



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 inner pilgrimage, which refers to our practices of communication through speech, listening, and relating to others.

Often a pilgrimage involves movement from outer to inner to innermost, from exterior to the deepest interior.

With inner pilgrimage, we practice cultivating the view that all communication is sacred. Loosely defined, communication here refers to how we listen, to how we use speech and other forms of communication, and to how we use our thoughts to communicate with the world around us.

On a traditional pilgrimage communication is governed by the idea of right attitude. One of the central requirements of the pilgrim is to refrain from all complaint. To complain about adverse conditions or events, about illness or difficulties, is to disperse the energy that is working to transform one. It is like letting the air out of a balloon.

The pilgrim is expected to constantly observe and adjust her attitude to relax and apply restraint whenever things get difficult. This inner pilgrimage idea of abstaining from complaint is a profound instruction.

Complaining is an insidious and nearly continuous part of our daily experience. If you question this, watch yourself and others to see how often complaining takes center stage. You can also observe how often those you experience through other channels, particularly through the media, speak almost exclusively through the language of complaint.

It is probably safe to say that we live in a culture of complaint and that this habitual tendency has unconsciously informed how many of us communicate. For example, see if you can remember the main content of your story about your day when you arrive home at the end of the day... how often do you give into complaint?

By practicing inner pilgrimage, instead of complaining, the pilgrim cultivates the willingness to be receptive, humble, selfless, and diligent in how she communicates with the world.



Taking up this practice can produce a single-pointedness of heart and mind and prepare us to receive whatever form of communication is coming our way. This is especially important as we journey through everyday life where we are constantly bombarded by various forms of communication, many of them challenging.

Refraining from complaint allows us to explore the emotional reactivity that arises for us when we feel challenged and to be better able to consciously deescalate that reactivity, allowing us to see more and more deeply into our own patterns. Transformation is not possible without first gaining insight into the various ways we struggle due to habits and patterns of thought and emotional reactivity.

Viewing everyday life as a pilgrimage can help to remind us of this simple principle of observing and adjusting our relationship to the triggers we experience.

Communication is also about how we listen. How we listen is closely related to how harmoniously we connect with ourselves, with others, and with the phenomenal world. On a pilgrimage, there is an idea that the pilgrim opens her heart to the world to begin to hear how the world speaks in various ways as well as how our own inner being vibrates and responds to these different manners of communication.

For example, how would you listen to the movement of sunlight across the floor; the blaring horn of large truck; the murmur of voices in a crowded shopping mall; or the flash of lights on a busy city street at night?

Everything is speaking to us in a variety of ways if we know how to listen. Most of what we experience does not speak in words, but through other, more visceral or intuitive forms of communication. In this sense then, listening also involves developing the capacity to listen to the small still voice inside of you—a voice that may often be easily overlooked, because it speaks less stridently and loudly than our coarser modes of speech.

To really experience the sacred through listening, we must learn to hear beneath the surface of whatever we encounter; to hear the nuances and subtleties of what is being communicated. True listening is a state of profound receptivity.

When we can be completely open to hearing it, this life transmits the experience of truth on a non-conceptual level that can be felt and experienced, but not thought.



At Aja Ney, I had no choice but to listen very carefully. This was in part because my knowledge of Dzongkha, the spoken language of Bhutan, was rudimentary. When our guide, the nun, told the stories of the different sacred spots where we meditated, I could often catch only a few words. Subsequent efforts by my Bhutanese friend to translate the story were only slightly more useful.

Ultimately, I found that I had to listen to the places themselves, to the energy that inhered in them. I had to listen carefully to how my fellow pilgrims related to the spaces with their bodies and to imitate them as best I could.

Listening in this way, I heard something deeply profound that spoke not in words but in sensory transmission: the rustling of the leaves on the ancient beech trees, the smell of the dank interiors of the many caves in which we sat, silent, wrapped in the womb of the earth, the powerful rushing of a waterfall surging down over stone, slipping away into the tangle of Himalayan jungle growth.

It is this kind of listening that we can apply in our daily lives. Another way of thinking about this is that we can listen to the truth of how things are, what the Buddhist teacher Reggie Ray has termed the “universal dharma.” Universal dharma is the truth that is continuously present whether or not there is a buddha.

It is the truth that exists as an underlying substrate of reality, of ourselves and our world—the ultimate truth of who and what we are. The goal of any pilgrimage is to recognize this ultimate truth of who we are and what reality is. And in fact, many of us see this goal as the telos of our spiritual path, even if we articulate it differently.

We desire not only to recognize this deepest nature, but to learn to rest in it, identify with it, and let go of our “ideas” about the self that keeps us separate, isolated, and lonely. This deepest nature/truth, is said to be unborn, unceasing, fluid, vast, loving and profoundly creative. But this kind of truth is not just the truth of the self. It is also the truth of what is so in our lives, whether we want it or not, like it or not, expect it or not.

Sacred truth can be communicated through various guises, some of which may feel deeply painful. For example, consider the end of a relationship, the loss of a loved one, or a serious illness or catastrophe. Each of these experiences is speaking a form of truth to us and there is something there for us to learn if we know how to listen.



Sometimes, even something as simple as the sudden loss of power during a lightning storm, the thought-stopping beauty of a clear starry night, or the symphony of frog songs on a damp night in spring, communicates in such a way that it can wake us up if we really listen. The rawness of the phenomenal world, as it is, demonstrates to us the presence of that deeper underlying truth of reality itself.

Just as it is when we go on a traditional pilgrimage, listening means taking whatever occurs in our lives, our ups and downs, and our difficult states as the path.

Inner pilgrimage also refers to our communication with others. On a pilgrimage, pilgrims often discover a deep sense of interconnectedness—that they are not separate—that they share deeper motivations and impulses toward kindness and care, and towards spiritual awakening.

Pilgrimage is sometimes considered a highly sociable activity, pilgrims enjoy those they meet on the road – discover the joy of giving and reciprocity and even appreciate learning from discord or conflict.

Consider the interactions of the pilgrims in Chaucer's famous work, *The Canterbury Tales*, where the focus is very much on the different modes of communication and miscommunication the pilgrims experience with each other.

Pilgrims often experience communion, a feeling of oneness; fellowship; and mutual participation.

This notion of inner pilgrimage can be explored in our everyday lives when we recognize how, fundamentally, we all wish for happiness and a release from suffering, even if how we express such desires varies dramatically. Cultivating a shared sense of humanity, even with those whose opinions and ways of being are radically different from our own, can shift how we position ourselves in the world and our degree of receptivity.

On a pilgrimage, the pilgrim actively cultivates receptivity to change and surprise. There is a sense that one is visiting the world and coming away changed by it in some substantial way is a common theme.

Consider too that there are various methods through which we communicate with ourselves about what we discover in every moment of our lives.



In this sense, the notion of inner pilgrimage can include the ways that we record our pilgrimage through this life. It's important to find ways to mark our journeys. Some such ways might include journal writing, taking photographs, sketching, painting, or writing poems.

In general, inner pilgrimage encourages us to explore whatever makes our heart sing; whatever momentarily wipes our mind clean, bare; whatever dissolves you completely. When we do, a natural, creative form of communication may organically arise – methods of communicating that reach below the level of what we think.

A final dimension of inner pilgrimage includes the fact that we are surrounded by stories and that such stories can be powerfully instrumental providing us with ethical guidelines by which we can learn to live well with and for others. For example, there are many stories of those who have visited sacred places before us and the events and achievements they may have engaged in there. There are stories of places themselves, of caves, mountain tops, rivers, and lakes.

The truth is that no matter where we go, we are surrounded by stories. In our daily lives, we can make an effort to learn the stories of the places we inhabit and visit. Learning the stories of these places situates us in a particular kind of relationship to them. Suddenly, they are not just random places, but places with histories, journeys and a potency of their own.

For example, in Tibet, many mountains are often seen embodiments of enlightened beings or deities. The stories surrounding them revolve around the topic of protection from fear and such stories often function in the creation of ethically oriented persons.

In truth, we are always in an ethical dialogue with the landscapes we inhabit. Such landscapes, natural or human-fashioned, are “storied landscapes” through which we can tap into a sense of the moral efficacy and behavior that inheres within these places and within the communities of those who live there.

The ways in which we use language represent our ways of being in dialogue with the land and with the places we go.

Mantra practice

Finally, I would like to briefly explore a final practice of communication that is often central to the practice of inner pilgrimage. This is the practice of reciting mantras.



Mantras are strings of sacred syllables that are considered to evoke positive energies within us. Reciting a mantra is not unlike reciting the rosary or repeating prayers. This may sound somewhat strange, but if it resonates with you, reciting mantra is a powerful practice of protection from negativity, complaint, habitual thought processes, and even emotional upheaval.

On Tibetan buddhist pilgrimage, pilgrims recite mantras almost constantly. This is not only to gain merit, but also to take advantage of one of the meanings of mantra – mind protection. The idea of chanting mantras is that this practice protects us from giving into our usual habits of thought or speech.

Reciting the mantra provides a counterpoint for our habitual mental chatter. A place to rest our attention that may evoke different enlightened aspects of our own being or which can generate love and compassion for others. Reciting mantra is a way to encourage ourselves not to lose heart and to continue to exert effort toward those things that we value.

Personally, I have found that mantra recitation is a powerful way to stay present in the moment. I am far less likely to give in to obsessive thinking about my experience, or getting lost in memories from the past, or fantasizing about the future.

If this practice appeals to you, you can choose a mantra whose basic meaning resonates for you. You could choose the mantra of a particular form of enlightened mind, like the mantra of the bodhisattvas manjushri or avalokiteshvara. In fact, the mantra of avalokiteshvara is the most commonly recited mantra in the buddhist world – *om mani padme hung*.

Reciting a mantra is like putting on a suite of armor against your own habits of negativity and reactivity.

Thank you so much for joining me today where we talked about inner pilgrimage. We explored how inner pilgrimage refers to our practices of communication through speech, listening, and relating to others. We discussed the attitude to be cultivated on a pilgrimage and practices of listening to our experience below the level of the thinking mind. We also explored methods of being in communication with others and with ourselves.

I hope you will join me next week when 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 heartmind. I hope to see you then.