Living a Life of Dhamma Inquiry

Myoshin Kelley · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 54:42

I realize that if there are some of you who keep track of days, you might be expecting Joseph to be sitting here tonight—just noting expectation. And not to worry, he will return.

The name of tonight's talk is Living a Life of Dharma Inquiry.

In my last talk, I mentioned that I had had a very strong fear of getting to my deathbed and looking back on my life and having the sense that I'd never really lived, that I'd spent my time dreaming my life away. It has been in my life a very real fear, a fear that I think emerged in my youth and has come to me in different ways. It seems to have in some way contributed to what seems to be my life koan: this very aspect of how one lives a life of Dharma inquiry, how one lives bringing truth to the center of one's life, how one does that without driving oneself crazy—"I must be perfect, I must get it right"—without burning oneself into the ground through striving.

Which, in fact, I did do. At one point in my practice in Burma, I was in a pretty collapsed state from holding rigidly to a view of practice, a view of what that life might look like. And it didn't meet what was happening. So it was in many ways a very brutal experience, but there was a lot of learning from it. Sometimes we drive ourselves into the ground, and that's how we learn. I realized I can be pretty thick-headed at times, can be pretty strongly attached to my ideas. But at least with aging, maybe, we get a little wiser.

In more recent years—and I think throughout my life, I just didn't have the eyes to see—I really do have a sense that we get our lessons, we get what we need to wake up. I met a couple of people that to me really have a posture in life of living from this place of Dharma inquiry. In my life I've met some beings that seem very realized—being in their presence, you can feel the compassion, you can feel the loving-kindness, the wisdom is evident. This is not to say that these two people didn't have these qualities, but they also had a stance, and it was just because of the way I spent time with them that I could get more of a felt sense of what it is like to live where one is always looking, listening, looking to truth—where one is engaged with life, but with an open mind.

I'd like to briefly mention these two people because they really did have an impact on me. The first was a nun named Daw Inyeti, or Daw Ahntie, as Daw Lay, as she was often called. She was the abbess of the nunnery that I went to live in for a period of time when I had temporarily ordained as a nun. It was in Sagaing Hills. I may speak a little bit more about that later, but right now the focus is on her because she was so impactful.

I had been practicing with Burmese teachers for a number of years, but it had all been male monastics. This was my first time of really being immersed in a world with other women, young girls. She was just a remarkable role model for a woman in a position of authority.

Because she didn't speak English, it's not like I have a lot of stories to tell about what she said. She did speak a little bit of English, but it was only enough that we constantly miscommunicated. But it was her presence that spoke to me. She was so alive. She was a tiny woman, but just a fireball of energy.

I had the good fortune of being able to walk through Sagaing Hills, which in itself is an exquisitely beautiful place. It was a place that earlier I had been to, and when I was there I just really found the aspiration welling up to go back there and practice. And there I was finding myself as a nun. Just because they didn't quite know what to do with me in the nunnery—I wanted to work with them but they didn't want me to work with them. I had a different status because I was a foreign nun, and they just wanted to respect that, but it really led to an unusual lifestyle.

I couldn't work with them. In fact, if I tried to work with the people cutting vegetables, or if I was even seen sitting with them, Daw Lay would come up and smell my fingers to see if I'd been cutting garlic. One of the things that we did was we went out together a lot.

Sometimes it was by car, and if we went in the car, she would give me her seat, which was in the front seat. That was just the way she responded. Her response to life was this sense of complete generosity. I was quite sure that if I had needed a robe, she would have taken the one off her back for me. Her generosity was so evident.

And she was so playful. When we went places, I could see people had a lot of reverence for her, a lot of respect, but she had this lightheartedness—people were often laughing with her. Then we would walk into some pagoda, a place of reverence, and she'd be touching everything, feeling it. And me, I'm not wanting to do anything wrong, but she was just in the thick of it, this sense of vitality and aliveness with it.

Even though she couldn't speak English, she was always trying to teach me in some way. As we would walk through these hills that were magically beautiful—and this was the romantic part of the time; the rest of it was not so romantic—she would teach me a chant, and we would just walk through chanting together. In the monastery, they taught the thirty-two parts of the body as their meditation, and so she would just be pointing to the different parts of the body. Her desire to share was so strong.

It was really from her that I learned this posture of presence, openness, vitality, and engagement with life. But at the same time, it radiated through this sense of stillness. So it wasn't a feeling of distancing, but a real connection—and not reactive, not the kind of reactivity that I, in my life, have so often experienced. And yet, I didn't have the sense that she thought she was done. She looked like, to me, she was continuing to practice. She worked from morning to night, and the morning began with practice and ended with more formal practice. It felt like everything was being brought into the context of practice.

The other person who had a strong effect on me was Sayadaw U Tejaniya, whom I think we have referred to throughout the course and whose different teachings we have shared. Sayadaw U Tejaniya was a layperson before becoming a monk, which I think most people are. He got married, had a child. He was a shopkeeper, and he practiced hard in his life. He didn't let the fact that he had a wife to take care of, a child—he didn't let that stop him in his practice. He didn't let the conditions of life say, "Sorry, I can't have this life of dharma inquiry. Maybe I can go on a weekend retreat this year and let that be enough." He practiced in his shop. He practiced with seeing meditation a lot.

But again, beyond the story of his life, from him too there was a vibrational transmission of a mind that is always looking. I found that in my interviews with him, there were different ways I could see it. One day I asked him a question, and he responded. His response was great. I took it in, I left. I came back four days later, and he said, "You know, the last time I saw you, you asked me this question. After you left, I just went and sat and looked at it in my own experience. So I just want to expand my answer." It really came out of not a pat answer that he was giving, but just what happened when he looked in that moment into his mind.

Then it could also happen that he would give you an answer to a question, and you might say something, and he'd just reevaluate it all. It would be like, "Oh, no, let's go in a different direction." But it was just that openness, that sense of inquiry, and that willingness to do it in all circumstances of life.

It's my sincere hope that your training in being here is not just to be calm, to be peaceful, but to really find the tools—a practice that will sustain you in your life, that will be helpful in the midst of chaos when things get difficult. Only recently I spoke to a woman who has been coming for years and practicing here. She's meeting challenges on the physical level, really quite strong challenges. But when I talked to her, I could see that all of the practice she had done was helping her. That didn't mean she was just focusing on her breath. It meant she was opening up to what a wise response was in this moment and how she could use these conditions as path, as the means to awakening.

That's what our training here is for. And that's where I really encourage you to watch any fixed ideas you have of what practice should look like, how we can rigidly fall into thinking what it is—this idea that we sit, we walk, we sit, we walk.

And sometimes in practice we do, because that's the wise response. But at other times, other things are happening. And that's where we see if our training in sitting and walking was just about having another meditative experience, or was really helping us to find the tools—find the way to stay connected, to look more deeply, to not just be caught on a superficial level, on a conceptual level, but a way of meeting this moment with all the wisdom that is accessible.

Going back to this aspect of living a life of Dharma inquiry: this inquiry does need to be supported by skillful means. It needs to be supported by the understanding of what helps us to connect. Through our time here, we are really learning to stabilize awareness, to have more and more moments where there is

recognition of what's happening in this body and mind. This in itself has a huge impact. It really helps us to see more deeply what our motivations are, what's moving us, where reactivity is still present, how the mind is relating to experience. When the attention is stable, we can see. Things can be recognized. It's not such a mystery.

Through this, we learn to live honoring the level of the relative, the level of convention. We learn about cause and effect, karma. We learn how our actions have consequences. And as our practice deepens this recognition of the conventional level, we also begin to see into the level of the absolute. We begin to see into the nature of reality. We may have moments—because of the capacity to know these two levels—where we do not feel so bound, so burdened by this mind and body. Moments where we discover the capacity to love fully, knowing there is nothing to hang on to, and yet loving anyway. Because this is wisdom. We live in the world as if everything matters. We take care and respect, and at the same time we let go.

And yet we will find that we still, over and over again, get caught in identifying, reacting. If we have this sense of Dharma inquiry, this sense of investigation, this doesn't become a personal failing, a way of saying we're not good enough, that we can't do it. It just gives us something else to explore, to know, to make friends with.

I'd like to share a poem called "Lost." It's from a Native American elder.

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you are not lost. Wherever you are is called here, and you must treat it as a powerful stranger and must ask permission to know it and be known. The forest breathes. Listen. It answers. I have made this place around you. If you leave it, you may come back again, saying here. No two trees are the same to the raven. No two branches are the same to the wren. If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you, you are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows where you are. You must let it find you.

Stand still. The forest knows where you are. You must let it find you.

I found this last line to be so potent, having seen my own tendency to try to find, to try to get—and to hear this poem that points towards such a state of receptivity, of being, of allowing, that is right here, right now. It needs an open mind, a mind not filled with ideas and beliefs and concepts. It needs us to recognize these ideas, beliefs, concepts that bind us, that become our prisons. And instead, moving—or it's so funny, even saying the word "moving"—there is like, there's no language. And I think "being" is the word that comes closest.

Probably some of you are like me and have noticed that the being is easier when the conditions are pleasant. When we like it. The being when it's reactive, when it's a challenge, when it hurts—the touching this, just knowing it.

requires a level of trust, a deep level of trust. It's not a blind trust. It's a trust that I know, from listening to you each day, you are getting in touch with—where you can really trust in the power of mindfulness,

where awareness becomes a refuge. It is what supports. It is like a life jacket, in a sense, knowing that we don't get lost in a way that brings confusion, that enhances bewilderment.

If we don't have trust as we're sitting here, we're probably looking for specific results, wanting things to be a certain way. It's like going into the lab to do an experiment but already having decided how that experiment will come out. This doesn't lead to openness. It doesn't lead to direct experience. We really need to have that capacity to sit with don't know mind, or beginner's mind. Trust is really what enables us to move into unknown territory, or else we're just caught in trying to make ourselves more secure, feel more safe.

I'd like to share a teaching from a teacher named Hamid Almas. He lives on the West Coast and brings together a synthesis of Eastern philosophy and Western psychology. This is what he says about trust:

We do not trust that if we relax, we will have the capacities, we will have the intelligence, we will have the strength, and we will have the compassion that we need to deal with our lives. We don't trust that reality as it is is fundamentally fine and will work for us and support us without any interference on our part. Basic trust is learning that life is manageable, is workable, that we can relax into it and just let it be. It is that trust that the universe itself supports us and that we have the inner resources to deal with whatever life presents us. Basic trust means trusting enough to let your mind stop, to be silent within. Trust to let yourself be silent within. Knowing this is—if there is something you need to know, the knowing will come. It means trusting that if you need to do something, you will be able to do it. It means accepting and trusting the silence, the stillness, the beingness. If we don't trust, we can't let our minds be silent and we can't let ourselves be still.

Have you seen that in your own mind? Where in a moment of silence, there's too much, and there's a recoiling, a pulling away? That's okay. Don't judge that. Because that's what the Dharma inquiry comes into. But this quality of trust—we need to look in our own experience and really get a sense of where that trust comes in, where that softening happens, where that acceptance happens.

I had an exercise I used to do in my life, after I'd been sick for a number of years. I discovered that it was so healing to every day, for just one moment, allow my heart to open. At that time I lived in a much different climate. I lived in Australia, in a subtropical area, and there was a beach just below where I lived. I could swim every day. Not all year long, but much of the year, the water was warm. Some days it was calm. I would go out into the ocean, lay on my back, and just let myself feel held, letting the ocean hold me. It got me in contact with that sense of trust.

In our lives, it's letting the Dhamma hold us, not feeling like we have to do it all.

So exploring here—what helps that trust to strengthen? Where is your confidence growing? My experience has certainly taken me to mindfulness, awareness. What becomes reliable?

I had a lesson in seeing this that came from my time as a nun in Burma. I had actually gone to Burma after

I'd read the book *Great Disciples of the Buddha*, and I was just really struck by people's diligence, their capacity to really live this life of Dharma inquiry. The question had come up in my mind: Am I doing enough? I wanted to go to Burma not to practice in intensive retreat—I'd done that a number of times before—but just to live as a nun amongst nuns and see what their life was like, to see what else I might be able to bring into my own life as a layperson.

Just pausing here to say, because my two examples before were monastics: this talk is not in any way meant to suggest that if you're living a life of Dharma inquiry, you shall ordain. That's not what it's pointing to. It's really about how we live our lives. But this was about seeing what they do in their lives that I could bring back to mine.

I'd gone to Burma, ordained with my teacher, Chamye Sayadaw, or Sayadaw Janaka, and it had been a very profound experience—an experience where I did have a sense of the inner and outer world being in alignment. There was a sense of grace in ordaining.

But very shortly after that, the honeymoon was over. Unfortunately, it didn't last very long.

And then the lessons came hard and fast. I found living in robes was such a strong mirror. It just intensified what my motivations were, what my reactions were.

Very soon after I ordained, I traveled up to Sagaing Hills. I first went with a friend who was a nun and a Burmese woman, so they could translate for me because I was going to an area where people didn't speak English. I went to the place where my teacher had sent me, and the conditions were just very, very difficult. In the end I decided not to stay there, but went to another nunnery where the conditions were a little bit better.

But all kinds of challenges emerged. The language barrier. A sense of intense loneliness, because I was surrounded by people who were talking, and I felt that isolation, that not being a part of. I had problems with receiving too much food and not knowing what to do with it, and then that attracting bugs. It was a challenge. It all became workable, but there were challenges. The insects were biting me so severely that they actually bit my bottom so badly I couldn't sit down on it. And then bugs in my bed. It was living by the precepts—what do I do? I felt challenged on so many levels. And there wasn't a strong sense of grace. I didn't feel like I was gracefully handling this. It was quite painful, a lot of it.

And so there came the time when I left, and I was sitting at the airport in Yangon, reflecting on my time. It wasn't like sitting there going, "Oh, that was great. Oh, that was a good insight." I was sitting there scratching my head saying, "What was that about?"

And then something very unusual happened. At this time in Burma, the modern-day world had not caught up in the same way it has now. The airport had recently been redone, and there was a video screen. That was totally—you know, from where I'd been in Sagaing Hills, where there are monastics everywhere, temples, pagodas, just the sense that you could run into the Buddha himself there—and here I was in this

airport with this video screen.

All of a sudden, there came a song. It was by Sarah McLachlan. And I didn't hear the line right, but I heard it right, just not the way it was. The line was, "living in a mystery." When I heard that line, it was like a bubble popped—this mind had been trying so hard to figure things out, to put things in their proper place. And in that moment came the sense: I didn't have to do that. I could simply relax and trust. And from that place, the Dhamma reveals itself.

But it is really hard to tell that to the frightened mind. I think fear is something we hang out with a lot. If you can, just touch it with kindness, with that refuge of awareness—to know it's just fear. These fears are so often based on ideas, what it'll be like if we really let go. An idea is not truth, not wisdom.

The blessings of walking this path. Today, I kept having this image in my mind: having my head to the floor, just bowing, that sense of surrender. The Tibetans say the preciousness of this human birth, and sitting here right now, it's just such an honor to have a mind and body to be able to do this exploration.

My notes are making no sense to me. I've never had a relationship with words. When I first started teaching, people kept saying to me, "Is English your second language?" My response was, "Yes, silence is my first."

Live it, be it, open to it, trust it, inquire. You can do it. That's what the Buddha said. He said, if it was not possible, I would not ask you.

I know many times I've thought, it's not possible. It's not possible. And that's where, sometimes, the taking of refuge helps. Maybe we feel really shaky with our mindfulness—a moment of mindfulness every two days doesn't seem like a lot. But just knowing all the beings that have walked this path before us, all those that have awakened—they were just like us.

That's where I love to read the stories of awakened beings, because you see they came from all different kinds of circumstances, so many horrendous ones. I actually read a story today that I didn't want to tell you because it comes from the Japanese lineage, and somewhere my mind was just like, whoa. It's where my mind says, can you really learn anywhere? It was this woman who was a prostitute, and a monk came along and encouraged her to practice with mindfulness, to do it where she was.

And it's how we apply, how we look, what the attitude is. We have to look at the mundane, because we're not going to have a life that is the charmed existence where we have the perfect conditions. People living in monasteries—they have to do the menial jobs. The repetitiveness, that's what life brings: these tasks that need doing over and over again. And this is where we practice.

As you're here practicing your yogi job, or even just the in-out of breathing—yes, it's repetitive, but the boredom comes not from the experience but from the quality of attention. We really begin to see this. We see that when there's mindfulness, things do become more vibrant, more alive, more clear. Not that we

can practice to get that, but that it can happen. And that's because of the quality of attention.

Bringing this to everything—everything—including to the boredom. Boredom, we go nuts with it. It's so unpleasant, so painful. But look what's happening. Here through this time, we're learning to recognize what the mind is doing. Watch the mind. Pay attention. This is where the learning is. This is where wisdom is.

Living in a wholehearted way that at times seems half-hearted might be what's possible. But when we do this the best we can and let that be enough, it leads to a sense of care and respect in how we live our lives. It leads to a sense of devotion—really bringing that devotion to this moment, to truth unfolding, life unfolding.

Our time here really nourishes any aspiration to awaken. And maybe it's not clear exactly what our motivation is, but it certainly clarifies itself as we practice. Because we see the value, we understand for ourselves through these little moments of seeing clearly, a moment of not clinging, a moment of letting be.

This is a teaching from Sayadaw U Jotika from Burma: "A fragmentary or specialized approach to life will not work. One needs an all-around understanding. In the body, every part is related to every other part. So it is in life. Every aspect of your life is related to every other aspect of life. The economic, sexual, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual aspects of your life are all related. You cannot keep them separate. If you try to keep them separate, your life will be unfulfilling and unharmonious. There will be conflict, schism, paralysis."

Every aspect we bring to our practice—our relationships, sexuality, our rage, frustration. The way we live, what we do, what we say. Bringing this quality of devotion, care, respect. We do this. Maybe—I haven't died yet—but maybe when we die our hearts will be at peace.

There's a sense of rising up to the challenge. Just to move out of living in a habituated way, living driven by habits. A sense of coming out of the fog of delusion. Moments of clarity.

I remember that from one of my first retreats with Sayadaw U Pandita, where I felt just a mess most of the retreat. And then there would just be a moment where there was just seeing, hearing, touching, tasting. It was like a clear bell ringing. Stepping into the clearing from a jungle. These moments bring trust, bring confidence, bring faith, and this gives us the energy to go forward, to look, and to live a life of Dharma inquiry.

May all beings come to know a heart that is unbound.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.