

Lama Elizabeth Monson
Pilgrimage Unbound
Week One: “What is Pilgrimage?”
December 1, 2019



Hello and welcome to the Tricycle’s online Dharma Talks series. My name is Elizabeth Monson and over the next four weeks, I will be giving a series of talks entitled *Pilgrimage Unbound*.

Before I begin, let me take a moment to introduce myself. I am a meditation and dharma teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. I have been studying, practicing, and teaching Tibetan Buddhism in the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages for over thirty years. I have had the good fortune to study with many wonderful teachers as well as the opportunity to practice in solitary retreat for substantial periods of time. About fifteen years ago, I felt the need to deepen my understanding of the historical and philosophical roots of the Buddhist tradition, so I returned to school and completed a PhD in the study of religion from Harvard University with a focus in Buddhism and Ethics.

These days, I am fortunate to be the spiritual co-director of a Buddhist organization called Natural Dharma Fellowship, founded by Lama Willa Miller. I am also the managing teacher at our residential retreat center, Wonderwell Mountain Refuge in Springfield, New Hampshire.

As a dharma teacher, I am interested in developing practical methods for incorporating the Buddhist teachings into everyday life through the practices of kindness and compassion as well as focusing on ways to recognize the natural state in every moment of our lives.

One of the most powerful ways that I have found to bring the teachings into my everyday life has been through the practice of pilgrimage. Over the years, I have lived in Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan, where I was fortunate to be able to participate in numerous pilgrimages. In fact, I can say with confidence that pilgrimage has become one of my main practices. I believe the practice of pilgrimage has the potential to transform our understandings of ourselves, others, and even reality itself. Encountering the sacred in our lives and learning how to view every aspect of our lives as sacred can shift the very ground on which we stand.

Over the next four weeks, I will share how the practice of pilgrimage can be used as a tool for awakening to our deepest nature, no matter where we are or what we are doing. For this reason, I have titled this series of dharma talks *Pilgrimage Unbound*.

Why is this topic important for dharma practitioners?

When I lived in Bhutan, one thing that surprised me was that in addition to the longer traditional pilgrimages that people aspired to do, there were also everyday mini-pilgrimages taking place all

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the time. Every weekend, families would pack a picnic lunch, put on their finest clothes, and hike to nearby temples or monasteries to pay homage to the teachers or the places. The entire adventure was conducted with good humor, playfulness, and delight at the sheer pleasure of being together and engaging with the sacred. Pilgrimage was simultaneously ordinary and profoundly sacred.

Observing this and occasionally participating, I began to consider how it might be possible to bring practices of traditional pilgrimage into our everyday lives. These talks are my attempt to share my conclusions with all of you.

First, let’s talk about what a pilgrimage is. Pilgrimage is a powerful practice for breaking down fixations and centralization on the self. It is a practice which harnesses our physical bodies, our different ways of communicating, and our patterns of thought and emotion to dismantle and relax habitual ways of seeking comfort, security, and assurance for this idea of “me” and “mine.” It is the best example I know of taking meditation off the cushion and into the world.

Pilgrimage is considered a sacred journey, usually in the company of others, to a place or places imbued with power and blessings. It is a practice of connecting with sacred spaces and places to be transformed, purified, and shaped in new and potent ways.

Pilgrimage often include experiencing obstacles along the way—which, instead of being seen as hindrances, are instead viewed as opportunities for transformation and purification.

If we can take the same principles that apply to traditional pilgrimages and relate them to in daily life, our lives can unfold as transformative and sacred journeys, no matter where we are or where we go.

Pilgrimage unbound is a way to discover the sacred in every moment of our lives.

This practice asks us: how can we live in such a way that we remain tuned into the sacredness of our experience? How can we realize the Dalai Lama’s words when he says: “A truly great pilgrim doesn’t need to go anywhere”?

Now, I would like to share with you some of the characteristics of a pilgrim. We might ask, “What is a pilgrim?” A pilgrim is a wanderer, a person who travels to sacred places seeking spiritual insight and transformation. In Buddhism, the practice of going on pilgrimage is an



extension of the basic idea that we are all pilgrims wandering through samsara until we recognize the true nature of reality and are enlightened.

A pilgrim is also a renunciant. A person who leaves behind the familiar, comfortable world, her habits and entrenched patterns of reactivity, and goes forth into groundlessness with the trust that there is something beyond these habitual ways of being and acting.

A pilgrim is a refugee. One who takes refuge in liminal spaces, in the unknown and unformed. Liminal spaces are defined as places of transition, waiting, and not knowing. It is in liminal space where transformation can take place, if we learn to wait, listen, and let it touch us.

Finally, a pilgrim is a devotee. A person who practices to see the sacred in every experience, every place, and in everyone she meets—even in obstacles and hardships that may arise.

In Tibetan Buddhism the word for pilgrimage is *Ngas 'khor*. This compound word consists of two words – *ngas* and *'khor*. *'khor* means ‘to cycle around,’ ‘to circumambulate,’ and sometimes, ‘to stay close to’ and ‘respect.’ The word *gnas*, when used as a noun, means ‘a sacred place,’ ‘an empowered place’ where blessing reside. When *gnas* is used as a verb, it means ‘to abide, reside, to dwell,’ to come home to the raw, uncomplicated, and simplest dimension of our being—the nature of our heart/mind.

Together, these two words suggest that ultimately, a pilgrimage could be viewed as a journey taken to experience the blessings that are always available to us when we discover how to rest in our own buddha nature.

What is the purpose of pilgrimage? Just as in meditation, the purpose of going on pilgrimage is to be transformed—to be awoken to ourselves in a new and profound way.

Pilgrimage also functions to break down our fixations and habits of self-focus and self-cherishing. Engaging on pilgrimage retrains us from seeking comfort and familiarity to being willing to take risks and to encounter aspects of ourselves that have been dormant or hiding.

Pilgrimage leads us into recognition of and communion with the sacred. And by virtue of this recognition, becoming someone different in our relationships with ourselves, others, and the phenomenal world.

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What do I mean when I use this word, *sacred*?

Sacred, as I am using it here, is a way of perceiving every part of our experience without conceptual mediation or fabrication. Sacred means seeing things *as they are*, in their own right, without the veils of thought and desire, hope, fear, and expectation that usually obstruct our capacity to connect directly with reality.

The idea of the sacred is that when we can experience things as they are, we may discover that they are imbued with power and energy that can transform us.

Encountering the sacred has to do with what kinds of relationships we have to whatever we experience. Experiencing the sacred arises in relation to how we view ourselves, others, and the world.

Do we view the world as an extension of our ideas and thoughts? Or, as I think we all do from time to time, do we occasionally tap into experiences of present moment wakefulness in which the thinking mind takes a back seat, and we sense our interconnectedness and intimacy with everything?

Perhaps we've had that experience when we stood at the edge of the ocean with the waves and the vast, open space. Or perhaps when we allowed the idea of “I” to dissolve while listening to a beautiful piece of music.

To illustrate better what I mean by “sacred,” let me tell you a short story. Some years ago, two Tibetan Buddhist masters were sitting side by side outside on the slope of a mountain. In front of them and down the slope a little ways, a large aspen tree was shimmering in the wind and sunlight. The two masters sat in silence for a long time. Finally, one of them leaned over to the other and said, “They call that a ‘tree.’” The two of them burst into uproarious laughter.

The point of this story is to show that our thoughts and the labels we assign to phenomena cannot possibly capture them in their fullness, power, majesty, and vividness. But if we can drop the thinking mind from time to time, we all have the capacity to directly experience reality, *as it is*.

When we remain present to things as they are in each moment, we discover their sacred and transformative nature.

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We have mundane, ordinary relationships with our lives when we live only from our ideas, labels, and thoughts about how these should or shouldn't be. But we can have a sacred relationship to our lives when we practice encountering everything directly, from our hearts instead of our heads, from our deepest nature, our innermost being that naturally recognizes our interconnectedness and intimacy with all phenomena.

So, in this sense, the practice of pilgrimage unbound is a way of training ourselves to experience the sacred everywhere—in our bodies, our homes, workplaces, schools, towns, cities, natural environments, in other people, and everywhere else.

Thank you so much for joining me today where we talked about pilgrimage unbound. We explored what a pilgrimage is and what its purpose is. We also discussed the characteristics of a pilgrim and the possibility of bringing the view of the sacred into our everyday experience. I hope you will join me next week when we will continue our journey by exploring the notion of outer pilgrimage—the relationship between our physical bodies and the places we encounter.