Returning to the Marketplace

Winnie Nazarko · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 1:03:43

Like old times.

This is the last Dharma talk of the retreat. It's sort of remarkable to think that three months ago, or six weeks ago, you came here to these very special conditions. Who would have guessed that something so interminable could go by so quickly? But here you are, getting ready to go home.

This has been a very different environment from the one most of you are used to. Perhaps not so much for Sister Jewel, but certainly the lay people here. When you think about what it's been like to be here, you can see how unusual the environment is, how rarefied in a kind of way.

When we come on retreat, there are some very interesting features of the environment. First of all, you're out in the middle of nowhere. And you're in silence. Except for the hammers and the bulldozers, all you hear are natural sounds—not a lot of speaking except at the talks, in the chanting, and in your interviews. You've been pretty much in silence, at least externally. No eye contact, keeping your sense doors guarded and your energy in. Vegetarian meals—that's been a great part. There's something childlike about having somebody make food for you every day. No sex. You may have noticed that. I won't go there. Simple rooms. Perhaps you've been doing the eight precepts: no eating after the midday meal, no scented products, no TV, no radio, no internet—at least supposedly—little or no contact with friends and family.

In fact, when you describe it all out loud like that, it sounds a little bit like you've been monastics, or quasi-monastic in any case. And some of you even have gone so far as to adopt the haircuts of monastics.

So you've been here doing this intensive meditation practice in this environment that's been designed specifically to support this purpose. There have been a lot of teachings and a lot of teachers, and very soon it's going to end.

Usually at this point, the thought may come up in your mind: How do I take this home? At least this is the case for many of you. For some of you, the thought might come up: How can I get out of here as soon as possible and never come back? But for many of you, there's a desire to take it—or have it take you—with you.

Sometimes this "taking it" or "with you" can get mixed up with somehow taking this whole retreat thing along: the whole ethos of it, the whole conditions of it, the whole orientation to silence and seclusion and meditative silence that we've had here. You might think that what you've been doing here is the real deal—this is the real thing, this is the real practice, just like we've been doing it here. And you might think that's true to the exclusion of what is often called real life, the life outside these walls. You might think this

real deal is the only way to practice, the only way to get benefit.

But you'd be wrong about that.

The Buddha is very clear about this point. He had a much broader, more inclusive understanding and view of what he was doing and how his teachings were to be understood.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says, when he's talking in his book *In the Buddha's Words*: "The function of a Buddha is to discover, realize, and proclaim the Dharma in its full range and depth, and this involves a comprehensive understanding of the varied applications of the Dhamma in all its multiple dimensions. The Buddha not only penetrates to the unconditioned state of perfect bliss that lies beyond samsara, outside the pale of birth, aging, and death. He not only proclaims that path to full enlightenment and final liberation, but he also illumines the many ways the Dhamma applies to the complex conditions of human life for people still immersed in the world."

If you take a look at the Buddha, his mind had great power. One of the hallmarks of being a Buddha is a mastery of the full range of skillful means. His own awakening occurred as the result of very close observation, of learning by direct experience and direct clear seeing what led to what—deep insight into causation that led in the direction of liberation. He saw very deeply into the causes of greed, hatred, and delusion.

He saw so deeply into their causation that he understood how it was possible to reverse engineer the whole process. And because his seeing was so complete and so deep, he could communicate this path to liberation to all kinds of people.

He taught the full range of people in his time, giving the teachings in many different iterations, each appropriate and complete for the group or individual he was addressing. He taught monks and nuns of course, but also kings, courtesans, widows, children, businessmen, husbands and wives, warriors, mothers, Brahmins and members of the lowest social classes. Every kind of being there was, he taught. And he taught them in the manner that was appropriate to the totality of their conditions and in a way that was responsive to their specific inquiries.

In other words, he accepted them at the starting point of their inquiry. However they framed the question, he would respond to what they were asking. Sometimes he responded in a way that showed them it was the wrong question and that they needed to start elsewhere, but he would always respond to them where they started from.

Part of why he was so customized in how he worked with people was that he wasn't an indoctrinator. He wasn't interested in giving a big rap and having people accept it as a matter of belief because he was the Buddha or claimed to be the Buddha and they should take it at his word. He was more interested in finding the inquiry within them, the spark of investigation, and fanning the flames, getting that going for them. Awakening wisdom was what was required from his perspective, not blind faith in him or anything

that he said.

He didn't think everybody should be a monk or a nun. It's not possible. Most of us are not set up for that to be a viable, lifelong path. He didn't think it was possible for everyone to be a monk or a nun, nor did he think it was necessary. In fact, if you really think about this, if everyone had become a renunciate, the path probably would have died out because it's very dependent on the support of lay people. The entire teaching structure, the ability for there to be teachers to offer the teachings, is completely dependent on lay support. And if there hadn't been the support of wealthy and not-so-wealthy lay people, it's very likely that the teachings never would have carried through time, especially when you consider that monastic communities by their nature are not self-replicating. The source of monastic practitioners is lay family life. That's where they come from. They arise out of families and then make that choice in their life. So the whole monastic structure that has largely been responsible for carrying the teachings is replenished anew from the ranks of the lay community.

I want to talk about some common misunderstandings of Buddhist practice among Westerners. When we come across the teachings, we always add things to them. And of course what we have to draw on is our own personal history and understanding and also the cultural matrix in which we've grown up and exist. For most Western people, at least for those who come from families which are not Asian, which are not part of the traditional practitioner groups, we can easily get the wrong idea. We can easily think that it's all about meditation and being quiet. We could even get the idea that sense pleasure is off limits and that joy is somehow suspect.

The Buddha does talk a lot about suffering. He talks about suffering, talks about suffering, talks about suffering. But he's describing the problem when he's talking about suffering. He's not prescribing suffering as what you're supposed to do.

If we're introduced to Buddhism through meditation, which we often are, we can get the idea—especially through silent retreat—that the retreat model is the way we should attempt to live our lives as laypeople. That in some sort of way we should try to transport this setup, or some variety of this setup, into what we're going to be doing next. But there's a problem with that, which is that generally speaking in our lives as laypeople, the whole scene is very much different. It's greatly at variance with how it's been here. We would essentially be trying to live as quasi-monastics in a culture that doesn't understand or support that.

Now this is not to knock people who have a real bent for renunciation, lay people who have a real renunciate kind of mind and orientation. There are people like that. I know a number of them who basically are not monastics, but what works for them and what feels right to them and where they really thrive is in living in a way that's as close to this kind of environment as they can set up for themselves. I'm not denigrating that in any kind of way. But for most of us, it doesn't really work. And if we think that the only way is the kind of way that we've been here, then there's a false binary that's set up. We can wind up making a problem out of something that really doesn't need to be that way, creating a kind of dualism

based on an idea that we got somewhere about the right way we need to do it or the only way that we can practice. It's very understandable why we could get confused in this kind of way.

If you look at how the Buddhist teachings have been carried, it has largely been through the monastic community. And it's very likely that over time, many of the teachings directed to lay people were not necessarily preserved because they didn't pertain to monastic life. When you look for teachings that pertain specifically to lay people, you find them scattered around in various places. They're not in a unified body of teachings.

The other part of it is that you're not necessarily going to encounter many teachings specifically oriented toward lay people when you're on retreat, because when you're on retreat in this kind of setting, you're somewhat like monks and nuns. You're being given teachings that have a more renunciate flavor to them—the teachings that come with deep meditation practice, the ones that seem most pertinent to that context.

But if we're not monastics, and we're not going to be monastics when we leave here, then the question arises: How can we use the life that we actually have to wake up? Can we practice with the life that we have, without rejecting it?

So here's the question: How can we practice after we let go of the special circumstances here? We're letting go of the special circumstances, but consider what remains. All the fields of practice in the Eightfold Path remain. The Dharma itself remains operating and visible in everything, if we can see it. Skillful and unskillful attitudes and actions remain. Karma remains. The three characteristics of all conditioned things remain to be seen. The four foundations of mindfulness remain to be practiced. Dana remains to be cultivated and offered. The precepts remain to be trained. The paramis remain to be developed. The brahmaviharas remain to be practiced. And mindfulness remains—possibly. Concentration remains—possibly, depending on how we choose.

So the raw materials for practice are still there. The whole field of practice is still open. But it's different when you leave, because now things are in motion, more obviously in motion. Things are more open, broader. If you consider retreat practice as being deep but kind of narrow, specialized in a certain way, lay practice is broader, more interactive, and it has a much more visible social dimension. That means other people—you in relationship to other people, you as a member of a community or a family or a culture, a sangha.

Lay practice is different, but it's not inferior. It's the out-breath. There's all the learning and understanding that's been gained here, and going back out is the exhale into the world, where there's the opportunity to actually apply what's been learned on the cushion, to integrate the understanding that's been gained with activity. This marketplace kind of practice will really test your understanding and commitment to the whole path.

So even though the field of practice is different, the practices and teachings can be integrated into lay life. There are other teachings of the Buddha, not usually offered in this setting, which are directly pertinent.

For instance, did you know that the Buddha taught that relative happiness is a good and worthy thing? Part of his teachings to lay people included how to attain relative happiness, as well as prosperity and a good marriage. The Buddha didn't say that kind of happiness is the highest happiness of human beings. He saw its limitations, which are the same limitations that all conditioned things have. But he saw it as a positive, nothing to be denigrated.

If you look at the main teachings of dana, or generosity; sila, the moral trainings in restraint; and the brahmaviharas, you can see that these are all directly applicable. In many Asian American Buddhist communities, those are among the primary practices—the brahmavihara attitudes, the offering of generosity, the practice of the precepts. Meditation is not necessarily a big part of how those communities practice. These are three very important teachings directly applicable to lay life.

But there are other specific teachings that could also be of interest and use to you, and it would be good for you to check them out. There's a relatively new book that pulls them all together in one place, organizes them by topic, and has an accessible commentary. It's called *The Buddha's Teachings on Prosperity*—an interesting topic. He thought it was okay. The author is a Sri Lankan monk, Bhikkhu Basnagoda Rahula, published by Wisdom Publications. It's even got some love advice in it, for those of you who are looking in that direction.

So let's talk a little more about this daily life practice—how to do it, how to consider it, how to design your customized daily life practice. In thinking about this, you might want to start with an examination or reflection on your life priorities. What are your life priorities, and why?

How does this whole Dharma thing fit into that? And how important is this kind of learning and development to you? How does it fit with your other life priorities and responsibilities? So there's an initial clarification there, a values clarification right at the beginning.

Then the second question is, once you've figured out or have a felt sense for where this is in your scheme of values, in your hierarchy of what's important to you—the second question is, which practices of the Eightfold Path will you emphasize? Because there's a range of them. And how will you practice them? What do you imagine, at least initially, to be the course of your bhavana, your emotional, mental, spiritual development? Knowing yourself, where do you want to focus? You can focus broadly, you can focus specifically, but is it conscious?

I know a number of you, as part of the process of having final interviews, have noticed that there may have been suggestions from teachers about particular things. For instance, "I think this style of practice might be something you'd want to check out," or "You might want to look into this," or "Check out this book. This teacher might be a good person for you." So you probably have had some teacher input.

But the other part of it, of course, is what's the inner voice? What's the interest? What resonates for you? What do you intuit might be a path to some things that seem to be core to your personal inquiry? Where is it alive for you? What part of the practice, what part of the teachings?

To what level are you interested in practicing? There are probably three different levels for anything you're looking at. The first one is hearing it—whether that means reading it in a book or listening to a Dharma talk, hearing the teaching. The second level is knowing it, being able to mentally organize it enough to state it back in a somewhat coherent way, if only to yourself, forming an internal understanding of it initially. And then the third level is penetrating it in some way—penetrating this teaching or this practice, assimilating it, making it a deeply absorbed understanding or training that actually changes who you are and how you are from the inside out. Transformational practice and insight.

Now there's an important point here related to practice and practices. You may have noticed in the course of being on retreat particular areas of psychological or emotional pain. Maybe it's trauma-related. Maybe it's things related to your personal history—something that has repeatedly come up for you in a very painful, difficult, often unworkable way on retreat.

It's important to know that even though Dharma practice and Dharma teachings are a universal medicine, meaning they will help whatever ails you, they're not necessarily the best medicine or the most direct way of addressing particularly lodged forms of emotional pain. So if something has come up for you on this retreat of that type, and you haven't done some sort of process that might involve psychological investigation or psychotherapy, that kind of investigation within those modalities, you should really consider it.

Because while Dharma practice is good for every being and is a tonic for us on many different levels, it's not necessarily the best thing for every single kind of pain that a human being can have. Sometimes we come to Dharma practice carrying certain kinds of emotional wounds that can benefit from the practice, but could also benefit more directly from other approaches. And these paths are not in conflict. I would say almost everybody I know who teaches has done at least some investigation of their stuff, if you want to put it that way, using these other methods as well.

So to tie out this section: once you've found what practices of the Eightfold Path you wish to emphasize, once you've figured out where it fits into your life and at what level you want to practice it, then it's just a question of figuring out what resources are available to help support you in that particular inquiry. And probably in the daily life session you received today and in your visits to the welcome room and the cornucopia of books and publications there, you've found out a lot already.

Then there's the sangha or community piece. Who are you going to practice with? You could find such a group, such a place, or if you're a self-starter, you could organize something for yourself and invite like-minded people in.

The role of community is very important, because if you think about it, you might not have anything else in common with somebody, but if you have this in common with them, you have a lot in common compared to the more typical individual you might run across. This is a bit of an off-the-beaten-path interest you have here, at the depth you have it. So sangha is very important—to find a community of kindred souls. We don't have souls, but you know what I mean.

So there are all the books, articles, and publications. The talks and teachings online—Dharma Seed, Access to Insight, and all of that. And then the retreats and teachers. You can put together your own strategy. Figure out what you're interested in, how it fits into your life priorities, what depth you want to pursue it. Figure out the resources, put it together, make your plan.

Now onto our final topic: the marketplace talk. This is about making the transition either back to where you came from, if you're going home, or making the transition on to something else, which you perhaps don't even know yet. But in any case, you'll be leaving here.

The first point is that you're closing out what's happened here in a sense. You're physically going to be leaving the premises, hopefully with all of your meditation equipment and socks and coats and things. Watch and see if the mind wants to hold on here—the "keep it" mind arising. For some of you, I'm sure there's the "get the heck out, get on with it" mind, but notice the "hold on to it" mind, whether that's trying to hold on to states here or trying to hold on to the environment or trying to hold on to the people. See if the holding on mind is there. Because if the holding on mind is present and it's not seen and it's strong, you're not going to be able as easily to open to the actual truth of what's happening as you move into the world.

You're going to be going through a process of reviewing the retreat and what happened here. And it takes quite a while for it to really work through your system. It's a very deep thing to do. And you'll probably find that you form some very vivid memories during the time you've been here. I know for myself, I came here in 1987 for the first three-month retreat, and I stayed in the annex. Even today, whenever I walk over that bridge—you know, where they keep the linens—I smell the linen closet and it's very vivid, very vivid, the memories of being here on that retreat. And it's likely that you'll have that kind of experience too. The experience that you had here is going to keep on working after you've left. There's a long digestive and assimilation process that goes with doing this kind of practice at the level and for the length of time you've been here. It's going to keep working on you.

Some advice while traveling. Driving is fortunately a habit, and this is one case where you can let your habit do the driving. Just let it do the driving. If it gets confusing, just stop, pull over, stop. But it probably won't. It's interesting to see how automated that function is. It can be useful to stay in the body. Feel the feet. Feel the weight of the body, the solidity of the body, the heaviness of the body. Watch the sense doors because it's going to be loud out there.

If you're going to be doing the airport exit, there are quiet places in the airport and you can find them.

Sometimes you can find a gate that's empty, no planes are using it. Or many airports have those meditation or contemplation rooms somewhere, usually in some out-of-the-way place. But it's a good place if you've got a few hours—to go and sit and hang out, be quiet.

Brahma-vihara practice while you're traveling can be really helpful. I can remember once getting off a retreat here and getting on an airplane to fly back to the West Coast. As I was walking down the aisle, I realized that of course I was the dreaded middle passenger. But the two guys on either side of me were really big guys, and I'm not small. I thought, oh, let's see, I'm going to be in the air for several hours and I'm going to be sitting between these two guys I don't know. They're kind of overflowing the seats, and I'm going to be touching them the whole time, and I won't be able to... And then I remembered: ah, metta practice. Metta practice. It really helps. It removes that need to try to escape from human contact very often. So highly recommended with plane travel.

So returning to the marketplace itself. This is really where mindfulness and equanimity practice is so important. There can be a kind of shock sometimes when you return because of the sensory nature of the outside world. It's really been quiet here. When you go back out, everything's on again. People are talking everywhere, there's all kinds of sounds, there's electronica of all types. And initially it can be a little bit of—whoa—and not necessarily in a pleasant way.

That sensitivity wears off, you'll be glad to know. In the meantime, just try to keep yourself grounded. Stay in the body. Find opportunity for some quiet and some seclusion. Practice the Brahma-Viharas. You can sometimes go through sensitivity cycles when you come out of practice, where the mind will be steady and stable and then there could be an uprising of "whoa, it's a lot going on here," and then it'll settle back down. I'm not saying this because it's everybody's experience, or that it's a problematic experience necessarily, or that you should be having this experience. I'm just saying this in case you do have something like this—you don't need to worry about it. It's normal. You might also notice some differences in the way that you see the world or understand the world, a new view, so to speak.

One question that comes up is: to habit or not to habit? If you look at all the habits that you had before you came here, that you haven't been doing while you're here, you're going to go back out where you can choose to pick those habits up again. You're in a rather unique position to be able to perhaps selectively choose which ones you really want to do again. And sometimes you might notice that there's a compulsivity to pick up certain of them—that they're strong habits, and when you're in an environment where you can't do them, you don't, but if you're in an environment where you can, you really, really want to. That can be valuable information too.

When you come out of retreat, the mind has been collected and very often there's a certain amount of concentration. Part of what that means is that concentration can really power whatever habit you pick up. So choose wisely with that.

For some of you, you might be going from retreat into a very undefined or uncertain period of prolonged

transition—not quite sure where you're going to be going or what you're going to be doing, what the next step is, the next move is. If that's the case for you, consider it bardo practice. You know what bardo is? It's the Tibetan Buddhist teaching on the time, space, experience after the end of one life and before the beginning of another. This liminal period of time where one thing has ended but the next major thing hasn't yet started can be a really fruitful place, but it can be a very uncomfortable place too because of the uncertainty involved. It would be important in that case to do what you can to stay grounded and to think about what's available to you in terms of support. Or if you don't have support, to think about what you could do in order to get some.

Now, some special teachings if you're returning home and connecting or reconnecting with other specific beings. This is advice—my personal view based on my personal experiences.

It's very likely, given what you've been doing here, you're going to be on quite a different wavelength from the people back home. The question is: can you be with that, with openness and acceptance, recognizing that you're just on different channels for a while? Or does the mind have to make that into a problem?

Part of what you may notice too is that other people who have been living a very different life than the one you've been living here for the last three months or six weeks aren't necessarily going to be present for you in the way that you are able to be present for them, at least initially. In other words, part of what you're going to be seeing or noticing is the way that we human beings usually walk around in a semi-trance state, very lost in a lot of thinking and distraction. You're going to see that in the people around you—which of course is all of our habitual state, except when we've been doing this kind of thing intensively or for a long time. The question is: can there be some compassion there in that seeing?

As far as loved ones and reconnecting with loved ones, whether that's close members of your family or intimate partners, my experience of this is they want to know two things. They want to know: do you still love them, and are you okay?

I can remember when I came off my first three-month retreat here. I had told my parents I was going to be coming to the East Coast and doing this silent retreat where I wouldn't be writing or calling and they couldn't write or call me for three months, and that seemed odd. It is odd, compared to most people's familiar ways of being. And they used to have these retreats so that they ended closer to Christmas.

So I decided when the retreat ended, instead of going right back to the West Coast, I'd go to my folks' house and spend Christmas there. I took a train from Worcester and got off in Albany. Meeting me at the train station were my mother, my father, my sister, and my brother. I'm walking down off the train, and they're all looking at me like... I could tell they'd been talking.

And they said, "We were thinking we'd go out for pizza and beer. What do you think?"

I knew it was a test. So even though I didn't necessarily want pizza and beer right then—because I was relatively cleaned out at that point—I knew it was a yes. "Yeah, let's go get pizza and beer."

They want to know, do you love them, and are you okay?

So if you're going home to somebody in particular, some set of somebodies in particular, gratitude is very appropriate for those who have held that space for you—whether or not they've handled everything the way you would have. It's a lot for someone to handle the home stuff when you disappear for a length of time and aren't available.

Along with that, I would also give the advice: if you can, don't be too precious. You know what I mean? Take the space that you need—I'm not saying don't do that. Find a way to balance your energy. Practice equanimity. Try to be somewhat normal. It'll be appreciated, it really will. Because if you're not relatively normal, then it stirs up all the questions about whether you're okay.

The last thing is talking about the retreat. This is a very interesting one—what to say about the retreat. The first point is there's a certain ineffability about this kind of experience. It can't really be put into words, can it? You can talk about parts of it. You can talk about specific sittings or insights that arose, or what you saw some guy do, or what the teacher said, or what the lunch was like. But the heart of it, the essence of it, the core of it is really hard to put into words—especially since it's still working in you.

If somebody asks you, "How was it?" they are probably asking you a social question. And you should just say, "Good." And they'll say, "Oh," and then you'll talk about what they want to talk about. It's usually a social question. They usually don't want to hear too much more than that.

Now, there are exceptions to this, and they will make themselves known. These are the people who really want to know. There will be something about how they ask you, or they'll ask you more than once. Those are the kind of people where, if you feel comfortable, it would be appropriate to go have a cup of coffee or tea with them in some quiet place, because they really do want to know. There's something they find very interesting about what you did, what you've experienced.

Because there are two kinds of people in relationship to this kind of thing, it seems to me: the ones that think it's really kind of nuts, and the ones that think it's really interesting. And there are more of the first than the second.

There's another danger about saying too much about the retreat out of enthusiasm and desire to share. At least in our culture here in the States, people will be very likely to think that you're proselytizing. Do you know what I mean? That you're telling them this in order to cause them to change their views or be converted to this particular religious or worldview. They'll just think that, and you'll be able to tell by the look on their face when they say, "Oh yeah, we all have our own path." Then you'll know you've gone too far.

There's the other possibility too, which may arise at future family holiday occasions: someone who wishes to hear about your experience in order to deconstruct it for you, or to debate you.

Most families have at least one of these types. So with that one, I just wouldn't bite. Because what would the point be—to defend or attempt to defend this ineffable experience that you've had, one that you can't even put into words? I would just let that one go by. Maybe that would be a case where you could use the phrase, "Everyone has their own path."

It's also wise to avoid giving dharma talks to your partners, even if you've got a really good one.

There's one other thing in relationship to family groupings. Often, if you've done something outside the boundaries of your individual family experience or their faith traditions, it brings up fear for them. Fear about who you're turning into. You used to be one of us. You're in the lineage of—I'll take an example, my mother's family, Irish Catholics. They've been Catholics since St. Patrick told a convincing story about a shamrock. I mean, it goes way back.

When you change or move outside the family tradition, it causes people to be afraid that you're rejecting them, rejecting connection with them, becoming a kind of mystery. I've found it very useful to try to signal, if this is the case for you, that I still love them. I'm still the same person. I'm not any weirder than I used to be. Reassure them in that kind of way—being the same familiar member of the family who remembers birthdays and isn't trying to convert them or push anything on them or make them be different than they are. It goes a long way.

I had a very interesting experience a couple of years ago where I took my mother on a weekend trip up to Burlington, Vermont. My mother was, I think, eighty-seven at the time. We stayed in this hotel on the shores of Lake Champlain with a panoramic view out across the lake and the water. We were sharing a bedroom, and I got up in the morning and did my sitting. My mother went over to a chair and got out her novena book. She read her novena and I did my sitting, and we did parallel play—or pray, as the case may be. It was a really beautiful thing.

It can be very useful to take the long view over time with these things. If people are important to you and worth having a relationship with, put the practice into effect by being open and caring and non-judgmental in your relationship with them. There's actually modeling of wise intention in relationship to the people who are closest to us, accepting them for who they are.

So those are my words of wisdom for you on your way out into the marketplace. The return.

May you all go wisely and safely, going back to the lives that you left or onward to your new life yet to be opened. May you bring with you the fruits of the practice and live to see the ripening of the work that you've done here. May all your deepest aspirations be fulfilled in this very life.

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