

Lama Elizabeth Monson  
*Pilgrimage Unbound*  
Week Two: “Outer Pilgrimage”  
December 8, 2019



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

Last week, we explored what a pilgrimage is and its purpose. We also discussed the characteristics of a pilgrim and the possibility of bringing the view of the sacred into our everyday experience. Today, I will talk about the notion of *outer* pilgrimage—our relationships to our bodies, places and spaces, as well as how to recognize that this body and every place we encounter are sacred.

Let’s begin with discussing the pilgrim’s relationship to body.

A significant component of pilgrimage practice has to do with the relationships between our bodies and the places in which we find ourselves. Pilgrimage is very much a physical, somatic, and embodied practice. This body is the vehicle within which we travel and it is always in relationship to the places we are in.

Our bodies are constantly exchanging energy with the environment and places we encounter. Even modern physics espouses the view that, on the subtlest level, we are no more than energy and space. In this sense, we are intimately connected with any physical space or place where we may find ourselves through our physical bodies.

Almost any traditional pilgrimage is enacted via the vehicle of this human body, and very often that enactment can be extremely physically challenging. Think of such well-known pilgrimages as the Camino de Santiago, where pilgrims walk a total of about five hundred miles over 30-35 days, or the Tibetan Buddhism pilgrimage to Mt. Kailash, where Tibetans can sometimes spend years prostrating to the sacred mountain and around it.

When I lived in Bhutan, I went on a pilgrimage to a place called Aja Ney in central Bhutan. *Ah* refers to the sacred syllable *ah*, which symbolizes openness, energy, and expansion. It is the point of stillness, of emptiness itself. *Rjya* means ‘hundreds’ or ‘thousands.’ *Gnas*, as we talked about last week, means ‘sacred place.’

The story of Aja Ney goes back to the 7th century, when the great siddha Guru Rinpoche and his consort, Yeshe Tsogyal, arrived in this valley and practiced meditation together in a cave on the banks of a river. When they departed, it was discovered that they had each left an imprint of their

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bodies in the stone. Everywhere, inside and outside of the cave, were thousands of self-arising *ah* syllables.

The pilgrimage to Aja Ney required a tremendous amount of physical exertion. Two days of trekking through dense Himalayan mountain jungle at 9,000 feet eventually brought us to the ney.

But before we were allowed to visit the innermost sanctum, the cave with the thousands of *ah*'s, our group was required to circumambulate three *khors*—circular paths that moved in concentric circles inward to the heart of the ney.

Each of these *khors* required 10 - 12 hours to complete and involved hiking, climbing, and clambering, hand over hand, up and down cliffs and hills, sometimes worming on our bellies through mud in underground caves and passageways, and practicing in numerous sacred sites along the way.

I was vividly aware of just how intimately and powerfully my body was involved in every aspect of the journey, not only because I was often sore, wet, cold, and bruised, but because the very nature of encountering the ney demanded such a high level of physical exertion. As a result of this experience, I became more and more aware of the physically embodied nature of pilgrimage practice.

Even when we are not required to exert ourselves physically to such an extreme, we are always in relationship to our bodies. In fact, it is worth saying that this human body is amazing—and that we often forget to appreciate the remarkable reality of being a body. The joy of living vividly through our senses and opening ourselves to the full experience of being alive. In the words of the poet Rumi: “Just being sentient and in a body with the sun coming up is a state of rapture.”

Another helpful characteristic of this body is that the body is always in the present. When we pay attention to our bodily sensations—as happens naturally on a pilgrimage—we are automatically drawn to the here and now. After all, we can't feel our aching knees yesterday and we can't feel them tomorrow. We can only experience our physical sensations right now. This body as natural anchor for being in the present moment.

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In this sense, outer pilgrimage can be experienced as a practice of coming into wholeness with the body; of discovering the power of directly inhabiting the body and its myriads of sensations. When we live out of touch and at a distance from our bodies, it is a recipe for fractured living. But if we can practice relating to the body as if we were on a pilgrimage, we discover a means by which we can begin to rebalance our relationship to this sacred body, alive, vital, and continuously present.

You may wonder what is the purpose of exposing our bodies to such extreme physical experiences? The purpose is purification.

Outer pilgrimage also includes the notion of body purification

Today, modern psychology describes how the body functions as storehouse for our physical and emotional experience. Everything we think or do and all our emotional experiences, both positive and negative, are stored in the body, in both its coarse and more subtler levels.

The idea of outer pilgrimage is that freedom lies not in what is stored in the body from the past but in how we respond to whatever emotional, physical, or psychological experiences arise through the body in any given moment.

Because pilgrimage almost always includes this powerfully challenging physical component, where the body is pushed to its limits, old patterns, traumas, thoughts, and emotions can emerge. How we relate to these experiences can either liberate us or further entrap us.

Even when we are not on a traditional pilgrimage, simply being embodied can be a challenging experience. We all encounter times of powerful physical, emotional, and psychological discomfort and suffering.

However, usually when unpleasant sensations arise we have a strong tendency to get caught up in emotions and stories about them. This is also true when pleasant sensations arise; our minds are drawn into fantasy or planning and we lose our awareness.

Pilgrimage forces the pilgrim to stay present in the body regardless of whatever challenges arise, physical or emotional. Staying present with whatever manifests and maintaining awareness can naturally release the negative charge that physical experience may engender.



In this way, the purification of body on pilgrimage happens organically, as part of the process of the journey. When it does, pilgrims may experience a profound sense of release, relaxation and freedom from previously painful situations.

The great 13th century Tibetan saint Longchenpa focused on the fact that we are embodied consciousness. One of his most famous lines states that great wisdom is held in the body. Practicing outer pilgrimage asks us to trust that this body possesses a way of knowing—an innate wisdom—that is present in our more animalistic and primordial, rather than cerebral, way of being.

When we trust this kind of non-conceptual knowing, we may find it is easier to shed the concepts and ideas that keep us bound and trapped in old habits, patterns, and fixations. As we discover a felt sense of "awareness of the body in the body," our attention drops down into our actual physical experience rather than being suspended in our views and concepts about the body. These views, emotions and concepts are naturally purified and released.

The practice of outer pilgrimage demands that we inhabit our bodies. The very physical nature of the pilgrimage journey gives us no choice. But the fact is that we are always in a very physical relationship to our world, we are always embodied, and by taking up the relationship with the body that outer pilgrimage describes, we can discover how powerfully this body can work to transform us.

Having discussed the pilgrim's relationship to body, I'd like to speak now about the pilgrim's relationship to places and spaces. Sacredness is often understood to be inherent in spaces or places—for example, religious places like chapels, churches, or cathedrals or natural sacred spaces such as Stonehenge or Taktsang in Bhutan are considered to be imbued with spiritual energy and blessing. Alternatively, places may be made sacred by the people who spend time in them and the actions and events that occur there.

Whether a space is commonly understood as sacred or not, we are always affected by the places in which we find ourselves—not just physically, but emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually.

For example, as I described earlier, on my pilgrimage to Aja Ney, I was constantly confronted by the raw, elemental power of the place. There was nowhere to go for warmth or comfort nor was there any way to buffer myself from such a visceral engagement with the place, with the mud and trees, the rocks and cliffs, or the constantly changing weather.



All of these manifestations were considered to be imbued with power and blessings and my only choice was to surrender to the immediacy of the experience. The juxtaposition of the raw elements and their associated sacrality clearly demonstrated a lack of separateness between “mundane” and “sacred.”

We might describe this phenomena through the notion of immanence. The notion of immanence means that the divine is encompassed and manifested in the material world and in this physical form. This is in contrast with the notion of transcendence where the sacred is seen to be outside or separate from the material world.

The idea of outer pilgrimage is that in every place we find ourselves, we can learn to pay attention to the indwelling of the sacred in places, spaces, and bodies. Remember that “sacred” here just means the places and this body *as it is*, in their natural state, regardless of what we may think about them.

Though the notion of outer pilgrimage, we can notice when we are genuinely embodied and connected with our sensory experience and when we are distracted, caught up in a discursive and conceptual interface with ourselves and others.

Learning to relate with openness to bodies (our own and others) and places, we can live our lives in the moment, open to the power and sanity that arise when we are in direct relationship with our experience. If we can remain radically present to life’s direct expressions, the manifestation of things as they are, we discover the sacred everywhere—in our homes, on the subway, at school or work, in our backyards and in the natural world.

Culturally, many of us have learned to separate the sacred (our special, spiritual world) from the mundane (our ordinary, daily routines of work, etc.). We leave home to “go on retreat.” We may have a special spot in the house for our meditation practice, a shrine room or altar. Grossly or subtly, we make a break between our spiritual activity and life and our mundane, ‘go-to-the-grocery-store’ daily reality.

But here, outer pilgrimage is a practice of being in the world—of being in direct relationship, unmediated by thought, to our bodies, the bodies of others, and to places.

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Thank you for joining me today where we explored the notion of outer pilgrimage. We discussed how outer pilgrimage refers to the kinds of relationships that we have with our bodies and the places we find ourselves. We discussed how cultivating a direct experience with this body and any place can reveal the presence and power of the sacred in our embodied experience.

I hope you will join me next week when we will continue our journey by exploring the notion of inner pilgrimage, our practices of communication through speech, listening, and relating to others.