were to leave this hall in a few days saying, "Okay, you're on your own. Here it is." What would you think? It really requires such determination and a kind of true faith to continue the path. Do I really need to set up this form?

But what happened was extraordinary. That very same evening, my husband and I went back to the place where we were living, and there was a note from Joseph saying there was an extraordinary master from Burma who was there for a month and who was going to offer a retreat—Sayadaw U Pandita, whom you probably have heard of. There were still places on that retreat, and if we wished, we could join. This was my first meeting with Joseph.

I had only done a weekend of vipassana practice, so I had completely mixed feelings, being really linked to the Tibetan tradition and not really knowing what I was exposing myself to. And yet it turned out to be the most difficult retreat—in Nepal, the very first one-month meditation retreat. The conditions were absolutely awful. Everybody got sick because there was a lack of hygiene in the kitchen. I got very, very sick. There was a tremendous amount of noise. You don't know how lucky you are to have this setup.

And yet it really required such a leap of determination to remain stable, to have this sense of aspiration, of seeking the truth. In the first interview I had with Sayadaw U Pandita, he saw me a little bit shaky and asked, of course, "What are you doing here? What brings you from so far away?" I'll always remember this question. And I said, "I wish to end suffering in myself. This is really my deepest aspiration."

His reply was very direct, straightforward. This was a master who was not limited by wanting students to be comfortable, you could say. And yet his wake-up call was just so impressive that one would simply follow the way he had of guiding us. So his words to my deep wish, my deep yearning, were: "If you want to end your suffering, you must be willing to give everything away."

In my early twenties, I thought, "Whoa, I'm not quite ready for this." But then came the next part of the phrase: "You must be willing to die for the Dhamma." Of course this was an image he used, but it was a very powerful image for me. It meant nothing other than: don't indulge while you're here. This is such precious time. Don't indulge in the habitual tendencies of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Now, as teachers here in the West, we have a very different way of expressing ourselves to support your presence, to support your practice. We won't say you need to die for the Dhamma. Yet we do emphasize this need for commitment, for great renunciation, because this is the way that will enable us to really benefit from this time together. And it is precious time.

The wake-up call was so strong in that first retreat that it gave me the spark of faith to walk the path up to this day. And it can really be an endeavor—an endeavor to meet whatever it is that is showing up. What it really means is doing the best we can.

So what it meant, when I reflect back over the years, is that we call forth the qualities, the good qualities,

the paramis that Joseph mentioned last night, to come to the surface. These qualities are present within us. It's not that they're not present, but instead of lingering in the negative forces, we really call forth those qualities that lie within us, that will give us support to trust the moment.

The qualities of wholesome desire to see the truth. Of strong determination, or yearning, to wish to wake up, to end the suffering. The sense of great energy that allows us to really make the effort to keep going, even when it's difficult. The quality of equanimity. Of loving-kindness, of opening that heart of kindness towards ourselves. Of patience, perseverance, and many other qualities that you'll hear about over the days.

All these different qualities, in a way, support our initial sense of faith. And then the need for faith simply arises naturally. As one of my teachers would always say, it's a question of really living the path—living the path in this moment rather than wanting to achieve a goal. Living this path means just being in this present moment. And so different kinds of faith will aspire and inspire us on the path.

The first of these, of course, is the faith and trust in the teachings, in the Dhamma itself. You might not know exactly what the Dhamma comprises, and of course, over the days here, we gain a greater sense of what it means, what it is leading towards. It's said that the Dhamma is good at the beginning, good at the middle, and good in the end. What is good is available to us. And so it's helpful if we can open our heart—maybe at first it will be something we approach with a blind faith. And yet, by the progression of meeting ourselves on the path, we'll ask ourselves the appropriate questions and really relate in a way that brings us closer to the truth. What Myoshin said this morning about interest, and Joseph too—that curiosity, that real investigation of heart and mind, to know just what is happening. So the faith in the Dhamma is definitely one upon which we can place our heart.

Another trust or faith is to place our trust in our own teachers. To take to heart the advice of a teacher is not always easy. I know that for myself I have often tried to justify through reasoning not to follow a teacher's advice, and I have had a sense of regret at times for losing time, losing energy, because all of the advice I have received really strongly emphasized wisdom and compassion towards myself. And so, of course, if there are ways that you feel something isn't helpful, then you can leave that on the side. But mostly, what prevents us from taking in advice that really is helpful towards seeing the truth? So relying on the advice of our teachers really is a leap of faith. You'll get to know your teachers if you don't know them already. A sense of trust will also enable a confidence in being able to reveal the truth, to say just what is, rather than what we would like to be happening.

In this Nepal retreat, I remember having had such a hard time to relate, not knowing exactly what was asked of me. Even practicing very diligently, it seemed that it was never enough. There was a sense of real unworthiness that was coming up. And yet, such a learning in that moment of dread when I would have an interview—and yet being able to stay firm and just say what was happening. At times it did reveal an unsatisfactoriness in the response I was getting. And was it not the truth I needed to hear?

One day I was really living an anxiety attack, really a panic attack, because there was not much of a reference and not much of a support. We talk about a container here of real support, which I hope, in a way, gives you the sense of being able to trust that an opening is possible. So in a moment of panic attack, I totally lost it and ended up in the quarters of the Sayadaw at a totally inappropriate time—things that you don't want to do at night—rushing in in tears because I needed help, and I wasn't really noticing what was happening. No teacher assistant, no night contact, nothing of that kind, I can tell you.

And so the attendant, the monk who was at the door, seeing me rushing in said, "No, it's not a time for you to come in." But Sayadaw was not far away, and he called to me. He said, "No, let her in." And I was asked, "What is happening?" Of course, through my tears—I was crying more than I could express in words. And the only thing that was said to me is, "Good cry, please continue. This is the truth."

Well, you know, it's extraordinary because what it reveals is that one can rely on oneself. And that's exactly what gives us the greatest strength, the greatest determination of, okay, am I really alone in this path? We're not. Yet there are circumstances where you wonder. And luckily, I had the strength to be able to hear. Just, you know, good cry.

But the monk, seeing that I was still totally unsettled—he was also the translator—just added one phrase that changed everything. He said, "You have fear. Take the lap of the Buddha as a refuge. Just take the lap of the Buddha as a refuge."

Now you have to know that these are Sayadaws or monks, and of course there isn't the psychological or, in a way, cultural psychological way that we express and have an interchange. And so having faith in that Buddha, I thought, take the lap.

I went back, and of course it was very late at night. I went into the empty Dharma Hall, and there was a very big Buddha rupa, Buddha statue. Burma is filled with them. Thank goodness—this is really where you can get a sense of refuge.

It didn't occur to me right at first, but I just sat in the Dharma Hall alone, and it was amazing to notice the impact on my emotional state. To be able to really receive from that statue, from that rupa, the support that I needed—support that enabled me to open the heart and to say: what is happening is just okay.

Sometimes we need to take heart. This is a poem by Jennifer Edwards:

Take heart, but also take comfort, healing, rest, and love. Leave sorrow amongst the rocks and woods, who most of the time are far stronger, better able to handle such loads. Take courage, but also take honesty, courtesy, empathy, and patience. Leave doubt amidst the deep ocean waters; watch it sink there until you cannot cling to it any longer. Take faith, but leave with an open mind, an open hand, open arms. Take whatever you need to make it through. Leave what keeps you from going on. Tears only go so far. Fear only holds so long. Though your feet may bleed and your hands tremble, take deep compassion for your own suffering. Take deep compassion for the suffering of another, and journey on.

This is really the courage that is needed to reveal the opening of the heart and all the difficulties that lie deep in us all. But it's not pushing in any way. It's really allowing ourselves to be touched by what is arising and not hide away. This is the journey.

So faith holds an element of courage. Having a courageous heart gives us the strength. A state of reverence to the Buddha really allowed me to have reverence to my own essence. And that's exactly what is revealed. That Buddha nature, that essence that we are so deeply yearning to meet, is exactly what presents itself when we stop running away.

So we surrender to the truth in taking refuge—in the teachings, in the teacher, in the sangha, in the community, in all of those who walk the path with us. And most of all, the preciousness of having faith in our own capacity, our own ability, our own courage to walk this path towards awakening.

Faith causes steadfastness to emerge. There's definitely a greater sense of determination which comes forth when we understand that it's by opening that we heal. When we live on the surface, there's a natural closing down. And yet we acknowledge finally what is good for us, what is beneficial. And what is beneficial is sometimes to meet our fear, our doubt, our questioning—at the pace that we're able to.

It's said that faith or confidence overcomes doubt and fear. Of course, we'll be talking much more about the hindrances that come up for us all. They're also called the afflictive emotions. And it's true that they tend to color the present moment.

One of the biggest hindrances is doubt, when it's not seen for what it is. Because when doubt comes in—and it may be that you had some doubts today, not open questions but doubts, about what you're doing here, about the instructions, about the way to practice, about your own capacity, whatever the doubt was—when doubt is present, we often go into the thinking mind. We try to figure it out. We try not to let doubt just reveal itself; we try to be clever. How can I know better than just meeting doubt?

And at least it has been my experience that the more we think about it, the less we're able to see clearly. The thinking mind has such a capacity to spin and to not reveal true understanding. So it's confusing. And not only is it confusing, but it brings more pain. We get tied into the knots of the thinking mind.

So wisdom that is spoken of here is not coming from reasoning or intellectual knowledge, from trying to sort out. And we'll see that happening. We'll see this over and over again—that we'll use the thinking mind to try to solve our problems. And so we open to allow doubt to be known just as doubt. And again, it is this trust, this faith, to open to this momentary experience in this very moment that enables us to see what is, to see the reality and understand it.

What really is happening then is that instead of being at a distance with experience, we come really close to experience.

There's an existential understanding that doesn't come from doing anything. How much we try to do,

thinking that by doing, by achieving, by doing the practice, we are really, in a way, hindering our own progress. And so the less interference, the less manipulation you can say, the greater is intuitive knowledge. It's exquisite at times to live this process of deepening the trust to just allow what is to be known. That's the capacity of the heart and mind to stay open, to trust, and to trust the unknown.

All the habits, all the tendencies of the mind to manipulate, to interfere, to want to do something instead of just receiving—this comes from wanting to run away from the unknown. It's scary. How can we live more willingly in that space of the unknown? Well, very easily. Already you have the secret. This morning we received the instruction of being receptive, really receptive, receiving sound, receiving experience. That is enabling us a sense of moving away from controlling, manipulating, from self-referencing, from "me and my meditation." Therefore, the process doesn't need as much as we think. The path is quite simple. Awareness itself is what we trust in. Rather than trusting that we have to do something to reach a destination, we are not getting caught into the known, and the truth just reveals itself.

In the Buddha's teachings, the Pali word for faith is *saddhā*. It means different things. It really means very deep confidence, deep conviction in the process of meditation practice itself. It's basically this confidence in ourselves when we're engaged in an intense meditation retreat like this one. We rely on a path that is beneficial for us. We can undertake it without hesitation because whatever we meet is exactly what will reveal the truth. So we can't go wrong. The hindrances, when they're seen for what they are, are stepping stones to our understanding. Everything is part of the practice. Everything is enabling us to liberate the mind and heart. So there's nothing to get rid of and nothing to get.

When we are present in this way, we may ask ourselves: What have I come for? What is actually happening right now? Rather than the question, "How can I get rid of this? What can I do to change this situation?" Just staying present. Being able to truly see, clearly see the nature of experience as it is. And then wisdom is present. Wisdom is liberating.

In my own practice, there have been so many moments of deep, deep hardship, difficulty, even despair. So many moments of despair where you think it's going to be the end and you want to roll up the mat and leave. Even on day one, you might have that kind of thought: "How am I going to be able to do this?" And you have this sense of so many days ahead. That is happening when we don't have the sense of faith, of trust. What is present is closing us down, shutting off ourselves from who we are. And truly, when this is happening, it's difficult. This is exactly when you need to recall a moment when you've had faith. In retrospect, you remember a moment when you've had the sense of trust. Or you call forth the memory of a teacher or the Buddha or the Dhamma, really relying on something that will give you support.

Sharon Salzberg, as you probably know, has written a book on faith. She says that despair is the opposite force of faith. In the texts, we speak of doubt as being the opposite force of faith. But she says when despair hits, it really is the moment when we need to recall and call forth our deepest sense of trust. We need to have the humility to accept what is happening, and we are able then to surrender to just that

momentary experience of difficulty, of hardship.

What I've seen for myself is that when there's despair, added to that deep pain is the feeling of shame or blame. And when we are relating to that shame or blame, it really feels real. It really then feels like this is me.

And it's not at all the passing state. It's not just the nature of the mind manifesting a state which is temporary, one that will change. And so we need to learn how to work with emotions. This, of course, will be talked about—knowing that, again, whatever it is that we are meeting, there's a process of purification. We're bound to meet the difficulties because we're really facing the whole, the entire mind and body. And to stay in balance requires this process that will lead to trust that everything is okay. Absolutely everything that we're meeting is perfectly okay. Okay because the truth is that nothing is permanent.

Sharon says in her book that the literal translation for *saddhā* is "to place one's heart upon." And I think that is the most beautiful rendering of that quality of *saddhā*. To give ourselves over to, to surrender to the truth—this will enable a true conviction that yes, this is liberating.

We can think of the Bodhisattva's path to awakening, the Buddha-to-be, who lived for so many years away from all forms of unpleasantness because everything was done for him not to see the unpleasant. His father, the king, did not want him to meet the reality of life. And every time—can you imagine?—he would have different palaces, and every time he would come out of his palaces, the servants would be given the duty to clean out the streets so that he would not see any type of suffering.

But as you know, on one occasion, on his own initiative, he came out unexpectedly. And it's said that he met the four heavenly messengers: an old person, a sick man, a corpse, and a monk. This changed his whole life perspective. He asked—he couldn't believe it—he asked the charioteer, "Is this the predicament of every human being? Is this what is happening to all human beings? To get old, to be sick, to die?" And sure enough, the response was yes, this is. And this was enough for the Bodhisattva to really awaken this sense of spiritual urgency, to walk the path to full awakening. Not only did he walk it himself, never discouraged when faced with difficulties, but he was moved to alleviate the suffering of all beings by offering the teachings.

To this day, at least to my own heart, it's an immense source of inspiration that this was just a human being like us. No *deva*, just in the same condition—the same condition of having a body that hurt. It's said there was nothing different. And yet, this calling for him was so deep that he walked the path to realize full liberation. And then he offered this one word: *Ehi passiko*. Come and see for yourself. Make of yourself a light. Enabling our own possibility, our own yearning to awakening—a possibility, a deep search.

And we have the great fortune here, entering retreat for six weeks, three months, to be able to live that from morning to evening. To really see so deeply within ourselves, understanding what causes suffering in ourselves, how to liberate the mind, the heart, the body from that suffering. And even if we think that at

times we can't do it anymore, that we're done—just remember your aspiration. Just remember why you came. Often in the midst of the work, the process, we forget the aspiration, and we need a recalling of that inspiration.

In those moments, talking to a teacher is extremely valuable—to really be truthful. I know that for myself, when I've had hard times, I would not always express the difficulties, wanting to manifest my best side. And yet it was just so important to really be humble and sincere in my devotion to seeing the truth, and to receive help. All of my teachers, when I have expressed difficulty, have said, "It's okay. If you come a little closer, really meeting what is present, you'll see for yourself that it's okay."

What causes greater suffering—and this tendency of ours is completely natural—is to move away from the suffering, to create a distance from the pain that we're feeling. That is not wanting to feel what is happening. And therefore that very distance is just the pain of reactivity. It's that pain that makes us feel fragmented, disconnected.

It's a process. It's really a process. We will see for ourselves when we stay very close to the present moment—then the truth is revealed. What is true is that in the reality, in the wisdom, there is no fragmentation, no separation. And that taste of freedom, when it happens, even glimpses, is what keeps us going. It's again that force, that strength of heart that enables us to meet those moments when we have fear, when we have deep pain, when we feel inadequate, or when we compare ourselves to others.

We will have cycles, and this has been said. There are moments when everything is beautiful, we want to stay here for the next ten years, it couldn't be better, and there's no way that we want to leave retreat.

And it's wonderful that these moments happen. We open, we wake up, we receive those moments when all the beauties of our lives, all the beautiful aspects of the spiritual journey, manifest. And we have moments when it's going to be more difficult. Every bit of it is part of the practice.

As part of the poem that was offered last night: *I knew myself completely. No part left out.* There's absolutely no mistake about what is unfolding. And it's such a relief when we truly trust that there's no mistake. Everything is born and everything dies out of causes and conditions.

In that light, we don't need to hide away from what is unpleasant. Just like the bodhisattva who ventures beyond the walls of the palace, we are here in the same way, invited to venture beyond the walls of habitual tendencies. And it's incredibly easy to think that we are safer if we stay within the walls. The tendency is to stay in confinement, in the known.

Why is that? Even if it reveals suffering and pain—it's incredible, at least in my own practice, how much I've seen and how often I've seen the tendency to stay within habitual confinement. And that is simply because it's familiar. Even if it's painful, what is familiar seems to feel safe.

So whether it's fear, whether it's the obsessive mind, whether we see doubt over and over again—however

the afflictive emotions are happening—we are developing the willingness to explore a new field, one that we don't know. It is faith that inspires that willingness to move beyond the known, the capacity to question whether the habit needs to be in place. A sense of direction born out of interest enables us to stay awake and not waver. Surrendering with humbleness to the unknown.

The spiritual teacher Trungpa said, "Spiritual awakening is facing one insult after another." It's so humbling. For all of us on the path, what we see is not always something we want to look at, and yet it's such a purifying process. It doesn't belong to us. It's not personal.

Remember that mindfulness and wisdom within the process of meditation will reveal aspects of ourselves that we don't like. And yet it's okay. We don't need to hide away. Within meditation, it's really important to allow everything to come to the surface. That is the way we will reveal great liberation.

An inner calling has brought us here—for sure an inner calling accompanied by faith, whether we know it or not. Many other wholesome qualities of mind and heart will also give us direction, enabling the aspiration we have to flourish. May we allow the natural openness of the heart to support this yearning, this journey to awakening, this journey to freedom.

I'd like to close with the first words the Buddha expressed as a teacher. He says: *Opened are the gates of the deathless. Opened are the gates of immortality. You that have ears to hear, release your faith.*

Release your faith. Walk with your faith as nourishment.

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