

Discovering the Jewel of Who We Really Are

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Okay. So on my mind this last week has been some Buddhist allegories, some stories that are meant to be interpreted correctly. They come from the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, the East Asian Buddhist tradition, from a very large East Asian Buddhist scripture called the *Lotus Sūtra*. And I'd like to tell you these allegories, these stories. And as I said, they're meant to be interpreted. I think in the original text, there's a particular context for the interpretation. So we can ignore that, but rather ask what interpretation would be useful for us to have.

One of the interesting approaches to Dharma teachings, Dharma stories, is to listen to them from the point of view of how they're beneficial for you. Because if you discover how they're beneficial for you, then you'll benefit from them. Some people are very strongly oriented to find what is wrong, and to have opinions of, that doesn't work, this is bad, this is wrong, this is the wrong thing to do. And that has its place in life. I don't want to discount the value of that at all. But it can be overdone, and it can be in the Dharma situation, where we're trying to actually benefit and become a better person and improve and practice something.

Sometimes it's actually better to consider, how is this teaching useful? How is this story useful? How can I understand it so I can develop, I can grow, I can, you know, support myself in my practice? And leave the critiques of it for another time. And so even if it's like, well, that's a crazy story. There's no way that that's going to be a good story. This is completely a disaster. Right?

And boy, I'm going to write a letter to the president of IMC. I mean, that may be useful, important, maybe. We'll see. But maybe, well, if I think about it deeply, this is never going to be a useful story, except maybe if in that kind of situation, maybe then it's useful. Maybe I should remember that story then. So then you have some use for it. Maybe that situation happens and you're ready with your little story. So that's the preface to these stories.

So the two stories. So the first one from the *Lotus Sūtra* is a story of a man who is hanging out with his friend. And I think one of them was going off on a trip. Maybe both of them were going off on a trip. And they're having a nice time together, drinking, getting drunk before they go off. And one of them gets so drunk he falls asleep, and deeply asleep. But the other one, while the first one is asleep, goes and finds a very precious, very expensive jewel and sews it into the travel coat of the one who's sleeping drunk.

I think the story is important about the drunk part. And so in the morning, the person who's really drunk still sleeps while the other one has to start on his travels, and he goes off. And then the one who wakes up later goes off on his travels. And the second one, with a jewel that he doesn't know about, it's sewed into his coat, travels around and ends up traveling all over, ends up being in poverty, destitute, has a very hard time, is not always, you know, in his right mind because of hunger and poverty, and just wanders around for a long time. And after some maybe 20 years, happens to kind of stumble back, maybe almost accidentally, at his hometown where his friend is there.

And this friend sees him, and they're happy to see each other. And the friend is kind of, the one who didn't go traveling that long for 20 years, is kind of surprised to see his friend kind of all in rags and emaciated and poor and just kind of stumbling along. And says to him, well, don't you know, didn't you realize that you had this jewel in your coat and that that was enough for you to live well for the rest of your life? He said, no, I didn't know. I was ignorant of having this jewel. And so that's the first story.

So this story of wandering around impoverished, not knowing that we have a jewel somewhere in our inner lining, maybe, that would make us quite wealthy and be well for the rest of our life. Maybe not financially well, but maybe spiritually well. Maybe psychologically well, maybe some other way.

So the second story, about a father and a son. Some people compare it to the story of the prodigal son, I think in Luke, in the Gospels. And in this story, the man grows up, has a father, but I guess when he becomes of age, he decides to go traveling, heads off for himself. And his father, too, just kind of also goes off to some other town, city. And this time, the traveling son has the same experience of poverty, destitute, struggles, hunger. He's mostly able to get a few menial jobs, working hard for people and hardly making any money or hardly getting any food.

But in this case, the traveling son, living this kind of life, kind of forgets who he is, does this for 50 years. And in the meantime, his father has moved to a new city and done really well for himself, has become really wealthy, phenomenally wealthy, has a huge estate, huge beautiful

gardens and stables and lots of people working for him. But he misses his son. He's been looking for his son. He missed his son. He thinks about his son a lot, but for 50 years he hasn't seen his son.

Well, one day the son, in his stumbling along in the world, stumbles into that town, that city, and walks by the estate of his father, and looks at it. He's kind of amazed by how wealthy it is, looks at it from a distance, and thinks that has nothing to do with him. He is actually kind of frightened of it because people like him, being so poor and destitute, are often not treated well by such people. But the father sees that his son clearly, recognizes his son. And he sends some of his attendants to go and find his son and bring him home. But when these servants or attendants come with all their wealthy servant clothes on, the son gets really frightened because what he thinks is, he's either going to be captured and enslaved for menial work or he's going to be killed. So he runs off.

So the father understands that his son is frightened of this whole thing and doesn't know who he is, doesn't recognize his father. So he comes up with a plan. He gets some servant dressed really shabbily, maybe the superintendent of the stables, and wears rags and goes out and finds the son and says, oh, you know, we need someone like you to come and do some difficult work. We need someone to come and, you know, shovel the manure in the stable. And is that something you know how to do? We can pay you a little bit if you can come, and there's a place on the edge of the property where you can live while you do this job, and you're welcome to build a little hut there.

So he's not treating him like he's special, kind of according to how his son has come to think of himself. So he feels lucky to be given a job with anything at all, and so he's quite happy to go and shovel the manure. And so he does this for some time. And after a while, the father puts on some shabby clothes and goes out there and shovel shit with him. And so they get to know each other a little bit.

And so the father then invites him to come and, you know, why don't you come? You can come. I have other work for you. Why don't you come work in the garden now? And so the son, okay. And the son, and we'll give you a raise. And the son goes into the garden, gets a raise, maybe gets nicer clothes to put on, and works in the garden for a while. And then gets promoted to be the head gardener. And things go well.

So this is a 20-year process. And slowly then they trust each other and become connected, the father and the son. The son still doesn't know it's his father. And then he invites his son to come into the household and work there as a close assistant and eventually become his accountant and his treasurer and run the estate and be responsible for everything. And after

a while, the son knows everything. He's able to handle everything. He knows and is trusted and trusts the father. And they have a good relationship.

And then at some point, by this time, the father must be really old. And so the father, he's getting close to dying, invites the local king and important people in the community to come. He has an important announcement to make. And everyone comes together, and his son now is like his main assistant, a main person, so he's there, of course he's going to be there. And he announces to everyone that in fact his son, this man who's this, you know, senior assistant or whatever, is actually his son. And he forgot who he was. And now when he's dying, he's going to inherit it all. And that's the happy ending of the story.

So here's a story of someone who's impoverished. And if we apply it to ourselves, are there some of us who feel impoverished, spiritually, emotionally, psychologically? Impoverished. And is there something about seeing who we really are that's frightening? Not a few people get a glimpse of what it's like to be free, psychologically, spiritually, emotionally free, to let go of certain attachments, to show up for what's difficult in life. That is really frightening, really almost unacceptably challenging.

To realize we have to let go of something to really be free, some people run away. I'll die if I do that. My world that I know of won't exist anymore. So some people are so frightened they run away from their own freedom, from their own spirit beauty, their own inner treasures, a treasure house that they have inside.

And in both these stories, the idea is that there's something very special about who we are. There's a treasure, there's a jewel, there's a state of being that is present for us, available for us, but that we don't know. We don't know it. In the first one, the guy gets the jewel, he just takes it out of his lining and he knows he has it. That's like kind of an instant enlightenment kind of thing.

And the second one, and this is why this story touches me, and why it's evocative for me, I've been thinking about it, is that it was a slow process of trust, of growing, of cultivating, learning, learning how to do the heavy, difficult work of dealing with our shit. Some of you, maybe it's a little bit nicer, maybe you'll call it manure, something, but you know, or the dirt or something. Sometimes we have to do that. We have to work with it. And some of us have a legacy of challenges that we have to really come to terms with and work with. And it's difficult work. It's painful work.

And there's maybe no circumventing that. Sometimes the very reason why those things are there is what makes it frightening to look beyond it. And then at some point, maybe finished,

you know, dealing with the shit, then they're ready for something else. Maybe it's learning skills, learning to garden. Maybe it's developing yourself in certain capacities that we have, but we never develop them. Certain strengths, certain capacities for attention.

For a gardener, I think one of those capacities is care. I like to think when I was a gardener in the monastery, it was such a wonderful job for me that I kind of did not the best job I could because I would spend the first half an hour every day going around and just kind of like communing with the plants, just checking in. I felt so parental, just looking at them, how they doing, and we were like quite close. So I could have done a better job, I think. It didn't work. There was not half an hour, but maybe the plants liked me, that I came and thought, oh, you know, cared for them. Who knows.

And so this developing in care, developing in compassion, developing in relationships with other people. And then the accounting part, he became the accountant of his father and the treasurer, learning how to count, learning how to really understand what's there, understand what the treasures are, to be able to track them and know them and develop beautiful qualities, the joy, the happiness, the peace, these beautiful aspects of being a human being as well. And to really know how to track them and be responsible for them and develop them further is part of the task.

So as we develop and grow, maybe there's some kind of understanding there of letting go, some kind of understanding of trusting this life, some kind of understanding of being willing to show up and really be fully present as we are, without apology, without trying to hide something, without doubting ourselves, without feeling insecure or inadequate. There's something about letting go deeply into something about being a human being that feels like a treasure, feels like a wealth. It feels like that we're complete or that we're full or happy or liberated in a wonderful way. And we've let go of all the things that interfere with having that deep sense of peace with who we are.

Who we are is not just enough, who we are is a treasure. And who would have believed it, that we are a treasure, that we're beautiful, we have something profound. But, of course, hearing that is not going to be the message some people will be willing to take. They might be willing to say, yes, there's really important work to be done. We understand that you suffer. We understand that you're afraid. We understand that you're angry. We understand that you're hurt.

And there's things we can do that support that, that help you kind of work through that. And there's simple mindfulness and simple meditation and, you know, simple conversations with a teacher or a friend, you know, if you learn how to have those conversations and really be-

gin understanding this side of yourself. And it might be that there's unresolved feelings and emotions that need to come to the surface. And it can feel awful. It can feel like this is unfortunate. This is just more of the, this is kind of the dealing with what's in the stables that we have to do. Maybe it's been in the stables for a long time.

And then maybe there's also cultivating and developing ourselves. It's been quite marvelous to see here at IMC, or being a teacher, to watch people over the years and watch their growth, watch how they change and transform, and their faces, their stance, their posture, their speech, their capacity to be present, their eyes. It's really something, you know, to watch slowly, slowly, slowly change, and to look back, to be able to compare from when I first met someone to where they are now. And some people I've seen grow and develop as volunteers. Some people have ended up in leadership roles at IMC, and they'd never had any leadership roles before, and I could watch them grow in certain capacity in relationship to other people and confidence in themselves. That became really important for when they sat down on the cushion to sit with themselves, to sit with that confidence.

So there's all these things that, you know, developing slowly and growing, and not just working with the unresolved issues, but actually developing and growing as a human being that's important, maturing. And at some point, we're mature enough, developed enough, we're grown enough, we have enough sense of well-being, enough confidence and trust, not in the so-called father, but in ourselves. That's where it is that we're beginning to, oh, it's okay. I think it's okay to let go now. I don't have to hold on to that security. I don't have to hold on to that identity. Maybe there's another identity that's better.

And so the story of this son who didn't know that he was the son, his identity was one of being an impoverished, unwanted person. And he couldn't just let go of that. That does not work. But he had to grow into the time where he could see his true identity as the son of a wealthy family. So we also sometimes have this way.

So those are the two stories. And perhaps I did a disservice by offering an interpretation for them. But I maybe get away with it because of the role I have here as a kind of Buddhist teacher and to offer kind of a Buddhist interpretation. But now it's your turn. Do you have any interpretations, different ones, that would be beneficial for you? Later, when we finish, you can come up with your reservations. Wait a minute, this is like terrible. Let me tell you why. Let's wait until afterwards. You can come up personally and talk to me about that. But for now, are there beneficial interpretations? What was meaningful for you in these stories? Or do you have any questions, clarifications? Anything you'd like.

So since Alex regularly asks first, I saw two hands go up together at the same time. And then

we'll do Alex. A little bit like Alex. Okay. Is this enough like a rock star? Okay, good. Excellent.

The second story hit me that the father met the son where he was. And I think often we sometimes don't meet them where they are, or anyone. We don't meet them where they are. We try to continuously pull them up or pull them down. But we're always trying to pull them instead of just showing up with them, being with them where they are, and then allowing them to move at the speed that works for them.

Yeah. That really... Thank you. Yes, very true. And since the story has to do with fathers and sons, what you're saying, what triggered in my mind was, when my son was quite young, I had all kinds of worries about him, and wanted him to be better, and manage with things. And it was really important that I, we had these play dates and all kinds of, I started meeting other kids the same age and I started seeing my son was very age appropriate. And so my job was at certain times to, okay, Gil, relax, just meet him where he is, let him be who he is. He's part of a process of growing up. I couldn't believe they were ever going to grow up. And so I had to accept him for where he was.

Agreed. I have an 18-year-old, and meeting him where he is right now has been difficult for me, and I just hit it. I feel really excited about allowing him to fly free.

I think, yes, you know, when some of them become teenagers, sometimes it becomes almost impossible except by biting your tongue. You know, there are challenges. And I was so surprised when my kids went off to college. And then I saw them, went to visit them, and like, they would talk to me. Well, this is different.

So, maybe Alex, in the front? Oh.

Just a quick 10-second thing, if I may. My brother-in-law has a phrase, that everyone in their own way and in their own time, and that's really important to me and kind of relates to what we're talking about.

Hi, Gil. The first story about the jewel reminded me about this research paper I read from a Harvard professor last week. And he was saying that, you know, I don't want to say that meditation is a panacea, but actually it's kind of the closest we can get to panacea. And that kind of reminded me that when I started, I don't know, maybe 10 years ago, I was thinking the same thing and I was very enthusiastic and like, oh yeah, meditation can fix everything. So it kind of brought me back to that thing. So I want to ask you, do you think meditation is panacea?

You have to try to get it right. What is your definition of panacea?

He explained it. I don't remember. Like, he had actually, like, they did some sort of study of the brain and how, like, it all works. And they were saying, like, as far as they know now, that's, like, the closest. If it's not panacea, that's the closest it can get.

Good. So my understanding of panacea means a cure for everything. Yes. Something like that?

That's correct, yes.

Well, I don't think we should see meditation as the cure for everything. I don't think that's good. But I've certainly heard, when I was in Burma, I heard in Thailand, my Buddhist teachers there were always ready to say it was good for all kinds of things. I mean, they loved telling dramatic stories of people who got sick and had cancer or this and that. Yeah. So, you know, it sounded like what it was. But I think we have to be very careful with it.

But I'd say two things in relationship to that. I think generally mindfulness and meditation is not necessarily a cure for things, but is a tremendous support for things. So it might not fix things, but it can make things better. And one way it can be better has to do with this stupid story, maybe. I'll say it that way so that you forgive me.

There was this executive, great executive, and he did a lot of wonderful work for the company, and the company was successful. But he had one problem, that when he stood in front of big crowds to give speeches, he would get so nervous, he'd pee in his pants. So this was a problem for the company. The board had to meet. And so they suggested, we'll pay for therapy and, you know, and you have to go see a doctor and try to help you with this issue because this doesn't work. And so he did that for quite a while. And he came back and said, yeah, that's good now. Thank you for the therapy. It works really well.

And they said, oh, tell us. You stopped peeing when you were in front? No, now I don't care.

So, mindfulness can always be good. But the second is that... I'm not finished. You can sit down. Is that meditation, I don't know if it's a panacea, but it's a really great placebo. And the more we speak it up as a placebo, the better it is as a placebo. And I say that with respect for placebos. We're learning that things, even when people are told that it's a placebo, it seems to help.

And so it's hard. The whole psychology, the whole inner life, what affects it, what works on it, is something we have a lot of respect for and care. It's kind of sacred, the whole inner mental life, how it works. And we have to be very careful and wise about it. So I'd rather not say it's a placebo or a panacea. I would like to actually try to meet the specificity of a situation, the specific conditions, the specific circumstance, and see now how can mindfulness, how can

meditation support this? And maybe we'll find our way. But to make the blanket statements, kind of a little bit, at least in principle as we're talking, I'm reluctant to do. I'm probably guilty of it, but...

Talking about placebo, I learned recently that there's also nocebo, and it also has a scientifically proven negative result. So if you think that's a black mold there, but it's not, still 15% more people will get a negative effect of thinking. So that relates to you.

But now I'm going to look at that spot later.

No, I'm trying to relate it to your original remark. The first remark that you made, like, try to find positive instead of negative. So that finding negative, it's not innocent. It actually does have scientifically, again, negative results.

Great. I think that's an important point.

What resonated for me in the first story was that wherever the traveler went, the jewel was there, whether the traveler knew it or not. And in the second story, the father reminded me of the Buddha crafting or pitching his message to the need of the people he was talking to.

So in the classic story, in the *Lotus Sūtra*, that's one of the messages. And it's called *Skillful Means*. In the *Lotus Sūtra*, it's a little different than our tradition, but it's the idea that it's being crafted for what the need is.

It's getting kind of cold in here with the air conditioner. Yeah, suddenly, but we can maybe turn that... I think you turn it, the whole outside rim, you turn it clockwise. Yeah, just turn it clockwise. Yeah, it's just that it's blowing on some of us. Anybody know how a Nest works? I think you have to tap it once and then... You can also turn off the fan. Okay. Well, let's see what happens. It's 59 and 77. Okay, let's see. Okay.

So, anything else right now? Yes, please. Where's the mic? It's right here. Oh, you're waiting. Yes.

Real quick. It struck me that in both stories, there was no one to kind of force the idea on either party that there was anything to see. In other words, the jewel, he didn't point out the jewel itself. He didn't force him to try to see it, to know he had it. And the same with the other story. It wasn't as if the father was trying to impose this vision of what he saw that he wanted him to see. And that resonated for me.

Nice, nice. There was no... It was really a personal process, and it could take a long time. Very nice. And so, if you're willing to answer my question, how is that interpretation, which I appreciate, how is that beneficial for you? How does that fit for you?

Patience, and also recognizing that I really can't be that useful to point it out to somebody else.

Yeah. Great. Thank you. So, oh yes, and then maybe move it here because Kelly's been waiting, but maybe, maybe, go ahead. Take the blue mic and move it and you can, Anne.

Hi. I was touched by the second story because the father took plenty of time to approach the son and to have the son go through his difficulties. I feel it. I've had to accept recently, last fall, I had someone who was important in my life who passed on, and then I talked to someone else, and he said, yeah, it's like when you're in grief, it's like you're trying to move, but you're moving through water. And I'm just coming to accept this is going to take some time. That was, you know, especially talking to this person, by chance, somebody I knew I ran into on the street and we started talking. The thing about trying to move through water. So I was touched by the second story that the father, he couldn't, you know, the guy had stuff to go through.

Yes. Yeah. I think it's very important. Thank you. So it applies in all kinds of situations that as a human being, things are in process. We can't expect to kind of force some of these issues, and so grief is one of them. We have to go through it. Yeah, thank you.

I saw the second story. At first I saw it as a relationship, the father and the son.

A little bit louder, Mark, please. Go ahead.

I first saw the second story as a relationship between the father and son, but then I thought about it as a relationship between the self, and I saw the father and the son as one, and it's your relationship with yourself going through the process.

Yeah, yeah. I think that's my favorite way of interpreting it, the relationship to yourself. Yes. Yeah. So, so... Part of the value of stories like this is if you keep thinking about them, keep reflecting on them and living with them and seeing, not that there's a fixed answer or a right answer, but rather there are new answers that come along.

And given that this is one of the, you know, scriptures of a whole wing of Buddhism, one of the key scriptures, and this story is kind of key to this, apparently it's considered very important for a large segment of the human population, this story. So it's nice you know it now, to know this Buddhist story. But maybe it's worth revisiting from time to time. What's your jewel that's in your lining? And what identity do you have that limits you? And what are you growing into? Do you have a feeling or a sense or intuition that's in your life, that's growing into a truer identity, a truer way of being?

So, yes?

It's a story about me and a jewel here at IMC. So years ago, I used to help with the tea, and the person who was doing it with me would say, would you like to make the announcement? And I'd say, oh no, I don't want to talk into the microphone. And then some years ago, as you know, Inez Freeman said, well, Martha, I think you could be the Sunday manager. I thought, me? Me? And so she saw the jewel.

Wow. And then after you started becoming a manager, I think it was, at some point you did our chaplaincy program. Maybe that prepared you for being a chaplain? So.

Maybe so.

Wow. It keeps growing. So may you all grow. Thank you.