

Venerable Pannavati Bhikkhuni
“Teachings for Uncertain Times”
February 22, 2017



Welcome to the Teachings for Uncertain Times series. I'm Venerable Pannavati, co-Abbot of Embracing Simplicity Hermitage and the founder and spiritual director of Heartwood Refuge and Retreat Center in Hendersonville, North Carolina.

I want to talk to you about this notion about these being “uncertain” times. The truth of the matter is, whatever time we're living in in this world, it's uncertain. It's been uncertain from the beginning and will be uncertain until the end. That's one of the things that the Buddha talked about. If you can get this, it's the crux of our impetus for spiritual practice: there's no certainty to be found here, anywhere. There's no certainty. If we're looking outside of ourselves for some kind of certainty, [*laughs*] we're just not going to find it. It is not to be found anywhere.

We begin then to turn inward, to look to see, “What is there inside that creates a world for me, this world that I identify with, this world that I call my life?” He says to know the dharma is to be a knower of the world. And also to know the dharma, one sage said, is to know oneself. And so instead of looking outside for our indicators, about what the world is and what it means to us, we have to turn inward and look inward. That can be . . . [*laughs*] sometimes it's not that pretty. But we're encouraged that we can look inside, and in this search, this inward search to see, “What is the world for me? For Pannavati?” I've come to some conclusion and some resolution, about how to peacefully coexist with the world, with the world outside. Because I have harnessed, I have mastered my emotions, my feelings, my views about it, from the inside.

So I think it would be good for us to look at that idea of being a knower of the world. How do we make contact with the world? How do we relate to the world? And in this particular context, of being what some call a “teacher of color.” I just call myself a teacher, and I think we all have a color. But if I were to look at that specifically and make some comment about it, I might say, “Oh, I remember when I was first invited to teach at different dharma centers.” And they would always invite me to come and share with their people of color. And I was like, “Well you know, I'm not a black dharma teacher, I'm just a dharma teacher. [*Laughs.*] So call me when you want

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me to come and talk to your whole sangha, OK?” And they did, they did begin to call. And so then I started getting flak on one side, saying, “Well what’s the deal about you not wanting to address sanghas of color?” And I’m like, “It’s not like that. It’s just the ways that we look at things.”

You see, because I feel that if I were in a place explaining, giving more understanding, giving people a sense or a feeling of comfort, and that there’s a level playing field. I’m not there to grind an axe, to beat anybody up, to talk about privilege. I’m not doing any of that. But just being able to talk to them about the dharma in a way that they can understand it, apart from the difference in color. Then, I think that that does more than for me just addressing their sanghas of color. That was the rationale. Of course it’s a nonissue now, but it was very much an issue when I began.

So on one hand we’re talking about suffering and what causes suffering in the world out here. On the other hand, we’re talking about how our own actions and our own understanding, can soothe, can support, can comfort, can even put out the flames of suffering for oneself and for others. And so when I go in and I talk, I talk to all people the same. I don’t try to craft one language for one group of people, and a different language for another, because I really don’t see us as different, as much as we are alike.

Yes, I know there are some differences. There are differences of experience, just general across the board. I’ve been in this skin for 69 years. And so—no, I don’t think I’m that old, 67 I think. A long time I’ve been in this skin. I’m well acquainted with what it takes to survive, to live, to be encouraged, and to be discouraged, being a black person in America. I learned something from that experience. The first thing is if I want to be happy, it means I’m not going to be able to depend on other people for my happiness. If so, I may never be happy. If I want to be loved, I’d better love myself, because if I rely on you to love me, you may never love me. And I’ll never know love, if I’m looking for it from you.

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There's a certain place that we come to in our understanding, that we're not really demanding anything of anyone outside of ourselves. And yet there is that hope, that there is something that can come from someone outside of ourselves, that will make our existence, our time here in this life enjoyable. It will make it beneficial, and that it will be a breeding ground for growth and personal transformation.

I'm thinking now, there is no security to be found anywhere, it is said. Then how will I be at peace? Because everybody wants to be secure. Whether it's financially secure, whether it's socially, to have all the friends we want, whether it's to be loved by family. Then when we start talking about the neuroses that we have, you know, around all of these issues, the principal thing is, "I don't feel safe, I don't feel secure." I was asked about how I feel when I come into an all-white sangha. I just feel like how I walk around in America. We are a minority in America, whether you're going to a sangha, whether you're going to a baseball game, or whether you're going downtown. Except if you lived in Washington D.C., when I was growing up we called it "Chocolate City." There were a lot [*laughs*] of people of color there and it was a wonderful time.

But once that time ended and once I left that place, I had a culture shock. Because I didn't realize how the rest of the country was. I had to undergo a reexamination and a different understanding of how things actually are. I didn't get sad about it, because, you know, ignorance is not bliss. It was wonderful to really know. See once we know—this is the good news of the dharma, I like to call it the "dharma gospel," is that we are not helpless, we're not defenseless, we don't have to be victims, we don't have to have a victim mentality. Or maybe I could say, even though we may be a victim of something, we don't have to take up a victim mentality.

When I talk with my sangha, and my sangha presently and for the last 10 years is an all-white sangha—I have one Asian now [*laughs*] and I still don't have any people of color. That's pretty much indicative of the racial dynamic of the city that I live in. But I remember on one occasion, I was asked, "What is it . . . how do you feel when you come into an all-Caucasian sangha? Because I don't feel safe." I said, "Well you know, I feel safe wherever I go. Because I'm relying

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on myself for my safety, I'm not looking for anything.” When I come into a sangha, I'm coming to offer something. That is my moment of offering, when I'm coming to sit, when I'm coming to share the dharma, when I'm coming to fellowship with you. That's my offering towards you. Whatever's inside, whatever's inside of us, when we come together, it is to offer that that is inside of us. In that place, there is no sense of fear, there's no sense of difference. I'm looking for where we can come together, where we can agree, where there is some similarity, where this is harmony, where I can see our interconnectedness, our interdependence. Coming with that mind, that is the world that appears in front of me.

I can say some hard things, some really hard things, to people of non-color, non people of color. Oh, you know what I mean. I could say some hard things, and they won't feel like, “There is another saying this to me.” But speaking, you know, as one, one group, one unit, one tribe. I can be understood. The truth can be understood, regardless of who it's coming from. This is the beauty of the dharma, that it can transcend these kinds of differences, if we want it to. It gives us a certain strength, and a certain energy, and a certain capacity to be a present help in a time of need, because we don't siphon off so much of our energy around our differences, or around our anger. I don't mean that it doesn't need to be addressed, if anybody knows me, I address it. But in the addressing, there doesn't have to be any pushing kind of energy. Because I attempt to see the person as I am. Whether I'm mother, whether, you know, I've been a mother, been a wife, been a businessperson, I've had money, I've lost money. It doesn't matter. I've encountered praise and blame, loss and gain, pleasure and pain, fame and shame in my life. And I know that goes for every other person.

So when I'm coming into contact with them, I'm looking to see how that person is like myself. What I would want from myself in that moment, what I would want from myself in that engagement, what I would like an outcome to be of us having come together. This is the ideal, this is the goal. Now it doesn't always work out that way [*laughs*]. Maybe when I'm enlightened it will. But for now, it doesn't always work out that way. But the intention is there, that's what I mean. Set your intention today, set your heart today, what is it that you truly desire? We say things like, “Well we want equality.” Exactly what is that?

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I know some people are going to have some issues with this conversation, because they are approaching it from another side. That's perfectly OK. But if all voices are only coming from one side, where will we finally come to some conclusion that every voice can be heard, and every perspective deserves the dignity of being considered? When will we get to that space? I would like to be one voice for reconciliation. We know—we already know we have a lot of problems. But I think if we look at how we individually approach life. What we see when we look out through these eyes, what we hear when someone is speaking, and whether we can superimpose ourselves over that one speaking.

I know that my views have changed about many, many things over the years. And maybe something that someone is saying today or right now, you know, we can agree it's decidedly a wrong view. It's not beneficial, it's not useful, it's a wrong view. I'm not afraid of the word “wrong.” But who knows? If by keeping that door open for dialogue, for just showing kindness. It's easy to love people [*laughs*] who love us, but can we love those who don't love us? But by continually showing kindness, when none is being shown to you, how do you know that that won't transform the heart of someone, and they can change? A kindness has transformed me, so I know that it's possible. Understanding me when I was decidedly wrong. Someone just understanding that that's the space I was in right now, based on the experiences that I personally had in life. They understood that, and they gave some grounds for that, offered some tolerance for that. Over time, in my own time, not in their time, in my own time, my thoughts changed. I'll come back and see somebody I hadn't seen for five years, and they say, “You're so different.” It's because I'm allowing the dharma to dress me up, and to dress me down. I'm allowing the dharma to speak to me and challenge my views, challenge my understanding. When I'm too high, it can bring me down, when I'm too low the dharma lifts me up. I'm looking constantly to the dharma and I encourage you to do the same. Looking to the dharma will transform how we see the world, how we know the world. We'll come to know ourselves in a deeper, more fundamental way.

We'll discover that truly there is the Buddha seed, that buddhanature, at the core of our being. And once we are convinced that it's there, we let it begin to have its way. By the watering of the

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word of the dharma, by our cultivation of thoughts, of words, of actions, that are in accord or in align with the dharma. Little by little we transform and we become useful in the world. Then when I come into a contentious situation, I'm not flaring with my own insecurities, I'm not raging with my own sense of injustices. I can nurse those at home. But in that space, I can be one who seeks to win over the enemy, so that he becomes a friend. This is the advice of the Buddha and all the wise sages, from all time.

Thank you for listening.