Finding A Path With Heart

Greg Scharf · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 49:05

Starting today, it really felt like autumn—that hint of fall weather that comes this time of year. I was struck by the feeling of the seasons changing as I walked over through the woods tonight, the quality of light at this time of day. Maybe it has to do with being this far north. There's a certain quality of light as autumn starts to come on, and there's a poignance to this season that I feel—though it may not be there for everyone.

It's a great time to be on retreat, I think. There's something about the change of the seasons that, for me, seems to incline the mind and the heart to quiet and to turning inward. I've been here at this time of year a lot at IMS in different capacities over a long time, many years. Not as many as my colleagues, but still quite a lot of time spent here in this hall and at this time of year. Walking over this evening in the light of the setting sun, through the woods, I was struck by the beauty—the fleeting quality of beauty. We need to be careful what we take for granted. We take a lot for granted. We need to be careful how we live.

I suppose I should begin my talk. The chances of me getting through it are not that good to begin with. But before I do, I was just doing some walking meditation before coming in, and I was reflecting on this quality of faith that Brian spoke about so beautifully last night—faith or confidence. We might find that at different times in different ways. We start to find our own sense of trust or faith, confidence, whatever word you want to use, trust in this quality of awareness.

I was looking in my own heart. I see a lot of this quality there. It's very big and huge. Maybe it has been since the get-go in a way. I'm lucky that way, maybe. But anyway, there's tons of it. So if you feel any lack, you can have all of mine. Any time you feel a little low in that department, I'm giving it all to you right now for your happiness and benefit. So if you ever need any, you can have all of mine. I've got lots of it and to spare.

Now I'll start.

If I conducted a survey here in the hall and asked, "Why did you come here? What's your motivation to come to this retreat, to undertake this spiritual life, a practice like this?"—there might be quite a wide range of replies. Maybe we're just looking for a little more ease or some kind of feeling of balance in our lives. Maybe something difficult or really traumatic happened and it propelled us into this kind of search. Maybe we were inspired by something we read or someone we met or heard about, and through that inspiration we felt, "Oh, yes"—this pointing to some possibility. Maybe it's just mostly curiosity, curiosity about what a long retreat would be like, for example, to come here for the autumn. Maybe one or two of you wound up here by accident thinking it was a health spa and are still hopefully looking around for that

hot tub. It's got to be here somewhere.

But I think all of us would say that our motivation is at least in part related to a sense of longing for meaning, for a deeper connection to life, some deeper understanding of what it is to be alive, to be a human. We may have touched, certainly at some point, some sense of questioning or dissatisfaction with the conventional offerings, the conventional strategies offered to us to find happiness and contentment in our lives—wondering if what's offered in that world will ever really bring us any kind of lasting happiness.

And if we look at the values in this society, at least in great part, those are based on getting and having, acquiring things or experiences—a lot of that kind of energy. We can find that we get swirled into it and find ourselves measuring our worth, measuring our happiness in terms of things we've gotten, things we have, things we can somehow lay claim to. We can define success in terms of what we've gotten.

And maybe it's not so conscious or obvious, but then we can look at how language is used so much: all the things we "have." We have a car and a house and all the stuff in it. We have partners or spouses. We have a body, we have a mind, we have knowledge we've had, and we have experiences. We can start defining ourselves in terms of all we have, all we've gotten. It's a rather dangerous way to value oneself—in terms of things we have, things we've gotten. There can be some unease, some anxiety, because things don't last. We'll be parted from any of the things we've gotten that we use to define who we are or measure our happiness. They'll get old. Eventually, we'll be parted from them.

And if we're measuring our sense of well-being or our worth in these terms, then it's a setup for this endless kind of pursuit for the next thing that does the trick somehow—searching for meaning and fulfillment outside of ourselves, in things we might be able to get and acquire.

When I was in high school—and that's a long time ago now; sometimes it seems so strange to be sitting up here teaching, like how did that happen? It wasn't something I planned—anyway, when I was in high school, there was a book that I know many of you are familiar with. It was published when I was in high school, called *The Teachings of Don Juan* by Carlos Castaneda. It was very important to me. It was my Bible, you could say, at that time in my life.

I'm going to read a passage from that book that has stayed with me over the years. It will be familiar to some of you. In this case, Don Juan is speaking to Carlos, who has come to him to seek learning:

"Before you embark on any path, ask the question: does this path have a heart? If the answer is no, you will know it. And then you must choose another path. The trouble is nobody asks the question. And when you finally realize that you have taken a path without a heart, the path is ready to kill you. At that point, very few of us can stop to deliberate and leave the path. A path without a heart is never really enjoyable. You have to work hard even to take it. On the other hand, a path with heart is easy. It doesn't make you work at liking it. For me, there is only the traveling on paths that have a heart, on any path that may have

a heart. There I travel. And the only worthwhile challenge for me is to traverse its full length. And there I travel, looking, looking breathlessly."

I remember reading that and wanting so badly to feel some quality of that—looking breathlessly, feeling that I was somehow walking on a path with a heart. I didn't know what that might be like, but I had this strong sense, this intuition: it must exist. It must be possible. But none of the paths that were being offered to me at that time seemed to have any real heart. I couldn't find it there. I thought, there's got to be more to life than the version of reality that was being handed to me by society—something beyond these conventional ways of seeing, the conventional offerings for finding happiness and success. I felt it must be there, but I didn't know where I could look or possibly try to find it.

And so maybe that's one of the reasons we would come to a retreat: because we're looking for a path that might have a heart. Or maybe we're here because we feel like we might have found one.

There's a word in the Pali language that I like a lot: *saṃvega*. It's usually translated as spiritual urgency. It's an aspect, a way of cultivating this quality of ardency that Joseph spoke about the other night. You could say this quality is what might motivate us to look for a path with a heart. It's a quality that makes us examine our life and ask the question: What am I doing with my time? How can I use my time well? What's worth doing with a life?

I think this is a quality that we all have to some extent. We wouldn't come to a retreat like this if we didn't have some connection to this quality of saṃvega. It's a huge commitment and takes a lot to get here, to spend this time.

Every year, it seems, as I get older, the passage of time speeds up. I don't know if anyone else notices this. Years go by so quickly—just another one gone, so fast it seems. Where does the time go? And of course, the perception of time is not a fixed thing, is it? A single meditation period can feel like an eternity. Ring the bell. Ring the bell! And then another year of our life, the last week—where did that go?

There's a place in one of the collections of short suttas in the Aṅguttara Nikāya—an unusual place where the Buddha is quoting another teacher who was around at that time, a teacher named Araka. I'll read just a few things from what this teacher said. It's a long list of images that he gave about the fleeting nature of a life.

He said: "Short is the life of human beings, limited and brief. This one should wisely understand. One should do good and live a pure life, for none who is born can escape death."

And then he gave these beautiful similes from nature, these images: "Just as a dewdrop on the tip of a blade of grass will quickly vanish at sunrise and will not last long, even so a human life is like a dewdrop. It will not last long. And just as when rain falls from the sky in thick drops, a bubble appearing on the surface of water will vanish and not last long. And just as a line drawn on water with a stick vanishes and will not last long—even so, human life is like this. It does not last long."

These beautiful images, but they point to something really, really true, something we can really touch.

Here's a little more from the teachings of Don Juan: "Death is our eternal companion. It is always to our left at an arm's length. An immense amount of pettiness is dropped if your death makes a gesture to you, or if you catch a glimpse of it, or if you just have the feeling that your companion is there watching you. The issue of our death is never pressed far enough. Death is the only wise advisor that we have. Your death will tell you that nothing really matters outside its touch. One of us here has to change, and fast. One of us here has to learn again that death is the hunter, and that it is always to one's left. One of us here has to ask death's advice and drop the cursed pettiness that belongs to those that live their lives as if death will never tap them. Think of your death now. It is at an arm's length. It may tap you at any moment. So you really have no time for crappy thoughts and moods. None of us have time for that."

That's pretty strong language. But it points to something really important. None of us actually has any idea how much more time we have, how much longer we're going to live. There aren't any guarantees—not even the next breath. We don't like to think about this. We don't really like to let the truth of this in. Most of the time, we try to avoid it.

Someone once told me that they were doing a practice called "One Year to Live." Maybe some of you have heard of this. I think it's from a book by that same name—it's not something I've actually read. But I mention this because it's an interesting question to ask oneself: What might I do differently? How might I live my life if I knew I had this finite time, this one year?

It's a question I have really asked myself at times over the years. Sometimes I've thought if I really knew it was true, it would be kind of cool. It would really help me put things in perspective. And sometimes when I look at my life, I find I wouldn't really change very much. But at other times, it's pretty sobering and humbling to look at how I'm spending my time.

And then we turn around and another year has gone by. So often we live as though we have all the time in the world. But the truth is that death is our constant companion. It's walking along with us, just there to our left. And if we come into a real relationship with this truth—the truth of our own mortality—not in some morbid way that takes us down into a dark place, but if we come into a real relationship there, we can actually find that it serves as a source of real strength and clarity for us.

But as I was saying, there's a lot of conditioning to avoid this subject. There's a lot of fear around facing this truth in our culture, I think.

And if you look at how we tend to hide dying and death away—we hide it out of our sight, in special places, so we don't have to see it. Then we sanitize the dead in funeral parlors, trying to make the corpse look like it's just taking a nap. We treat death like it's a mistake, or like growing old and dying are somehow evidence of our personal failure, a reflection of bad taste on our part. That's kind of how it's treated.

This fear is so pervasive. Maybe it's obvious, maybe it's subtle, but it pervades our lives a lot of the time. We focus on outward things—on getting and acquiring and having, all the different things we do to define ourselves, to tell ourselves who we are and enhance our sense of comfort somehow. We can spend a lot of time avoiding, repressing, not looking at our relationship to our own mortality. And it can really lead us to lose out on a lot of what life has to offer.

Here's a poem I love by Mary Oliver. It's called "When Death Comes":

When death comes like the hungry bear in autumn,
When death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse to buy me and then snaps the purse shut.
When death comes like the measle pox.
When death comes like an iceberg between the shoulder blades.

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering, what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore, I look upon everything as a brotherhood and a sisterhood.
And I look upon time as no more than an idea.
And I consider eternity as another possibility.

And I think of each life as a flower, as common as a field daisy, and as singular.
And each name a comfortable music in the mouth, tending as all music does towards silence.
And each body a lion of courage and something precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

I love that line: "I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness." If nothing else, our death is going to be a really interesting event. It's the next guaranteed-to-be-interesting thing—especially if we're actually present for it, if we can really show up for it, meet it with mindfulness and without struggling, step through that door with curiosity.

I once heard this story—I don't know who told it, it was a long time ago. It was someone who was living as a monk in Thailand and had become friends with an older monk, a very well-practiced elderly monk. This elder was getting quite old and was towards the end of his life. At one point, he called in the person who was telling this story, to where he was lying. He knew he was coming to the end of his life—he was dying right then. "Come, come," he said. And his mindfulness and his equanimity were so strong that he was just describing the process. "Oh yes, now this is starting to shut down." He was able to describe his dying

moments with incredible clarity, that whole process.

Can you imagine that degree of mindfulness and balance of mind? This is actually a possibility. It's not just a story I'm telling.

In a fundamental way, we can see this whole practice, we can hold it, as preparation for meeting our death when it inevitably comes. We can really look at it that way. And as Joseph said the other day, this could be an incredible opportunity for us at that moment, if we meet it in the right way.

So if we're living with an unacknowledged fear—or maybe an acknowledged fear—of our own death, of our own mortality, and we actually, in a gentle way, start to face that fear, start to look at it, start to undo our conditioning around it, bringing our fears to the surface, digging them out—not in a brutal way, but bringing those things more to the forefront of our consciousness—we can start to see that they're impermanent, those fears. That they're empty of anything solid. That they're not telling us some truth about what's real. We can start to let them go.

This can really broaden the scope of what we hold as possible for us as human beings. A meaningful relationship with our own mortality brings us into a direct relationship with the truth of impermanence, which goes to the very heart of what the Buddha was teaching. Connecting with this truth, with the understanding that all things are impermanent, is stressed throughout the teachings. The whole path seems to flow from a real relationship to this truth. And the classic description of a moment of awakening—the moment of stream entry, the first stage of enlightenment—

It's usually described very simply: the stainless eye of the Dhamma arose thus—that which is subject to arising is subject to passing away. It's a deep insight into that truth that opens the mind to the unconditioned.

But we can fall into a superficial relationship with this understanding. It's so pervasive in these circles. We hear, "Yeah, everything's impermanent." It can become a kind of philosophical stance or a concept that we ascribe to, an idea.

Out here in the woods around IMS, this is a great place to practice. This is a real forest center. A lot of places that get called forest centers in Burma, for example—if we were in a forest center in Burma, we'd be in the heart of a very noisy village with a lot going on. It's pretty quiet here, and we have these beautiful woods. These woods can teach us everything we need to know about the truth of impermanence. It's all right there, just shouting it at you constantly. You don't need me or any of the rest of us. With these woods, we can get it—direct transmission, right in. Just go out there.

If we let it in, we see that trees are born due to causes and conditions. If there's a seed and it goes into the earth, if it falls in the right place, and then there's the right amount of rain and sun and all the things that need to happen—then it'll sprout and we'll have a seedling and then a baby tree. I just saw some walking over here. They're out there, these little baby trees. I hope they make it through the winter. That's tough,

getting through the winter. And then they grow and become bigger, and eventually you have a nice, huge, mature tree.

If we walk in the woods, we'll see all stages of the life of a tree there—little baby ones and saplings and mature trees and old trees that are losing their vitality. And we'll see dead trees, ones that have fallen down that are turning back into earth, and new trees sprouting right out of that. We see all of this there. It's just the way of nature, nature presenting itself. We don't make a fuss over it, a problem out of it. It seems really beautiful if we notice it. They're just trees. But if we notice this, there's a sense of rightness there. This is the teaching of the Buddha.

And if we look at this in the right way, if we bring our understanding and awareness to seeing this, we'll recognize that our bodies, our own birth, is not any different from the birth of a tree. We are born due to causes and conditions, things that come together. We need nourishment the same way that the tree needs to be nourished by sun and rain and nutriment from the soil. We take food and our bodies grow based on that nourishment.

And our bodies are changing just like trees. They lose their leaves and get new ones. We lose our hair—we don't necessarily get new hair. At least in my case, I'm losing it, but it's not coming back. But still, our hair, skin, nails—they're growing and they die and fall off. Somewhere I once heard that we get a whole brand new body. It takes about seven years to get every cell replaced. That's kind of amazing. Who are we if we're in a state of constantly being replaced like that?

And so if we look, we'll see that we're not any different from a tree or anything in nature. We're just an aspect, a manifestation of that natural process. We'll see, if we look, that all things internally and externally are the same. All things—if they have been subject to arising—are subject to passing away. They'll change and pass away. That's just the way of nature.

And as I was saying, out in the woods we don't struggle with that truth. We let it be. We find beauty there, the rightness of that. There's a harmony and balance, it seems. Oh, it's just right—these stages of life, these changes. And it's so healing for us often to spend time in nature, opening to that. It has a healing quality for us. We aren't in contention with things there.

But then when it comes to ourselves, it's not different. Somehow we feel it's not right anymore. These changes shouldn't be happening. Like a mistake, or something we should have been able to avoid if we just had our act together. And we fight against it and struggle and try to hold on. We don't want to see that we're the same as nature, same as all things that arise.

This is from Ajahn Chah: "Trees, mountains, and vines all live according to their own truth. They appear and die following their nature. They remain impassive. But not we people. We make a fuss over everything. Yet the body just follows its own nature. It's born, grows old, and eventually dies. It follows nature in this way. Whoever wishes it to be otherwise will just suffer."

And if we sit and pay attention to these bodies and minds, we'll see that they're in a state of constant change. Always changing, and actually changing very, very quickly. How many births and lives and deaths do we go through in a single day here at the retreat? We take birth in these different realms, dwell there for a time, and then that changes, and we take a new birth into a new realm. Is there anything in that flow that we can actually hold on to?

Of course, most of the time we get caught up in the process of that flow of change. We get lost in the details of it. We don't see the change because we get carried along with the current, caught up in the details. We get caught up in the world of the senses—all the sights and sounds and touches and smells and tastes. And especially we get caught up in the world of our thoughts and emotions, all that we think and feel about this flow of experience, about the world, and all that we tell ourselves it means about me. Swept up in that, we don't see the change. And then we wind up attributing a kind of solidity or reality to it that it actually doesn't have—that we'll see, if we look closely, it doesn't have any solidity, doesn't have any ongoing, fixed kind of truth or reality in that change.

And then we try to hold on, and it just slips away. It keeps slipping away. It's like trying to hold on to moving water, to a river or a stream. No matter how hard we might try, it's just going to slip through our fingers. It just will slip away. And if we look closely, we'll see there isn't actually a river there. There's just this flow. There's nothing to hold on to. It's just flowing.

Sometimes when we try to hold on, it's like holding on to a slipping rope. And if we try to hold on to a slipping rope, what happens? We get rope burn. The only solution, if we're getting rope burn and it hurts, the only solution is to let go.

This is from a Thai teacher named Upasika Kee Nanayon, in a book called *Pure and Simple*. She said this: "If you look into the rippling current of your experience, you'll find that there's actually nothing you can latch onto as having any essence. Everything disbands and disappears."

New fabrications arise and pass away, arise and pass away. They keep on flowing, and they seem to involve many issues. But actually, there aren't many issues. There's only arising, remaining, and passing away. It's because we're so focused on not seeing this that there seem to be so many issues. But no matter how many there are, there's only just this arising, remaining, and passing away—like a rippling current of water where the rippling isn't a thing at all.

If you learn to see skillfully in this way, you'll see that all things arise, remain, and pass away. The past has passed away. The future hasn't yet come. Look simply at the present arising and passing away right before your eyes, and don't hold on. When you see arising, remaining, and passing away, pure and simple, right in the present moment, and then let go—that's when you gain release.

To me, this is related to this idea of refuge. We've been speaking about this in different ways throughout the week; it's been something of a theme—this idea of refuge, where we find a place of safety in that flow

of change. If we're trying to hold on to a moving stream, trying to hold on to the river, then what we're doing is seeking refuge, seeking safety, in something that is inherently unstable and unreliable. We're placing our hearts upon that which by its very nature isn't reliable, isn't really a safe place.

I read an article once where someone asked a Zen teacher what was the secret of her happiness. I guess she was a happy Zen teacher. And she replied, "It's the wholehearted and unrestricted cooperation with the unavoidable." Those Zen teachers are great with one-liners. But it's a good one, a great one. Because when we find ourselves living in a state of non-cooperation with the unavoidable truth of impermanence, it's a setup to suffer. We set ourselves up to suffer, and then if we find ourselves suffering, we tend to blame the world. We find ourselves pointing here and there to fix the blame for our unhappiness. It's out there—it's due to something in the world.

But the world isn't to blame when we're suffering. It's just doing its thing, unfolding lawfully, naturally, due to causes. The poor world is innocent, unfolding according to nature. We've just taken refuge in the wrong thing. That's why we're suffering.

Instead of taking refuge in that which is unreliable, if we take refuge in wisdom and wakefulness and love—if we take refuge in the truth of the way it is in this moment right now, just like this—that's a place of safety no matter what's going on. We can find real refuge in that truth of things. We can take refuge in awareness itself.

That's what we learn to trust through our practice. We trust this quality of awareness. We find the faith and confidence that Brian was speaking about last night. We find a safe place to rest our heart in this quality of awareness itself. And we start to see that awareness is not affected by what's known. The awareness of fear is not afraid. The awareness of anger is not angry. We see that this quality of awareness can hold anything that arises. And so we can find refuge, safety, in awareness itself. Through that, we find a truth that was there all along. We take refuge in the truth that's there now and always has been. We start to find a voice of wisdom that arises in our own heart, a place inside that already knows the truth.

So, ending number one—a lovely quotation by the great Thai forest monk Ajahn Phuong Jyotiko, from a book called *Awareness Itself*:

You have to keep being observant of the mind, awareness itself. It's not the case that the mind isn't aware, you know. Its basic nature is awareness. Just look at it. It's aware of everything. Aware, but it can't yet let go of its perceptions, of the conventions it holds to be true. So you have to focus your investigation on in. Simply keep at it. If you're persistent like this without letting up, your doubts will gradually fade away, fade away, and eventually you'll reach your true refuge within you, this basic awareness that sees clearly through everything. This is the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha appearing within you as your ultimate refuge. It's sovereign in and of itself. It knows clearly and truly all around. That's the true refuge within.

And ending number two, from Ajahn Chah:

You will reach a point where the heart tells itself what to do. Try to be mindful and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool, and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha.

The Buddha taught us to lay down those things that lack a real abiding essence. If you lay everything down, you will see the truth. If you don't, you won't. That's the way it is. And when wisdom awakens within you, you will see truth wherever you look. Truth is all you'll see.

So let's just keep sitting quietly for a couple of minutes and let these words drift out into this cool autumn evening.

Thank you for listening.

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