Climbing the Mountain, Following the Footprints

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Introduction

Good evening. Welcome. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Diana Clark. I'm happy to be here. I just got back, having been away for a few weeks. I taught a retreat in Santa Fe, and then I took this opportunity of being away to go to Rocky Mountain National Park, which is fantastic. Some of you might know that they have this road that goes up to 11,700 ft. This is a road you can just drive up there. To put that in perspective, that's higher than most of our mountains here in Tahoe in the Sierras. You can then walk just another 300 feet or something, huffing and puffing the whole way. And then there's this amazing view, right? You can see 360 degrees. It's just really breathtaking, actually, to be up there.

This reminds me of a simile that the Buddha gives about going up a mountain. It's a story of two friends, and they both walk towards the foot of the mountain. One of them climbs all the way to the top. When they're at the top, there's this beautiful view, of course. This is partly why humans like to go up mountains, right? For this change in view. Then the person at the bottom of the mountain asks, "So, what is it like up there at the top?" I'm often wondering, "Wait, how are they talking when one's at the top and one's at the bottom?" But, you know, this is a story, so this isn't clear. I don't know how this works. The person at the bottom is saying, "So, what is it like up there at the top?" And the person on the top is saying, "It's magnificent. There's this view. I can see lakes and groves of trees and ponds and meadows. It's really amazing."

And the person at the bottom says, "No, that's impossible. You can't see all that because I can't see all that, and I'm near where you were, and it's not here."

Then the person at the top says, "No, no, no. It's true," and goes down the mountain. Takes the hand of the person that was at the bottom and says, "Come on, let's go up together. I'll show you." They go up together, and then the person that was formerly at the bottom says, "Oh, you were right. It's magnificent up here. There's this incredible view. Now I see you were right all along." Or maybe they could say it was only the mountain that blocked my view. I just couldn't see from where I was.

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In some ways, we could say that this is kind of like a human story. We hear some people say, "Yeah, this path of practice, there'll be greater freedom, there'll be greater ease, there'll be fantastic views—meadows, groves of trees, parks." I mean, of course, you don't need practice to go see that; you can just go to Wunderlich County Park or something like this, or up the street

not too far from here, Edgewood County Park. But there's this way in which people might say something is possible, but from where we are standing, we think, "Yeah, I don't think so." But it's only because of where we're standing.

I like that so much, that this simile is about the one person that's up at the top having a different view; they can see something different. We can play around with this meaning of the word "see" or "view." To see something differently, or maybe it's to see the same things differently. They look different. Or maybe this idea of "view," right? We have views. We have opinions. We have ideas. We have notions about how things should be or how I am as a person—"I" being all of us, how we are as individuals, or what's possible for me, what I can do, what I can't do. But at the top of the mountain, the view is different.

Or maybe a third way we could think about this word "see" or "view" is there's this way in which a lot of us say, "Oh, I see," as a way to indicate we have this new understanding. And so, in all these different ways, this is how this path of practice changes things. Things look different, our views change, and there are different understandings.

But of course, if we're at the bottom of the mountain, we have to get ourselves up to the top. And the Buddha, he describes himself as one that's coming down the mountain and taking our hand and saying, "Okay, here, I'll show you. I'll show you." But it doesn't require the Buddha. Just in case you're—we're fresh out of Buddhas these days. Actually, I don't know that. Maybe there is one that I don't know about.

So there's this way in which this story is about, okay, maybe there's this "trust and verify." Like, "Okay, I believe my friend is telling me that there's something great up there on the top of the mountain, but I'm going to go look for myself. I'm not just going to believe it. I trust my friend. I mean, we are friends, so I don't think that my friend is going to lie to me, but I'm not going to just rely on what somebody is telling me. I'm going to go check it out for myself."

So, there's this way in which we often need confirmation. Of course, we do. Because practice is not always easy. It's not always fun. And so, if we have some of our own experiences, this is what's needed to kind of help us along this path of practice.

And maybe there's this same way in which climbing a mountain takes effort and takes patience. The Buddha offered another simile. It's about a tracker, somebody who is given instructions by the king to go find an elephant. "I need another elephant. Go find one." So this tracker has to go into the forest and find an elephant.

In this simile that the Buddha provides, they first see this large elephant footprint when they go into the forest, and they think, "Oh, okay. This is promising, but it's not proof." Because the king wanted a bull elephant, a male elephant, that are bigger. And they thought, "Okay, an elephant footprint. This might be a she-elephant. This might be a female elephant. I don't know if it's

quite the bull one." But as the tracker goes deeper into the forest, they start to see broken branches that are kind of up high, markings on the tree where the elephant was putting their tusk against the tree, and seeing more footprints. And still, they don't assume, "Oh yeah, okay, guaranteed that this is a bull elephant coming up." They just keep on following the signs until they actually see the bull elephant. "Oh, okay. Yep. Here's one." Now, how this tracker gets this elephant out to see the king is a whole other part of the story.

One thing I'll say about elephants is in ancient India, elephants were the most powerful thing known to humankind. Elephants are giant, right? And they are so powerful. So, it's pointing to something that is able to be transformative, to make big changes. Elephants can rip out trees or they can move big, heavy things that nobody else could. If you think in ancient India, they are by far the most powerful and have the potential to make the biggest difference, let's say.

And I mean, even today, elephants, there's something about them that's endearing, I would say. I've confessed that sometimes I like to watch kitten videos, but baby elephants also. Oh my gosh, they're so adorable and playful, and how the maternal elephants come and take care of them. The other day I saw this little video where the baby was, I guess, still kind of learning to walk and just stumbled, and then it went running back to its mom and was hiding under it. It was just so sweet. So sweet. So there's something about them even today, right? They're not the strongest or most powerful things that we know, but just something about their size, their majesty, the way that they take care of one another. I don't know anybody that hates elephants. There is something about them, right, that is just very sweet. I don't know if sweet is the right word. They also have this majesty about them, you know, something kind of regal.

So, I'd like to talk tonight a little bit about this path up the mountain or this path following these elephant footprints into the forest where we can see different things. On the mountain, you see a different view, and in the forest, following these paths, you see an elephant—something that's really transformative and powerful and we might say regal and also maybe endearing.

This is a little bit about this "gradual training," this expression that we find in the suttas.[1] This idea that things don't just happen all at once. I think that I'd like to have more peace and freedom, think about it, and then poof, it's done. That'd be great, right? But you would not be here if that were the case. You would be out there having already imagined a wonderful life. You would be out living a wonderful life. But there's this way in which we recognize that, oh yeah, so practice takes some persistence. It takes some patience. It takes some effort.

The Buddha's simile about this tracker following the signs into the forest is not only about elephants in the forest; it's also, we could say, a picture of our practice. How we go a little distance, we see a sign that supports us, and we go a little bit further. We see a sign, and that supports us, and we go a little bit further. And in this case, these are supports for mindfulness.

We come here and we just do mindfulness practice, right? We sit silently for 30 minutes. I don't actually know what you guys are doing, what's going on in your minds for that time. But there's a way in which we can think if you just come here and sit and listen to Dharma talks that it's only about mindfulness or that mindfulness is really what it's primarily about. But there are other steps that are a support for mindfulness and a support for our practice, and I'd like to talk about this a little bit.

So, I could say the first step is some trust. Some trust that it's worthwhile. Some trust like, "Okay, this is something that's a direction I want to go." Whether in the simile you're going up the mountain or in the simile you're going in the forest trying to find the elephant. There's this way in which we need something to have this idea that, "Okay, this is the direction I'm going to go, not these other directions, but this direction," even before we've gone very far. Just this sense that we want to go a particular direction. We could say this is a type of trust that what your friend is telling you up at the top of the mountain is the way to go, for example. Other words could be some confidence or faith. These three words—trust, confidence, faith—are a way to start on this journey.

Something that I appreciate so much about this practice is that it's not that faith is like this blind belief. "Here, we'll give you a bunch of information or some doctrine, and just believe this and you're good to go." Instead, it's very different, right? It's about all of us finding our own way, having our own experiences. So, faith doesn't give us the whole picture. It's not the whole path. It's just enough to get us started on the path. And this is where it begins. We could say we have this all the time. We trust a friend's recommendation for which dentist to go to or which therapist to see, or which meditation class. Sometimes people are talking, "Oh, I heard this other meditation center," or something like this. Or maybe it's just signing up for your first retreat, having a little bit of faith or trust. You don't know exactly what's going to happen, but you've heard other people talk about it. "Okay, I guess I'm going to go." This certainly was the case for me. Somebody that I didn't know so well, I kind of knew from the yoga class I was attending. I found myself with some free time, and this person said, "Oh, you should go on a meditation retreat." And I thought, "Well, I meditate for five minutes at the end of yoga class in Savasana.[2] I know how to meditate. This will be a piece of cake." Yeah, it was very different than what I expected. But it ended up changing my life too.

So faith is what gets us moving. We might say it's like being given the hand at the base of the mountain, or maybe it's like seeing the first footprint of an elephant when you've been tasked to go find an elephant. It's just the beginning.

Then what unfolds next, as the Buddha describes, is this commitment or this orientation towards living a life of non-harming. Even before talking about meditation is this living of a life of not harming others and not harming ourselves. This seems obvious, but there can be ways in

which we harm ourselves. We're doing things that aren't helpful. We're doing things that are maybe even a little bit harmful, and we find ourselves keeping on doing them, thinking that, "Okay, well, this will make me feel better. I'm just going to do it." An example is some of the ways in which media and the internet kind of just suck us in, and we find ourselves doomscrolling, or we find ourselves letting one video after the next play, or on Netflix watching movie after movie or whatever it is. I'm not saying that media is terrible and we shouldn't do it, but there's a way in which our relationship with our phones or the way that we're always seeking this constant entertainment or stimulation can just not help us have our best life.

So that's one way in which this commitment to non-harming is maybe to look at our media use and ask if it is supporting the life that we want to live. But the Buddha also talked about, and many of you will be familiar with this, these five precepts, these five behaviors in the world that make a difference: to refrain from killing. It seems obvious, but it extends to even the little winged creatures or little creepy crawly creatures. It also includes to not say anything that isn't true, or to not speak in a way that is divisive, or to speak in a way that is gossiping—to talk about a third person who isn't there. That also includes to not harm others or harm ourselves with our sexuality. Not because we're prudes, but just to recognize that sex is really powerful and tender, and it's a place in which there can be a lot of harm. So for us to be sensitive and for it to be filled in a way which isn't harmful to ourselves or to others. And then the fourth is to not take that which is not freely offered. So that's a little bit higher bar than not stealing. This is about just noticing what's offered and what isn't. And then the fifth is not to intoxicate ourselves, just because it leads to heedlessness. Meditation practice is about bringing some clarity and simplicity to our lives, and this doesn't usually happen when we find ourselves intoxicated. We find ourselves making decisions that we later regret, harming others, harming ourselves, etc.

So the Buddha recommended this as a way to really practice, to bring some integrity to our lives, partly because of what he talks about as the bliss of blamelessness. This not having anything to hide, to feel like, "Okay, I'm living my life the best that I can." It doesn't mean that we're perfect, and it doesn't mean that something absolutely terrible is going to happen if we break one of those precepts. It's just saying that if you want to live your best life, here are some guidelines. Here's something that's really going to be a support: these precepts and not causing harm.

So just choosing maybe not to pass along gossip, or choosing instead small acts of kindness in whatever way those become available to you or you notice or you think of. Because there's this way when our actions line up with our values, there's a certain amount of ease, there's a certain amount of steadiness or relief that shows up. And we shouldn't underestimate how powerful that can be, because the more our values and our actions line up, it starts to highlight how

agitating it is to do things that don't line up with our values, that don't support the life that we want to have.

And so we could say in some ways that maybe having this bliss of blamelessness when our lives and our actions are lined up is a little bit like this tracker who's looking for this elephant seeing more signs. Maybe they're seeing that there are some of the branches that are broken up high, tall, that only an elephant would break. They thought, "Oh, okay, an elephant's been through here." In some ways, we could say that experiencing this bliss of blamelessness is another indicator that we're on the right path.

So, a third thing. We had this faith, this confidence or trust to begin; this orienting our lives so that what's important to us and our behaviors line up, and the Buddha recommended these precepts. And the third is to intentionally cultivate some contentment. We're accustomed to thinking, "Okay, I'm just going to wait to be content until I have everything that I want, until all the ducks are in a row." We're often waiting, "Okay, I'm going to be content until I finally have engineered, manufactured, manipulated my environment in such a way that I'm only experiencing what I want to experience." But instead, the Buddha is pointing to, "Can you have some ease with simplicity, with not having absolutely everything exactly like you want?" For example, can it be okay that the temperature sometimes here in the summer has this little arctic effect as the air conditioner goes straight from those vents to individuals that are sitting right here? There's a little different microclimate underneath the stage, I'll say, just for those of you who are sensitive to this.

Is there a way in which we can just simplify our lives? Maybe in the way that the Buddha talks about, like a bird that only has its wings. And it's true, right? So many animals, they just have what they have. But maybe we might think of it as—I thought of this having coming back from this trip—maybe it's just like having carry-on luggage. Even though you're going for a long trip, it's just carry-on luggage. Just a small amount of things. Specifically, the Buddha talked about the monastics. They have very, very few things. No need to go that extreme, but there's a way in which if we simplify our lives and have fewer belongings, learning to be satisfied with less just brings more ease into our life. Otherwise, we find ourselves always looking for more, more, more, more, and more. But is there a way like, "Oh yeah, this can be okay. This is all right." Maybe it's not exactly everything that I want. Maybe I'm not 1000% comfortable. But it's okay. Yeah, it's all right.

Don't underestimate how powerful this can be to have a certain sense of contentment, because it kind of softens this way in which we're always looking out there. We're always looking for external things to make us feel happy, to make us feel comfortable. It's exhausting. You don't even often recognize how exhausting it is until it stops. When you start to finally feel contentment, you're like, "Oh my gosh, what a relief. Nothing has to be different right now."

So that's one way in which the Buddha is also pointing to some ways to find our way through this forest, tracking this powerful elephant: to cultivate a sense of contentment. We could say that contentment also lightens our load. Not only is always looking for more exhausting, but carrying so much with us, literally or figuratively, is heavy. It weighs us down. We're less agile. Can't go and do things, try things in a certain way. When we feel like, "Oh, no, no, no. I have to have the perfect shoes that match the outfit. I can't go there because I don't have shoes to match," or something like this. I'm just making this up.

So, in addition to some contentment, the Buddha points to something else that can be a support, and that is sense restraint. This is related to contentment, this idea of not always looking out there, not always waiting to be entertained or stimulated or excited or satisfied with something out there. So this, of course, is visually, but also with our ears. Do we always have to hear that perfect thing all the time? Taste only the best food, the tastiest food. Smell... oh my gosh, right? It's amazing how everything is scented. Like even trash bags are scented. This is so bizarre. Like everything is scented. We go to the grocery store and it starts to be more and more difficult to find things that are unscented. We're like assaulted with scents, but you don't notice it just because it's happening so often.

But many of you might know that when we go on meditation retreats, it's unscented. Everybody, you can't use personal products that use scents, and you don't wash your clothes with laundry detergent that has scents because as we meditate and we start to settle down, you become much more sensitive to this. I'm often getting really sensitive, and I'm just noticing like when somebody walks by, "Oh my gosh, they're using shampoo that's really smelly," and I can tell they've gone down this hall and gone. It's quite something. It's amazing how sensitive we can get.

But there's this way also, sense restraint is just to not always be looking out there, but to be sensitive to what's happening to ourselves. A friend of mine described one way, and I thought, "Oh, this is a modern thing." If you're driving down the freeway and there's somebody that's going way below the speed limit—for me, this is something that kind of gets me. I'm like, "Hello, we're on the freeway." So this is Diana's little thing here. But my friend was telling me that one way that she practices sense restraint is that when she finally is able to pass, she doesn't look to see who the driver is. She just passes and goes, right? Because nothing good is going to happen as a consequence of you looking to see who that is. You're going to make up a story. "Oh, this person, blah, blah, blah." Just pass. Just pass and let them be whoever they are, and you don't need to all of a sudden start—there could be a little bit of ill will that shows up or something like this. Why do that to yourself? We don't need any extra ill will.

So this is one way in which sense restraint shows up. Or, you know, if somebody comes in late, to look to see, "Okay, who is it that came in late? You know, how dare they? Who is this

person?" Right? We don't need to do that because it just fills us up with a little bit of animosity or some self-righteousness. "Well, I was here on time, why can't everybody else be here on time?" Right? It just creates the conditions in which some unhelpful things arise in our mind.

There's this way in which just guarding—this is sometimes the language that's used—guarding our senses, not always seeking to be stimulated or creating the conditions in which we might have some ill will or aversion, or there might be some lust arising. If we feel like, "Oh, there's something that's really attractive," and somebody that's going to, I guess, feel like we want to slip into some fantasies that aren't so helpful for us. So there's this way of paying attention to what we're doing with our senses instead of just letting them do whatever they're going to do. Tremendous support for practice. Tremendous support.

And then the Buddha, in this simile of the elephant's footprint is what this is called, he talks about mindfulness. Like, with all these as a support, then it's so much easier to sit down and bring attention to the sensations of breathing, for example, or to the experience of sitting. What is it like for us to be sitting? The Buddha, he talks about the importance of mindfulness during sitting or walking, standing, lying down, eating, moving, using the bathroom, like everything, just being mindful, being present.

So that's a way that's different than kind of being disconnected from ourselves, being disconnected from our bodily experience and instead always looking out there for something, for distraction often. So this way of mindfulness can show up other than just sitting. Maybe just while sitting, bringing mindfulness to how you're changing your posture. You're feeling uncomfortable. That's okay. This is what happens when we sit for a while. But often we are just, without noticing or without paying attention, making adjustments to our posture. Can we just bring some mindfulness to, "Oh yeah, this feels uncomfortable. I'm going to move a little bit." It's really quite something how often we are moving, not only during meditation but throughout the day. This could be something that is a support.

And so this mindfulness, in this simile, we could say is about finally seeing the elephant. This trust, this ethical behavior, this contentment and sense restraint were all different things along the way: tusk markings, broken branches, footprints. But it's not until we actually are mindful that we can actually start to see the elephant, this thing that's so powerful, that has the potential to be something that's completely transformative.

So we come back maybe to these two similes about walking up the mountain and tracking an elephant with the elephant's footprint. The Pali word, I like to say this, is *Cūḷahatthipadopama Sutta*,[3] just the discourse of the shorter discourse of the elephant's footprint.

With the mountain, maybe we could see sometimes what blocks us is simply perspective, and we can't see what's possible. And yet we start the climb. Somebody that we trust has told us that it's worthwhile, that there's something great up there on the top, and climbing reveals it.

Maybe with the elephant's footprint, it's that at first all we have are footprints. Maybe all we have is a small indicator, a little bit of some meditation practice or noticing that some of the ethical behavior or behaving with integrity just feels good. It just feels nicer. Or to stop our always searching outside for something that's going to make us happy, it just starts to feel better. So maybe in the beginning, all we have is just a footprint when we're looking for this beautiful, majestic elephant. But then if we keep going, we do meet this elephant. That's what's transformative. It has the power to change our lives. This is the power to help us to see that we don't control things the way that we think we do. We don't control nearly as much as we think we do. We're not at the center of the universe as much as we think we are. Things are changing more than we often realize. There are all these subtle ways in which the things that we're doing are making us agitated, but we are so agitated already we don't see some of this agitation.

So seeing the elephant, being at the top of the mountain, helps us to see these things. And when the heart and the mind see this, there's this letting go that's possible, a letting go that doesn't even make sense, isn't even really conceivable when you only see the first footprint or when you're at the bottom of the mountain. But following on this path, we start to see more and more, "Oh yeah, so much is extra in my life." It's not about what material things you have; it's just about some of the things that we do, things that we believe. But it's hard to know what those are, or it's hard to just listen to somebody like me say these things are going to be different until we actually are moving on the path ourselves. They're subtle. It's not things that we can see in such an obvious way.

And so there's this way in which this training—we use this word "training"—it just unfolds gradually, naturally, and more and more things become obvious as we are walking the path.

Maybe I'll close with this idea that each footprint matters. Each little indicator or sign or something that encourages us, each step up the mountain matters. They all do. And then one day, the view changes. It opens, and there's a shift in the way in which we view ourselves and view the world.

So, two similes: one up the mountain and one into the forest following an elephant. I'll stop there and open it up to see if there are some comments or questions. Thank you.

Q&A

Questioner 1: I was interested in the sense restraint description. Just trying to make sure I'm understanding what you said. The interpretation that I got was being closer to seeing my relationship with the sense that is happening, or seeing the... you know, either no smell or

maybe too much smell, like, "Wow, I don't like that." And kind of like with the story of not looking at the person who's wearing Axe body spray because I really don't like that kind of thing. So, initially I was thinking only of the desire side, but I guess maybe it's more just in general seeing that relationship of wanting or not wanting something with what's being sensed. Is that in the right area?

Diana Clark: Yeah. So, thank you for talking about it's about our relationship, but it's also about just noticing how often we are disconnected from our actual experience—we could say mindfulness—and instead are oriented out there, wanting to be stimulated, entertained, made to feel better in some kind of way. We're so often out there. And the Buddha is pointing to, you know, things out there are unreliable and you can't count on them, but instead to be with your own experience in a way that is supportive. And this definitely is something... it's not about deprivation and it's not about living with something over us, but just our relationship, noticing how much we are looking outside of ourselves, and specifically those things that don't support our well-being or support our practice or something like that. So does that make sense?

Questioner 1: Yes. So that makes sense. Thank you.

Diana Clark: Yeah. Thank you.

Questioner 2: Related to at least two of the marks, maybe contentment and sense restraint, there's a word, a concept that I've heard a lot but seems relevant, but I've never really understood it, is like "outflows."

Diana Clark: Yeah. So the Pali word is *āsava*.[4] And it's not really used in this context, but I understand what you're saying. "No outflows." That's pointing to the taints. Often *āsava*, the same word, gets translated as inflow, outflow, taint. And that's pointing more to greed, hatred, and delusion and these types of things. But I like where you're going, though, this idea of outflows, like having everything flow out of us instead of being present with what's actually happening. So, does that make sense?

Questioner 2: Both parts were helpful.

Diana Clark: Okay, great. Okay, so thank you. Thank you for your attention, and I'm wishing you a wonderful rest of the evening and a safe drive home. Thank you.

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1. **Sutta:** A discourse or sermon of the Buddha or one of his disciples. These are collected in the Sutta Piṭaka, one of the main divisions of the Pali Canon. ↩
2. **Savasana:** (Corpse Pose) A common resting pose at the end of a yoga practice, involving lying flat on the back. ↩

3. **Cūḷahatthipadopama Sutta:** "The Shorter Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint." A discourse from the Majjhima Nikāya (MN 27) of the Pali Canon, which uses the analogy of tracking an elephant to describe the gradual path of Buddhist practice. ↩
4. **Āsava:** A Pali word that literally means "outflow" or "influx." In Buddhism, it refers to deep-seated mental pollutants, taints, or defilements that corrupt the mind. The three primary āsavas are the taint of sensual desire, the taint of existence (craving for being), and the taint of ignorance. ↩

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