

Lama Elizabeth Monson
Pilgrimage Unbound
Week Four: “Innermost Pilgrimage”
December 22, 2019



Hello, welcome to back Tricycle’s online Dharma Talks series. My name is Elizabeth Monson and today I will be continuing a series of talks entitled *Pilgrimage Unbound*.

Today, we will continue our journey by exploring the notion of innermost pilgrimage. Innermost pilgrimage refers to our journey to the deepest and most awake part of our being – the nature of our heart/mind.

For many of us, this life can be understood as a journey to knowing, to transformation, and to freedom. We may even view our lives as a pilgrimage toward the freedom that arises when we recognize the true nature of the mind: empty, aware, and responsive.

Innermost pilgrimage refers to our journey to the innermost temple, the temple of our own awareness.

At the pilgrimage place of Aja Ney, in central Bhutan, that I have been describing in previous talks, the innermost pilgrimage circuit led to the cave of a thousand ah’s, the place where Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tsogyal meditated together in a cave on the bank of a river and left body imprints in the stone. Today, there is a shrine in front of the cave with images of ys and gr, offerings, scarves, and so forth.

But behind the shrine there is what I call the innermost sanctum. A wall is built into the cave, and built into the wall is a small window draped with *katas* and surrounded by offerings.

Looking through this window, one can see the back of the cave, the rock, where the body imprints are. The inner sanctum at Aja Ney turns out to be a natural element of the earth.

Pilgrims can reach in and touch that sacred rock and the body imprints within it. They can receive the blessings of this empowered site into their own bodies by touching where Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tsogyal’s bodies have been.

The inner sanctum in this case turns out to be an object of the natural world, something just as it is.

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My whole experience of the pilgrimage to Aja Ney, circumambulating all the khors and finally ending at this cave, meditating in the cave, and encountering the innermost sanctum can be seen as an allegory for what we are doing with Pilgrimage Unbound.

With this kind of allegory, we can see how every day can be an enactment of pilgrimage.

Outer pilgrimage is the moving of our bodies through spaces and places. Inner pilgrimage is where we encounter our styles and patterns of being in the world. Innermost pilgrimage represents our journey from living in the narrow confines of what we think, expect, hope and fear to a direct, unmediated experience of things as they are.

On the innermost pilgrimage, we take a journey from conceptual to non-conceptual, from an outer oriented gaze to gazing within and noticing and working with everything we find as fuel for our own freedom.

When we turn our gaze within in the innermost pilgrimage, like the Aja Ney cave, we enter the temple of our own minds and bodies and we explore them—their light and shadows, their conceptual and nonconceptual dimensions. What we discover when we look deep inside is something more than just the swirlings of the conceptual mind. We discover space, openness, and a profound sense of relaxation.

To get there, we traverse our reified habits of selfishness and the ingrained patterns of emotional reactivity that continually give rise to the various forms of suffering we experience. As we descend deeper into our inner being, beneath the layers of conceptuality and discursiveness, to the essence of our being—an essence of wisdom and compassion—we discover our own awareness, the sacred stone, the jewel of *rigpa*, the natural state.

Our lives provide us with endless possibilities to encounter this innermost sanctum when we view our journey through this life as a pilgrimage. Just like the rock behind the shrine in Aja Ney, we encounter a vast awareness that is natural and inherent to us, stable, grounded, and always present.

Awareness is like space. When we discover it in our experience and learn to live from it, we simultaneously learn, as Tsoknyi Rinpoche has said, to become the host or hostess for our own experience.

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Training to relax in that space and to simply allow everything that arises without getting involved enables us to be born to a new way of being—a way of being that is in direct experiential relationship to everything.

But to be born again into this awareness, we must die to our limited ideas about who we are and what we are capable of. At Aja Ney, this death and rebirth was enacted symbolically. Each of us had to lie on the ground in a special spot. We were told that we were dead. Only when our guide indicated, were we allowed to rise up into the sparkling sunlight, with the vast blue sky spreading away into infinity.

Being reborn into our birthright, our basic goodness, the awareness that has no solidity, no fixity, and no measurement, describes the journey we take everyday into our inner landscape.

Every day, we relate to ourselves: to our thoughts, feelings, and emotions. But rarely do we see the sacred in this landscape. We are usually caught up in warping what we see, trying to form it into something that conforms with our ideas of how things should be, or shouldn't be, trying to avoid what's there or get rid of it.

But the idea of innermost pilgrimage reframes this inner landscape as a sacred one. Taking this journey provides us with an opportunity to “walk through” and discover the magical play of the mind in its endless, creative expressions.

When we allow the mind's energy to express itself without interference, every movement of the mind can awaken us to our true nature.

The most creative and powerful way of all to take pilgrimage into daily life is to remember to relax. Deeply fundamentally relax, let go, and open to things as they are. This sounds so simple, but it does require practice.

What's encouraging is that every moment of our lives offers opportunities to relax and let go, allowing whatever is arising to arise, just as it is. This doesn't mean not taking action when action is required, but it does mean that our action can be sourced in sanity, clarity, and appropriate responsiveness, rather than in reactivity.

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How to practice pilgrimage unbound

Practically, wherever you are – in your home, your backyard, your workplace, downtown Boston, on the green in Andover Center, take a moment to pause and completely open your senses.

- Allow your whole being to be flooded with the energy, movement, textures, colors, sounds, smells as if all the cells in your body were drinking them in.
- Notice, pay attention, don't get lost, be utterly, radically present.
- The experience doesn't have to be pleasant, but what if we remove the idea of “like” or “dislike”? You might try to play with idea.
- Can you sense the sacred in every place you are? What is it?
- Can touching that sense of sacredness in your life wake you up to a recognition of equanimity, openness, and clarity?
- As you disperse your awareness throughout space and place, notice that in sensory experience, there is no separation between you and your world.
- In this state, the sacred, the divine, which is what wakes us up, is completely present.

In conclusion:

Pilgrimage unbound is about how we orient our minds, but also how we use our bodies and our speech. It is about renouncing the attitude that expects and demands comfort and familiarity and finding the unusual or the surprising in the everyday, the commonplace, and the habitual.

Pilgrimage unbound is about seeing this wandering life as an adventure, a journey towards, into, and within sacredness. It is about seeing the sacred in the mundane and appreciating this life as the blessing it is.

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It is also about developing the ability to connect with our bodies and our environments with presence and wakefulness and to recognize that ultimately, we are not separate from the world we seem to live in, but which, in truth, lives in and through us.

Pilgrimage unbound is finding contentment in adversity, challenge, the unfamiliar, and all obstacles, recognizing these as hot spots for our purification.

By shedding our habits of self-focus and self-centeredness in exchange for the fullness of human beingness in all its various textures and shades, we may be able to adopt a stance of openness and curiosity towards our own experience of body, speech, and mind.

Pilgrimage unbound is about becoming willing seek to see the sacred, transformative, the powerful and the strange within the everyday, being willing to experience life with a sense of freshness and newness, with a beginner’s mind and not with the mind that feels it already knows what’s going to happen and how.

At the end of this pilgrimage, we may discover who we really are, our own nature. We discover that rather than ending up in a foreign place, we end up back home, more deeply, powerfully home than we ever imagined we could be. This home is as vast as the sky and as brilliant as the sun. Our buddha mind is not some distant foreign place.

When we discover this home, we can truly understand the Dalai Lama’s words that a truly great pilgrim does not need to go anywhere.

Thank you so much for joining me on our journey with pilgrimage unbound.