The Way of the Pilgrim:

The Unfolding Path of Buddhist Chaplaincy

Final Learning Project
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Pilgrimage Introduced

As long as there have been people walking upon our earth, there has been pilgrimage. The impulse to wander, ramble and inquire is as old as humankind. Pilgrims throughout time have migrated in journeys of the heart, seeking the sacred, and the longing to understand.

Pilgrimage is widely seen as a universal quest for self, for meaning, and for a renewal of the soul. Pilgrimage has traditionally been associated with religious or devotional practice, but the form can also be cultural, literary, or deeply personal. Pilgrimage crosses virtually all human boundaries. The path of the pilgrim is the path of becoming one's own hero.

Pilgrimage can be understood as a spiritually transformative journey, as evidenced in the root of the word 'pilgrim', derived from the Latin 'per agrum', meaning 'through the fields'. This connotation implies a transformational journey to a sacred center, a soul wandering, a journey of movement.

A second Latin origin refers to a pilgrim as 'peregrine', meaning a person who wanders 'across the land'. In ancient Sanskrit, the word for 'pilgrim' was the same as that for 'chess player', again implying movement, strategy and meaning in it's derivation.

The word 'sacred' comes from the same root as 'sacrifice', meaning that in order to accomplish a truly sacred journey, one must sacrifice, or give something up. This speaks to pilgrimage as a journey of risk and renewal, where the process of awakening and transformation involves hardship, challenge and depth.

Pilgrimage involves simultaneous outer and inner journeying, where walking the path of the pilgrim, either literally or metaphorically, becomes an imprint for the parallel inner transformation. The path is seldom linear, but rather more circular or labyrinthine, where the searching can involve a shadow of difficulty and struggle.

While paying mindful attention to the path beneath our feet, the ordinary can become soulful, even sacred. The practice of pilgrimage enhances our ability to respond

from our deepest place, and to experience the Sufi notion of seeing with the eyes of the heart. It carries the embodiment of the Zen practice of seeing into one's own nature.

Pilgrimage, like art and poetry, is beyond space and time. Moved by powerful longing, we return over and over again to a mountain, a stupa, a temple, to understand our soul's yearning more deeply, with each turning of the wheel. We encounter rituals, landscapes, sacred objects, architecture and art, seeking that which evokes wonder, and that which when deeply considered, can become transformative.

Pilgrimage can be a powerful metaphor for any journey that carries deep meaning for the traveler. Deepened focus, keen preparation and mindful intention are all exquisite aspects of transformational journey, whether to a distant and remote sacred physical site, or to a place deep within the pilgrim's heart.

Pilgrimage is an archetype of human movement, a universal pattern of journeying that transforms travel into a larger framework of meaning. The pilgrim is a walker, a wanderer, a seeker, who sets out for an experience involving ritual, and a rite of passage. For the pilgrim physically able to embark, there is a powerful understanding that she is traveling a pilgrimage route not just for herself, but for others who cannot. One becomes part of an immense devotional collective, seeking personal answers to one's deepest questions, while caught up in a great universal flow of shared inquiry.

In Buddhist terms, pilgrimage is an embodiment of the unfolding path of practice, one that takes a pilgrim deeper and deeper into the stream of the dharma.
Buddhist pilgrimage is a virtual crucible of practice, a gate to the dharma that is at once difficult, exquisite, and transformative.

"Everybody has a geography itself that can be used for change. That is why we travel to far off places. Whether we know it or not, we need to renew ourselves in territories that are fresh and wild. We need to come home through the body of alien lands. For some,

these journeys of change are taken intentionally and mindfully. They are pilgrimages, occasions where Earth heals us directly. Pilgrimage has been for me, and many others, a form of inquiry into action."

Roshi Joan Halifax, *'The Fruitful Darkness'* (1)

"The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey. The inner journey is the interpolation of the meanings and signs of the outer pilgrimage. One can have one without the other. It is best to have both."

Thomas Merton, *'Mystics and Zen Masters'* (2)

A Project of Pilgrimage

'This longing you express is the return message.'

Mevlana Rumi

The human life of the historical Buddha itself unfolded as a pilgrimage. His was the life of a philosopher rambler, a teacher, an alms seeker, a pilgrim, a monk. With his followers he wandered and traveled the dusty Gangetic Plain on foot, in what is now Northern India.

In the Buddhist chaplaincy training program as envisioned at Upaya Zen Center, we are being asked to walk the path of a Buddha. As candidates in the Zen Peacemakers Order, we are being asked to walk the paths of our lives with depth and intention, engaging relationally with whomever is in front of us, and offering whatever is needed to alleviate suffering. Our stability and resource in engaging this way is the practice of the three tenets of the peacemaker… not knowing, bearing witness, and loving compassionate action.

We are also being asked to walk with the heart of a bodhisattva. The practices of actualizing the three refuges of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and of realizing the 10 grave precepts, provide moral and ethical strength in maintaining this path of the open

heart. The refuges and precepts themselves are practices that carry the form of an unfolding path, opening up as we engage with them more and more deeply.

I began to see my own life, the journeys to Upaya, and the unfolding of the chaplaincy program itself, with the perspective of pilgrimage. As I embarked upon the simultaneous paths of chaplaincy and pilgrimage, I became intrigued with their parallel form, a form requiring both inner and outer journeying, a form of spiritual walkers traveling on a path made by walking.

I became curious about the practices, Buddhist and otherwise, that created resilience, depth and authority both in myself, my cohort and the vast numbers of pilgrims who had preceded me, and who would come after. I was interested in how the practice, form and impact of pilgrimage could serve our developing chaplaincy in the path of service, where the intention is spiritual care.

In parallel to this thinking, I was also experiencing a persistent longing to travel to the place on our earth where the Buddha had lived and walked, and to literally walk in his footsteps. I trusted that my resolute longing to make such a pilgrimage made it one that authentically needed to be taken, and that there was personal truth to be discovered in that which was longed for.

My learning project then, became the choice to embark upon a year of pilgrimage. The concept was not to produce a travel journal, or to focus upon my own gratification, but rather to study and walk the path of the pilgrim as a practice of inquiry. I wanted to use the study of walking as a pilgrim as a way to explore deep practice, and the form of parallel inner and outer journeys.

The concept was one of experiential questioning, a personal phenomenological study, using my own embodied experience, and the observations of my fellow pilgrims. In addition, I wanted to embark on the most traditional, classical pilgrimage, the one cited by the Buddha himself in his last known discourse, at the same time as I was studying Buddhist chaplaincy, itself a visionary, emerging form of practice in the West.

I set out with a sense of mutual enrichment, on the parallel pilgrimages of ancient and modern practice.

The core of my embodied intention, and my deepest longing, was to walk as a pilgrim in the sacred geography of biography of the historical Buddha, to literally walk in his footsteps, as directed.

While in India, I set out on a secondary pilgrimage, to travel with my son, to be in the presence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, as he consecrated a new monastery in the Tibetean camps of the Orissa hills, and celebrated 50 years of protective exile in India. These essential pilgrimages form the basis of my embodied project, and are primarily what I write about for the purposes of this paper.

In addition, I chose three associated pilgrimages, all of which carried enormous meaning for me. Although I am only able to refer to them tangentially in the confines of this paper, they remain a critical, and extraordinary part of my experience and understanding of pilgrimage, and of the dharma.

I traveled as a pilgrim to Japan, in the exquisite company of Roshi Joan Halifax, and Sensei Kaz Tanahashi, in a pilgrimage entitled 'Arts Beyond Time'. The intention was to explore the seeds of Zen practice at it's roots, to examine the transformational nature of art, and to bear witness at the site of the catastrophic bombing of Hiroshima. I traveled as a pilgrim to Prajna, the mountain retreat of Upaya, to explore solitary wandering in deep solitude, immersed in the thin veil of the practice of a wilderness fast/vision quest, supported by the inspiration of Basho's Deep North.

I traveled as a pilgrim to Angel Fire, New Mexico, to bear witness at the first acknowledged memorial to the losses and suffering of the Vietnam War, itself a profound source of pain for my entire generation.

Throughout the year of this project, I felt a deep sense of journeying by myself, but not for myself, and became very interested in the relevance of the ancient practice of pilgrimage in our contemporary Buddhist and secular worlds.

I felt a keen sense of privilege and responsibility, and was very aware that my practice was to return with greater clarity and understanding, and to be open to whatever arose. I knew without a doubt that I was alone, but not alone.

I traveled with the question, how does the practice of pilgrimage serve our unfolding chaplaincy?

I also traveled with a curiosity about the practices embedded in pilgrimage that create depth and resilience in the pilgrim. I postulated the hypothesis that the practices that take us deeper into the refuge of the dharma on pilgrimage are the same practices that serve our developing chaplaincy, itself an actualization of the dharma.
In that vein, I set out with the open heart and intention of a pilgrim, on a path of inquiry, a path made only by walking.

Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the men of old. Seek what they sought.

Matsuo Basho

" I think pilgrimage will bring us to unfamiliar, historical, cultural, and spiritual experiences that broaden our practice of dharma."

Sensei Kaz Tanahashi, *In conversation*

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
Then walks with us silently out of the night.
These are the words we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your recall,
Go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Rainier Maria Rilke, *Go to the Limits of Your Longing* (3)

Traditional Buddhist Pilgrimage: An Unfolding Geography

"Lord, formerly monks who had spent the Rains in various places used to come to see the Tathataga, and we used to welcome them so that well-trained monks might see you and pay their respects. But with the Lord's passing, we shall no longer have the chance to do this.

Ananda, there are four places the sight of which should arouse emotion in the faithful. Which are they? " Here the Tathagata was born."is the first. Here the Tathagata attained supreme enlightenment" is the second. " Here the Tathagata set in motion the wheel of the Dharma" is the third. " Here the Tathagata attained Nirvavana element without remainder" is the fourth.

And, Ananada, the faithful monks and nuns, male and female lay followers, will visit those places. And any who die while making the pilgrimage to these shrines with a devout heart will, at the breaking up of the body after death, be reborn into a heavenly world."

Mahaparinirvana Sutra (4)

In the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, traditionally considered to be the final discourse that the historical Buddha delivered before his death, the conceptual practice of pilgrimage is directly enshrined in the biographical landscape of the Buddha's lived life.

Referring to himself as Tathagata, or Perfected One, the Buddha clearly directs his followers to seek him in the geography of his life. The four central sites he speaks of are: Lumbini, now in Nepal, where the Buddha was born; Bodh Gaya, now in Bihar, northern India, where the Buddha attained enlightenment; the Deer Park, now in modern Sarnath, near Varanasi, where the Buddha preached his first sermon, known as the turning of the wheel of the Dharma; and modern Kushinagar, where the Buddha passed away and entered his final Nirvana. These places directly map the historical Buddha's spiritual biography.

Additional sacred sites associated with the life and teachings of the Buddha became important sites of pilgrimage as well, most notably Vultures Peak, near modern Rajgir, where the Buddha delivered the discourses of the Lotus Sutra, and the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra: and Jetta's Grove near Sravasti, where the Buddha's followers established a 'vihara', or place of monastic living and teaching over many rainy seasons.

The early Buddhists were an order of wandering alms seekers. Driven by geography and the cycles of weather, movement was at the core of early Buddhism. In the landscape that is now northern India, July and August are the monsoon season, and tremendous rains make roads impassable and movement cease. The Buddha and his followers established ' rain retreats', periods of deep meditation practice and study. These included Jetta's Grove, Deer Park, and the Bamboo Grove, and set the stage for the many viharas of Buddhist civilization that ultimately came into being in northern India, most notably Nalanda University, a vast intellectual and philosophical center of Buddhist culture, philosophy and art, founded in the 5th century AD. Thousands of scholars, students and pilgrims came and went from Nalanda, wandered towards and returning, carrying the teachings of the Buddha with them.

Early Buddhist pilgrimage sites and practice also became deeply associated with relics, stupas and pillars. The Emperor Ashoka, who reigned on the Mauryan throne from about 274BC to 232BC, was a convert to Buddhism who ruled and united almost all of what is now India under Buddhist principles, and is recognized as the first known Buddhist pilgrim. His influence was extraordinary, as he combined the power and resources of royal patronage with the practice of the Buddha's teachings.

He is credited with building monuments, stupas and pillars symbolizing the Buddha's nirvana at the four central sacred pilgrimage sites, and is mythologized as taking the original eight relics of the Buddha, and spreading them in 84,000 stupas and pillars across the Buddhist world.

Ashoka fostered the tradition of erecting pillars adorned with animal capitals, the most famous of which is the lion pillar at Sarnath, an immense stone carving of four lions

facing the four directions,over the dharmachakra, which was adopted by an independent India as its state emblem, all these centuries later in 1947.

Stupas, the iconic Buddhist domed structures built of earth and stone, were built to commemorate and contain sacred relics associated with the life and teachings of the Buddha. The simplest ones still have the handprints of the devoted in their mud form, while the grandest have narratives of the Buddhas life and discourses artfully carved into elegant stone.

Buddhist pilgrims walk reverently around these stupas, in the ancient pilgrimage practice of circumambulation, while reading and contemplating the stories portrayed in the carvings. The immense carved Damakha Stupa in the Deer Park, originally erected by Ashoka to commemorate the site of the Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma, simply took my breath away.

Any site associated with the Buddha's biography historically became a site of physical pilgrimage, although for every pilgrim who has been able to journey forth, there have been countless others who have turned pilgrimage inward through acts of devotion and meditation.

From it's earliest understanding, Buddhist pilgrimage has been seen as both an inner and an outer journey, involving mind as well as body. A fascinating distinction, or perhaps expansion of pilgrimage practice, is seen in the difference between the Pali, and the Sanskrit translations of the Mahaparinirvana Sutra. In his essay, "Outward and Inward Journeys", the scholar D. Max Moerman, writes:

"Although the Scripture is unequivocal about the value of pilgrimage, however, the manner in which it is to be carried out is less clear. In the Pali version of the Sutra, the devotee is enjoined to visit the sites in person, literally to "see and be moved by" (dassaniyani samvejaniyani); but in the Sanskrit version, the sites are simply to be " recollected' (anusmaraniya). Thus, one edition of the text defines pilgrimage to the sacred sites of Buddhist India as a physical process, whereas the other sees it as a mental act,

cognitive rather than ambulatory. This seemingly minor difference in vocabulary was to have profound implications for Buddhist practice." (5)

Buddhism was transmitted from India across the Asian continent via a network of overland and maritime trade routes, such as the Silk Road, traveled by monks and by pilgrims. Buddhist pilgrimage practices began to spread and diversify as shaped by the cultures in which they emerged.

'The Path' is the most common image of Buddhist practice itself, and although the historical Buddha had set out internal and external practices for his followers, the individual content of practices developed in a range of cultural frameworks.

Pilgrims have always been drawn to places of rich spiritual power, despite physical hardship and distance, or perhaps because of it. Physical distances at the time were large, and often impossible, and aspects of pilgrimage to India ultimately evolved to become practices of a devoted imagination as well as of a physical actuality. Art and imagery began to play an increasing role in the practice of Buddhist pilgrimage.

The Buddha was initially depicted symbolically as a pair of footprints, or as an empty throne. His image transformed into human form to facilitate, and offer a focus for meditative practice, often displaying the 32 marks of a great being.

In addition to a human form, the Buddha was also made present through objects and images of contemplation and practice. The absent Buddha was made present by an extraordinarily rich vocabulary of cultural art, including paintings, sculptures, texts and carvings, meant to facilitate the interior journey. Mandalas, the iconic geometric paintings intended to symbolize the universe, were contemplated.

Pilgrims themselves would carry devotional objects of art; the amulets and prayer wheels of the Tibetans, the lacquered ritual cabinets of the Japanese, the gold leaf of the Thais. Maps and textual accounts of revered early pilgrims to India would be poured over, and studied, most notably Fa-hsien and Hsuan-tsang from China. The exquisitely written personal accounts of the wandering Japanese poet-pilgrim Basho have themselves become objects of reverence.

Buddhist imagery has often depicted likenesses of landscape, and of the natural world such as mountains and rivers, as a representation of devotional movement, and as a visible support to seeking the sacred.

A remarkable range of Buddhist pilgrimage practices and mythology have arisen with profound richness and cultural depth, over 26 centuries, depending on where Buddhism was flourishing. Iconic journeys, such as the pilgrimage to the 88 holy places of Shikoku in Japan, and the soul stirring, ferocious circumambulation of the towering Mount Kailas in Tibet, have become known far beyond their cultural borders.

Pilgrimage remains deeply embedded in the practices of Buddhism, and in the practice of the dharma. It remains challenging, difficult and important.
Practicing any aspect of the dharma carries the act and intention of taking refuge.

Contemporary Buddhist pilgrimage offers the possibility of deep intentional journeying in seeking the sacred and the transformational, in the historical, cultural, and spiritual ground of the Buddha. It also offers the extraordinary opportunity to truly follow The Path, both literal and metaphorical, the path that is made by walking, by one's own effort, and by one's own practice.

The resolve is that one will return different than when one set out. The road, the path, becomes the Way, the way of the pilgrim, and the home of the pilgrim becomes the journey itself.

"Buddist pilgrimage serves to ground us, literally in those places associated with the origins of our tradition. It connects us to the sources of what we value in a largely non-conceptual way, allowing us to bear witness to the environments in which the Buddha, or one of his followers, taught.

I find great inspiration in beholding and dwelling with the descendents of those trees, birds, and plants that such a figure would have been accompanied by when delivering his/her insights."

Stephen Batchelor, *In conversation*

The Way of the Pilgrim

The way is not in the sky. The way is in the heart.

Buddha

The way of the pilgrim is a way of seeing, seeking, listening and being. It is a way of the spirit, where the task at hand is to understand for ourselves what is truly sacred, and to be open to the possibilities of renewal, depth and transformation. The way of the pilgrim is an unfolding path.

Something in us responds to a deep longing, something calls us to a travel we must take. With a trusted sense of knowing, something arises within us with an urgency that we cannot turn away from. A question, either clear or still forming, implores to be answered. The longing holds a deep sense of inquiry, and becomes our unique preparation to embark. Peeling off the layers of the onion of our daily routines, we embark on a journey across space and time to access our own understanding of the sacred.

The awakened sacred has the power to change lives, and at this time in our history more people are traveling as pilgrims in journeys of their own spiritual exploration, than at any time since the Middle Ages. Straight roads and meandering paths take millions of people towards something that they consider sacred.

This remarkable human force has been made possible by modern methods of travel, that now make difficult, and previously impossible distances accessible. However, the deep longing, and the intention of seeking and of inquiry, remain unchanged through innumerable generations of seekers of the soul.

The way of the pilgrim carries the form of ritual. Ritual is traditionally shaped by the consecutive arc of separation, threshold and return.

In the context of ritual, the separation aspect of pilgrimage contains the longing, the preparation, and the embarkation. Talismans are gathered, rucksacks packed, maps are consulted, plans are made. One strives to take everything that is needed, and nothing that is not.

A useful question on embarking on pilgrimage, whether it is halfway around our world, or just around a proverbial corner is….

How can I lighten my burden on this journey?

The way of the pilgrim is walking. Buddhist pilgrimage is inexorably linked to walking, to the walking of the historical Buddha himself. Walking is the pace at which our bodies were meant to move, and is a physical activity that naturally supports spiritual exploration, and the inner and outer aspects of pilgrimage. Walking puts us in touch with our heartbeat, and with our breath. Our Zen practice of zazen teaches us to anchor ourselves in the breath, and to rest upon the breath. This too, we can do while walking.

Slowing our pace can facilitate the measured breathing of one step, one breath, that supports mindful walking meditation, or kinhin, in the Zen tradition. Mindful walking, combined with the intention of mindful breathing, as taught so beautifully by the Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hahn, becomes an embodied practice that enhances prayer and allows for a spaciousness of the heart and mind. He teaches the beautiful, and deceptively simple practice of 'peace in every step', where, as one places each foot in careful and full contact with our earth, we embody peace and interconnectedness. Not placing impatience, distraction or anger on our earth, but rather placing peace underfoot, between ourselves and the ground that we are covering, changes the process of walking into a practice of embodied prayer.

Passing through landscape, we are able to attend to detail, see beauty, and stay in the moment of movement and experience, all of which enrich the pilgrim's sense of openness and inquiry. Exploring the world on foot, becomes a practice of exploring the

mind. Walking upon the earth connects us to the wisdom of the earth, a deep mutuality that we come to experience through a purposeful act of the body.

Accelerating our walking pace can move us over landscape with a sense of focus and purpose. And walking at a measured pace, we can just keep going, longer than the distracted mind thinks we can. We can walk across plains, as did the historical Buddha, and we can walk around mountains with the beautiful, complex practice of circum-ambulation, as perfected in the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

As pilgrims, we continue to move, we endure. However difficult and arduous the journey, we know how to keep walking. Moving towards and through the threshold of our pilgrimage, we continue to walk. Struggling through challenge and sacrifice, we continue to walk. Even when no longer able to physically move, we carry the body's deep memory and understanding of walking, and in our hearts and minds, we continue to walk.

The way of the pilgrim is exquisitely embodied in the artful meanderings and poetic accounts of the 17th century Japanese poet pilgrim, Matsuo Basho. Basho was a wandering poet, whose pilgrimage was a journey that embodied the essential practices of Zen, where the path itself was the goal, and was a metaphor for the life he chose. His deep motivation was the attainment of an inner state, or enlightenment, where the walking reflected both the inner and outer pilgrimage.

His evocative written account, "Narrow Road to the Interior", also translated as "Narrow Road to the Deep North", is a masterpiece of prose and Haiku poetry which describes his encounters on the road, which are synonymous with his states of mind. Ultimately in Mahayana Buddhism, pilgrimage became a symbol for the spiritual path itself, and the elegant poetic image of ' Deep North', stands as an enduring Zen symbol of the richness and deep simplicity of the experience of pilgrimage.

The way of the pilgrim carries the archetype of generations of humans moving toward the spiritual. The pilgrim embarks with a sense of profound spiritual aloneness, only to discover a universal stream of spirit and devotion. Obstacles and barriers erupt on the journey, and the essence of pilgrimage is to respond with openness and possibility,

where one draws resilience from those who have gone before, those who are walking alongside, and those who are yet to come.

Pilgrimage takes us deeply into an understanding of humility and mutuality, where we recognize that we are not walking alone, and that our construct of separate identity is truly an illusion. In the journey toward this understanding, this journey of restoration, rejuvenation, and renewal, we become pilgrims walking resolutely toward the depth of what we already know, the depth of our own Buddha natures.

The way of the pilgrim is the way of the unfolding path, and for Buddhists the central image and idea of spiritual practice is the path. During several dharma talks, and innumerable personal discussions with Stephen Batchelor during our shared pilgrimage In the Footsteps of the Buddha in India, he spoke eloquently of the cultivation of the path of Buddhist practice.

Paraphrasing what he taught me, walking the path of Buddhist practice is empirically grounded in the Buddha's core teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the Eight Fold Path. The path is not a mythical experience, but rather a visionary way of living relationally. It is rooted in the two imperatives of Buddhist practice, wisdom and love.

The path offers a contemplative and spiritual practice, where one turns one's attention inwardly to the body and breath, and then outwardly to our sensory and relational world. It offers an ethical embodied relationship to ourselves and to others. In a metaphor paralleling pilgrimage, we ' enter the stream', which is the Eight Fold Path, which is the fourth Noble Truth. Entering the path, the stream, the teachings, the Dharma, our cultivation of the path takes us deeper and deeper into our own understanding and actualization of the Dharma.

Anytime we are practicing any aspect of the Dharma, we are taking refuge and we are practicing the path, the way. Buddhist pilgrimage offers us a profound tool of depth and resilience in cultivating the path, cultivating the way, offering layers of taking refuge in the Three Treasures, and of giving form to a quality of deep stillness, even as one is walking.

The way of the pilgrim is the way of the seeker. The seeker embarks with a curiosity of the spiritual and the sacred, taking an inner and outer journey towards discovery, service and love. A pilgrim learns, in the depths of struggle, and in the process of not turning away, one's own answers to the ultimate questions of the heart. These intimate personal searchings, which touch the universal, allow one to return with a greater depth and understanding of compassionate interconnectedness and service.

The pilgrim comes to understand essence, pared down practice, staying with what is important, and releasing what is unnecessary. Along the path, one comes to understand what gets in the way of deep and loving mutuality.

The way of the pilgrim supports deep Buddhist practice, and provides a literal and metaphorical form for deep connection to ourselves and others, in a process of fully seeing, listening, and holding the truth of suffering, and the truth of joy, sacrifice, and overcoming.

The Buddhist pilgrim understands walking through and over every inner and outer landscape, continuing under all circumstances, with a heightened sense of bodhicitta, and the company of the Dharma.

The way of the pilgrim is the way of the Buddha.
The way of the pilgrim is continuous practice.
The way of the pilgrim is the way of the bodhisattva.
The way of the pilgrim is the way of the peacemaker.
The way of the pilgrim is an unfolding path toward a deeper understanding of the path of service to others, one manifestation of which is the unfolding path of the Buddhist chaplain.

Where would you go if you had no feet?

Zen koan

Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha:
India, January 2010

Pilgrims gathering, we met in the center of the teeming northern Indian city of New Delhi, at the tender site of the assassination of modern India's spiritual and cultural hero Mahatma Gandhi. A poignant beginning, we walked in Gandhi's last footsteps, now immortalized in concrete, leading from his aesthetic whitewashed study, through his simple garden, to where he was stricken en route to prayer.

My heart already rubbed raw from several weeks of personal pilgrimage and backpacking through the exquisite and terrible beauty that is India, I could only bow in gassho to this extraordinary man, whose ideals so paralleled those of Siddhartha Gautama.

The great gift of India is awareness, and my eyes, burning in the polluted air, were already wide open. Over the previous few weeks of traveling with my 25 year old son Alexander, himself a pilgrim, I had learned to bow to everyone, to recognize everyone's humanity, to not take the first price for anything, and to see that what appears like utter chaos does function for those who understand. I had become used to the dull heartache deep in my sternum, and had taken to wearing dark glasses to lessen the longing in people's eyes. I had also fallen in love with the startling beauty and precious kindness that is India.

Alexander and I had already walked and walked. We had walked through the boulder strewn desert heat of the ancient Hindu city of Hampi, the immense and cultured City of Victory, ruling all of 15th century southern India.

We had walked the steamy beaches of Goa, the oppressive slums of New Delhi, the crumbling processional Raj gardens of Bangalore, the seething train platforms of Hospet.

All of this leading to our shared personal pilgrimage into the tribal hills of Orissa, a site of a now collapsed ancient Buddhist civilization, to be present at the consecration of a new Tibetan monastery by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, at the Tibetan Camp Number 5.

We embarked from the tiny poverty driven coastal village of Gopalpur-by-Sea in the murky darkness well before dawn. I had become accustomed to the shadow over my shoulder of our thin uniformed armed guard, carrying an automatic rifle. I tried not to think of our guide's reference to Maoist terrorist activity in the area, or of the reported local cases of malaria, reminding myself that pilgrimage is about challenge and overcoming.

We drove for three hours, through villages, rice fields, growing hills and beginning jungle. Our skilled hired driver wove through the landscape with as much security as feasible. India is already fully alive well before the rising dawn, washing, cycling, working, street and gutter campfires crackling in the morning haze, shapes of huddled people cooking, gleaning warmth and company, the night rest from labor. The movement for survival never stops.

Buses already jammed, faces at every window, some on cell phones. The light rises on a sense of ancientness, of how life has been, and will continue to be in this place on our earth.

But what is disturbing now is the plastic sludge, the garbage piles of what now has no use, in a culture that has always been able to use, and reuse everything. The animals, the cows and the dogs, stand and feed in these noxious piles, those who are hungry but cannot choose.

Moving through the endless, collapsing hovels of corrugated steel, cemented over brick and plastic sheets, it is difficult to tell which ones are inhabited, though any shelter would be used. Unmitigated, staggering suffering and humanity, overlaid with extraordinary beauty…our Western parameters simply do not apply.

I sit in zazen, eyes seeing clearly, and determinedly not turning away…. the pilgrimage practice of the art of attention and seeing. It is easier when one catches an eye, and a smile is returned, and I have yet to not have a smile returned. How can one truly bear witness to all of this?

Nearing Chandagiri, the light now up, the jungle falls away, and entering a clearing, we look up against the highest hill to see immense golden turrets shimmering above the pristine white walls of the brand new Tibetan monastery of Rigon Thupten Mindolling.

Surrendering our passports and visas, we secure our passes and begin walking again, through the Tibetan Camp Number 5, now a thriving community of several generations, laden with prayer flags, incense burners, raised wooden crates of maize, healthy animals, and signs of the industry and prosperity of carpet weaving.

There is a palpable sense of joy and anticipation, as HHDL is here to consecrate and celebrate the existence of the new monastery, teach the monks, ordain the abbot, speak directly to his people, lead the chants, and offer continuity, presence, hope and future. He is also here to thank India for 50 years of shelter in exile.

Every surface, corniface and pillar of the temple and the temple grounds is laden with garlands of flowers. Ropes and ropes of marigolds, zinnias, chrysanthemums, and roses are looped from the walls, the stairs and the doors in yellows, reds and golds. An enormous canopy tent is spread from the stairs of the temple, wide striped canvas in the Tibetan colors of red and orange, of red and yellow, held up with thick bamboo poles. The floor is covered in a rainbow of carpets and blankets, places for the entire Tibetan population to sit together, shielded from the sun.

Welcomed, we sit amongst them, a commandingly beautiful people, at every age, all dressed for the occasion, the women in an infinite variety of patterned Chinese silk, in the form of the traditional wrapped dress. Some of the elderly, the generation who fled, are in deep red wools and sashes, the ancient clothing of mountain people.

All around us are malas, prayer wheels and the triple bowing of prostrations. Such beauty… .the pilgrimage practice of renewing yourself every day. My son exudes a joyful ease, covered as he is by giggling Tibetan children, and the eyes of their delighted parents.

HHDL began to speak in his native language to his hushed elated people, his massed, gathered pilgrims. Our radios were not strong enough to pick up an English signal translation, instead we simply listened deeply to his communication beyond words.

His deep, sonorous, vibrating throat chanting was of, and through the bodies of us all. A visceral offering, a visceral choral response, an embodiment of the spirit without separateness, we let it wash over us, rattling and playing the body in thanks…the pilgrimage practice of gratitude and praise singing.

Knowing that this was not my place to weep, I sang our Upaya metta chant over and over. A giving and a receiving, the way of the pilgrim is to accept what is offered.

We stayed, we rested, we were held in loving generosity, and were fed a glorious celebratory meal in the flow of fellow pilgrims. This is why we came. We knew, but we did not know.

The palpable resonance of a spirit and culture, of a people united in exile, in the tender presence of the impoverished Indian tribal people, who have protected this precious man, HHDL, for 50 years. For this day at least, joy prevailed.

Now returned to New Delhi, Alexander journeyed on to Thailand, and I met up with the spirit of Gandhi, and my pilgrim companions heading north to the Gangetic Plain, setting out towards the sacred geography of the footsteps of the Buddha.

The important traditional Buddhist pilgrimage sites, those associated with the biography of the Buddha's life, and commemorated by the Emperor Ashoka, are now located in the north Indian states of Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh.

The historical path of the Buddhist pilgrim now unfolds in an area of India that is stricken with poverty, misery and a terrible beauty. Desperate need and lawlessness prevail, relentless begging continues at every turn, with layers of humanity on the ground, one body more awfully distorted than the next, bands of performing children, a gauntlet of entrepreneurial misery.

There is an uncompromising physical intimacy of the body in India that challenges one's ability to stay with the strength of equanimity, and not be overwhelmed by the softness of compassion.

The way of the pilgrim is the way of continuous practice, the way of the bodhisattva, and walking in India constantly challenges this way with a demanding, bottomless determination. It also teaches you with profound understanding, that this way of compassionate mutuality is the only possible way to continue.

I had become beautifully taken with the sudden exquisite beauty of India, the startling colors of fuchsia, saffron, cobalt and gold, a stunning woman, birdsong, a beautiful child, the wisdom in an old woman's eyes.

I was treated with such kindness and generosity by so many, the women smiling at my silver hair, pointing to the black streak, as all women of all castes in India blacken their hair. Women offering me their own jewelry, concerned that I was wearing none. Men constantly lifting off my backpack to carry it, concerned that I should not be. Such love.

The culture of modern India, met with great acceptance, was both a deep support, and a disconnect, from walking the path of the contemporary pilgrim. There were times on that unseasonably cold northern plain, wrapped in all that I had brought in my backpack, huddled against the suffering, and holding it all in my aching chest, that I just stood immobile, with an enveloping fatigue. Such love.

I had the great good fortune of traveling in the footsteps of the Buddha with two remarkable guides and teachers of the Dharma, themselves both active and advanced pilgrims.

Shantum Seth, a pilgrimage guide, and a dharma teacher in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hahn, shared his elegant home in New Delhi, and the grace of his love of his native India with us.

In his evenness, and his love of the Dharma, he walked on as a pilgrim, not turning away from either the complex sadness or inexplicable joy of India. He modeled

our own continuous inquiry, and our own evolution as pilgrims. Gracious and generous, denying nothing, we walked alongside.

Stephen Batchelor, a scholar and teacher of the Dharma, who continues his own unique exploration of the life of the historical Buddha, described his own continuing pilgrimages as "earthing my practice', a wonderful phrase, illuminating what it means to walk this unfolding path in this sacred geography of the Buddhas biography.

SB's Dharma talks, and readings, given at each of the main Buddhist pilgrimage sites rolled extraordinary depth into the experience, the pilgrimage practice of reading sacred texts. SB spoke of Siddhartha Gautama as a man who had lived out a remarkable life, the unfolding life of a pilgrim. A visionary man, who nonetheless addressed all of the ordinariness and complexity of a human life lived over 80 years, 26 centuries ago.
SB's teaching voice became a fine companion, walking alongside.

We set out in our 'Buddha bus', some 20 odd of the finest seekers, with SS and SB guiding us, my husband and fellow practitioner, Joost, and I the sole Canadians, my dear friend Claudia a fellow seeker. We set out to walk the scale of the plain, the rice fields, the river banks, the mustard fields, the dirt paths still leading through sustainable villages, the roads now leading through the impossible slums of cities.

We felt the footsteps, the birds, the old trees, the immense bamboo trunks cracking and groaning in the wind. It took little imagination to feel the presence of the Buddha's followers moving through this landscape 2600 years ago.

"What is it about two weeks on a bus? Why do I feel so changed?"… the questions of a British fellow pilgrim.

The way of the pilgrim is a deep, hard questioning of the essence of one's human experience. It requires transparency, courage and an openness to true transformation. One learns as a pilgrim however, that transformative experience cannot be called up at will, but rather happens without warning in the companionship of an open heart and mind.

The Dharma is a wonderful companion on the path, and it is one that I have, and continue to trust, but I was not prepared for the depth of experience evoked by walking where the Buddha walked, by sitting where the Buddha sat, and by listening where the Buddha had spoken.

My practice was indeed 'earthed'.

An embarrassment of riches, I will pinpoint only some of the highlights of the traditional pilgrimage sites taken from the clear direction of the Buddha's final discourse, as well as two secondary sites that took my breath away.

My intention was to both be with, and observe, my own experiences, and to explore the practices of pilgrimage which support an 'earthing' of practice, and a deepening understanding of the Dharma.

Bodh Gaya

Wrapped in layered pashminas, wearing everything I brought in my backpack, I am lying in an icy bed in the simple and welcoming Daijokyo guesthouse attached to the Japanese temple in Bodh Gaya. I am grateful for a few nights in the pared down familiarity of Zen.

Waking up, now near the site of the Buddha's awakening, I hear a full wild chorus of birdsong, and dogs barking in urgent succession, answering the jackals who move closer to the town at night. A knock on my door brings two small Indian men, and a tray of sweet steaming chai. India is full of such gestures of kindness.

Out on the streets, the days in Bodh Gaya proceed with a cultural and entrepreneurial mayhem. Layers of seekers, sellers, hawkers, beggars and touts compete for a place, a rupee, an experience. The streets are narrow, chaotic, and lined with temples from every practicing Buddhist culture in our world. The scale of devotion and industry is staggering. All of the streets and the movement eventually converge on the central site of Buddhist pilgrimage, the reason why everyone is here, the Mahabodhi

Temple, the revered site of the Buddha's enlightenment while meditating under the Bodhi tree.

Entering the gates, I am swept into a river of devotion of thousands of pilgrims lost in prayer, meditation and practice. Despite the masses, a quiet discipline and patience prevails. Where had they come from? How far had they walked?

We are a massive devotional collective, all engaged in the pilgrimage practice of meandering to the center of things.

The collective carries a deep focus, a sense of heart pounding presence and joy. In the light of early dusk, the towering temple is bathed in the beginning glow of butter lamps. In amongst the stupas, the full enclosure is carpeted with the saffron, white and garnet robes of the Tibetans. Prostration boards, butter sculptures and prayers scarves cover every corner. The temple, its walls and its carved enclosures, are draped in garlands of saffron and garnet marigolds, laden with offerings of lotus flowers, and covered in gold leaf, all brought by pilgrims.

There is a constant hum of deep flowing chanting, recitation of scriptures, shuffling feet by the hundreds, the movements of prostrations, fluttering malas and prayer wheels.

There is a place for everyone here, and pilgrims from Thailand, Burma, Japan, Tibet, the West, from virtually every culture where Buddhism now thrives, all gather here to celebrate the origins of their practice.

The extraordinary thing is that despite all of this devotional movement, or perhaps because of it, the site still emanates a deep calm. Caught in the stream of circumambulation, and holding my own stillness, I turn the corner around the carved stone enclosure, to see the Diamond Seat, almost obscured by sheets of white prayer shawls. The now timeless message of awakening virtually radiates from the core of that ancient stone. One can only bow in silence.

And looking up, the heart stopping grace of the wide, gnarled, opening arms of the Bodhi Tree. The Ficus Religiosa is a gorgeous, mature shade tree. Its crown reflects a

subtle silver light, and like the aspen and the alder, carries a constant, intrinsic, fluttering vibration. The individual leaves are shaped like hearts, and like tears, with long tapering tendrils, all of which move and shudder together in simultaneous joy and sadness.

I find my place under the enveloping branches of this tree. Supported by profound silence amid the chaos, and deep stillness amongst the movement, I sit in zazen, with a full awareness of the reverance of 26 centuries of pilgrimage and of continuing practice.

Looking up into the moving hearts and tears, I think of the extraordinary impact of this visionary man, this man who became the Buddha, sitting under this tree. As Buddhist practice and pilgrimage is inexorably linked to walking, it is also linked to trees. As Buddhas all, we are implored to find our own awakening, our own tree.
The understanding that every soul, has the potential of freedom through awakening is the gift of the Dharma, and is the great resolve that radiates from Bodh Gaya.

The Deer Park

The Deer Park remains a peaceful and open space, the deer now in an enclosure, the gentle landscape now dominated by the grandeur of the Dhamekh Stupa, sending forth it's message of the Dharma in carved sandstone.

I approached this looming stupa, marking the site of the First Sermon, the Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma, surrounded by a stream of Ladahki women pilgrims.

Dressed in faded woolen shawls, kerchiefs and leggings, their long braids tied together by string, they were all chanting mantras,and moving prayer malas quickly through their weathered fingers.

They gestured my joining them, and again I was so deeply touched by the devotional effort, challenge, and overcoming of so many of the pilgrims I have practiced alongside, what it takes for them to get here.

Circumambulating the stupa , caught up in, and supported by this stream of devotion, I join their voices by singing our Upaya metta chant over and over, practicing the pilgrimage art of gratitude and praise singing.

The Ladahkis bow, and smile and nod, as do I, both in timeless friendship, and in gratitude for being floated on the stream of such prayer.

Sitting on the grass in zazen, the stupa in full sight, I hear the voice of Stephen Batchelor, speaking of the powerful and classical text of the First Sermon. Practicing the pilgrimage arts of listening deeply, and of reading sacred texts, I am suddenly so aware that this earth beneath me, and this air around me heard these original teachings right here.

I think of the four Noble Truths, which SB describes as four tasks, and think of the sublime poignancy of the task of fully knowing dukkha, of fully opening to the extraordinary tenderness, beauty and pain of life, of fully knowing the truth of suffering and of joy.

The potential of this remarkable teaching is that it takes us out of our individual illusional selves, and into the great shared stream of experience of dukkha in our world. No separation.

I sit in the Deer Park, knowing that I have entered the stream, and that the stream is the unfolding path.

Vulture Peak / Gridhakuta Hill

Walking up the wide, bricked, steep path, with an armed guard still oddly visible over our shoulders, Shantum Seth reminded me that the Buddha was especially fond of the beautiful Vulture Peak as a setting for his teachings, for retreat, and particularly for his meditations at sunset.

We pass shallow caves made of fallen boulders, now covered in gold gilt, lit candles and prayer shawls.

Nearing the top of the volcanic peak, the landscape is draped in a multitude of courageously placed, crisscrossed Tibetan prayer flags, their Buddhist colors decorating

every stump, crag and outcropping, their 'windhorses' blowing in the steady wind, carrying prayer around the world from this sacred mountaintop retreat.
The peak vibrates with the energy of the Dharma.

I recall Joanna Macy saying that Vulture Peak was 'an appropriate pulpit for so uncompromising a gospel.' One is exquisitely aware that the 'Perfection of Wisdom Sutra,' the Prajnaparamita Sutra, the bedrock of our Mahayana practice was first delivered here.

Overcome with humility, I settled in zazen against an ancient stone outcropping, facing the setting sun, and looking out upon a lush deep valley with a view largely unchanged since the Buddha's time.

The steady cool wind, the mountain air, the clarity of an open view, the agelessness of a setting sun… all familiar to me, all deep connectors to generations of fellow seekers.
Somehow Siddhartha Gautama the man seems the most alive for me here in his essential humanity, both sitting down and rising up from this beloved mountain seat of his, and now of mine.

'Gate, gate, paragate'…turning away, chanting, and beginning walking down the mountain with an awareness of 'peace in every step', I understand beyond knowing, that the way of the pilgrim is the way of the peacemaker.

Jetavana Grove

Jeta's Grove, a wide expanse of park, mature trees, and the archaeological ruins of the viharas where the Buddha spent at least 24 rainy seasons meditating and teaching, still maintains a quality of ease and serenity.

Immense bamboo trunks bend and crack in the wind, overlooking a favorite walking meditation site of the Buddha. The ruins of the modest house where he is said to have lived, carry a lovely humility, and human scale. The mind easily slides back 2600 years.

Sitting in meditation with a British fellow pilgrim, we faced the setting sun as the full moon rose behind our backs. The radiance of the full moon's light silhouetted the gnarled old bodhi tree in the darkening sky, turned the bamboo silver, and turned the candle lights left by pilgrims a deeper gold.

My fellow pilgrim and I fell into a unified measured step of walking meditation, kinhin practice, with a profound sense of so many who have walked before us. Depth, ease, and the richness of the timeless full moonlight surrounded us, friends on the path. The way of the pilgrim is the way of renewing yourself every day.

Kushinagar

Marking the site of the Buddha's death in Kushinagar is the Nirvana Temple, appearing unimposing from the exterior, the path up to it so ordinary. The plainness of the building makes even more startling the scale of the Parinirvana Buddha within.

An immense monolithic sandstone carving of the 'lying down' Buddha, from the 5th century, is now fully and radiantly golden from the innumerable, collective gold leaf offerings that are the practice of the Thai pilgrims. The huge reclining golden face, the enormous golden feet, are gently draped in offerings of silk, incense and flowers.

The mood in the small, cramped temple is reverent and peaceful. We sit in silence, with the essential humanity and lifetime of the Buddha, and with the great matter of life and death. The deep knowing of impermanence is palpable.

We are being asked to walk the path, with the bodhisattva resolve of practicing as a response to the dukkha of the world.

The way of the pilgrim is walking on, in continuous practice, continuing under all circumstances.

Recalling the pilgrimage practice of reading sacred texts, I remember Stephen Batchelor's quoting of the final words of the Buddha, from the Mahaparanirvana Sutra…

"Walk on. Conditioned things break down. Tread the path with care."

In the end, I fell deeply in love with India, and the process of bearing witness to such exquisite beauty and such staggering suffering is changing.

One stands with a heart opening and breaking at the same time. In the midst of such complex contradictions and wonders, the omnipresence of divinity and spirit seems to eclipse everything. In a culture that carries 33 million gods, there always appears to be light, and spiritual possibility, despite the evident misery.

What does it mean to be a Buddhist chaplaincy candidate in a culture whose language has no word for chaplain?

In India, one can truly hear the cries of the world, and I can say that the energy of the bodhisattva, the energy of Avalokiteshvara, felt palpable, and deeply present with me in my time there. He/ she was the richest of companions.

As is the case with most pilgrimages of deep meaning, I expect that I will be working through this experience for many years. One peeled back the layers of self protection, and of illusion, coming face to face with the three poisons of greed, hatred and delusion.

One peeled back the layers of comfort and safety, carrying a raw throat, irritated skin, and stinging eyes, the aches of the body mirroring the containment of heartache in my chest. The release in sudden moments of beauty was utterly unpredictable.

One peeled back the layers of the three tenets of the Zen Peacemaker, Not knowing, on a massive scale;. Bearing witness, how can one bear witness to all of this?; and Loving Action, in moments of understood mutuality, nothing else made sense.

Ultimately, the way of the pilgrim is to just keep walking, walking and riding on buses, trains and rickshaws. Walking in stillness, in the midst of a scale of devotional practice that opened and freed my heart.

Walking in literal contact with the earth, and with the sacred geography of the biography of the Buddha's life.

Walking the unfolding path of the Dharma, walking to enter the stream of one's own examined life.

On the full moon day of January, near Sravasti India, the day before leaving Northern India and my fellow pilgrims, and en route to the rock cut caves of Ajanta, I wrote this…..

One who sees the Dharma, sees Buddha
One who sees India, sees the Dharma
One who fully knows dukkha, knows India, and sees the world, just as it is
One who sees this ancient world of the Buddha, bears witness to the suffering, and to the joy
One stands alongside the tenderness, with a heart cracked open, and the company of Sangha
One does not turn away
One returns to one's place of home and responsibility,
Carrying the grace of India
Our Dharma sister
And speaking of her with love.

'I am a soul in wonder.' Van Morrison

The Practices of Pilgrimage

While on pilgrimage, we are engaged in practices that are as old as human movement. As long as people have been walking on our earth, there has been a seeking of spirit and meaning, and a cultivating of the way of the pilgrim. Some of the forms of pilgrimage practice are highly individual, taken from the personal heart responses of the pilgrim, others are scripted from spiritual directives or sacred texts.

As discussed earlier, the core way of the pilgrim is walking, a literal or metaphorical movement across simultaneous inner and outer landscape. The practices that support this movement of the bodymind vary according to tradition, to cultural context and place, and to the individual's responses to events encountered on the journey.

Traditional Buddhist pilgrimage has been given a clarity of sacred geography, but within this structure, the practices vary widely. Buddhists throughout an immense range of cultures have developed practices over centuries. Personal pilgrimage, Buddhist or otherwise, is as individual as a fingerprint.

What was of interest to me in this phenomenological project of exploring the practices of pilgrimage through my own journeying as a pilgrim, was to observe those practices of pilgrimage, which create depth and resilience in the pilgrim/practitioner. I set out to study this, both from the practice of my own embodied experience, and from the observation of others.

If one considers the arc of ritual in pilgrimage, the preparation, the threshold, and the return, one can consider practices of pilgrimage that enhance and create meaning at each turn of the arc.

When one considers practices in the preparation for pilgrimage, again, these are highly individual. Preparation begins at the moment of deciding to go, the moment that

the calling, the longing, is answered. The story begins when one has made the decision to travel, and the mind begins its consideration of the journey.

Regardless of where I have journeyed in this project of a year of pilgrimage, whether to the desert Southwest, or across the Pacific Ocean to India and Japan, my preparation is similar.

Reading literature and poetry, studying the visual arts, and listening to music that is of a place, are all practices that I have found productive in focusing a sense of deep seeing and listening.

Maintaining an intention of lightening the burden on the journey is crucial. Taking only one bag, packing the least clothing possible, including some that can be given to others, carrying only the relevant parts of maps and of guides, and bringing a blank unlined black Moleskin notebook, and three pens are practices I maintain.

The pilgrim understands the call for self-limiting, and the care and intention of how one packs for the journey reflects this understanding, and contributes to the ability to move in essence.

The ultimate paring down of taking everything one needs, and nothing that one does not need, is exemplified by the preparation for the wilderness fast at Upaya Zen Center's mountain refuge of Prajna. There, one walks truly alone, with the heart of a pilgrim, into the thin veil of wilderness solitude.

While on pilgrimage, I carry a small medicine pouch of transformational talismans with me as companions: the Zuni fetishes of a raven, a bear and a crone/maiden; a small ' touching the earth' Buddha; a Navajo turquoise cuff, a Northwest Coast mussel rattle, and a small carved Jizo.

I carry small offerings, objects of spirit to leave in places, or with people that have moved me. Often, I take keyhole limpets, chitons and sand dollars, from the beaches of Tofino, a Canadian coastal wilderness that is deeply familiar to me.

In the weeks before embarking, I maintain a steady practice of zazen, and a regimen of daily walking, practicing carrying the stillness of meditation with me as I move, aware of the grace of walking with 'peace in every step', and with gaining physical strength.

When one considers the practices of pilgrimage that create meaning during the threshold of pilgrimage, that is, during the journey itself, one can reach back in time, as long ago as people have been walking and seeking, to find and understand practices that are as relevant today as when they were recorded.

When preparing for my traditional Buddhist pilgrimage in India, I came across a conversation ascribed to China in the period of the 5th century. This century was also the time of the Gupta Period in India, a golden age of it's civilization, when the great Buddhist University of Nalanda was thriving in northern India, and when the revered and legendary pilgrim ancestor Bodhidharama was walking between India and China, studying and carrying the Dharma with him.

This conversation, and the five practices that it refers to, became a touchstone, and a framework of investigation for the practices of pilgrimage during my project year. They are listed as five, but are of course, deeply interwoven

"Inspired by a 5th Century conversation between Zi Zhang and Confucius about the practices of wise rulers in 'The Analects', here are five excellent practices for travelers on sacred journeys.

The Five Excellent Practices of Pilgrimage (6)

Practice the arts of attention and listening.

Practice renewing yourself every day.

Practice meandering toward the center of every place.

Practice the ritual of reading sacred texts.

Practice gratitude and praise singing."

Practicing the Arts of Attention and Listening

At some point in one's journey as a Buddhist pilgrim, walking the unfolding path of the Dharma, one needs to go deep, bearing down into the essence of the timeless questions of the seeker.

The first deep listening practice is to hear the calling to embark, whether this call is a persistent, urgent calling, or a barely perceptible whisper. The art of the practice of listening is in understanding that the calling is a profound invitation to a journey of meaning that needs to be made, and that cannot be turned away from. This listening to a question embedded in the calling, in the longing, begins the cultivation of inquiry so necessary in pilgrimage.

Answering the call to set out, one does so with the clear intention of moving with mindful attention, and of seeing clearly. Our Buddhist practices of zazen, attentional mindfulness, and of actualizing the interwoven Four Noble Truths, and the Three Tenets of the Zen Peacemaker, collectively give us a moment to moment set of embodied tools in

practicing the art of attention, as we train our minds to see things as they really are, without needing them to be different.

Our practice as engaged Buddhists and as aspiring Buddhist chaplains, requires us to offer our full presence, to see with clear eyes and an open heart, to not turn away, and to offer what is needed. This is the way of continuous practice. This is the way of the engaged pilgrim.

Our work of bearing witness requires that we be in deep relationship to a place, that we attend, perceive and listen with great discernment, and that we see clearly for the benefit of others, offering whatever is needed.

Practicing the pilgrimage arts of attention and listening, as embedded in our Buddhist practices, gives us a profound tool in understanding how it is that one may best serve.

The way of the pilgrim is a way of seeing and of hearing, that excludes nothing, and that supports our practice of fully knowing dukkha. One walks in fully seeing and knowing the truth of suffering, and the truth of joy, while maintaining a sense of inquiry. One walks in not knowing.

The way of the pilgrim is often difficult, and the practices of pilgrimage can teach us how to stay with stillness, and with a deep awareness of what is. The way of the pilgrim teaches, and requires, endurance. Fully knowing dukkha can be difficult, and the practices of pilgrimage offer us a way to know it fully, in all it's beautiful, terrible, sublime and painful manifestations.

Pilgrimage is a crucible of practice, and in the arts of attention and listening, one is able to attend to remarkable detail, to find occasions of stillness in chaos, and to experience moments of freedom along the path, showing us the way.

Practicing the pilgrimage arts of attention and listening, requires that we attend both within and without, with a sense of curiosity and self reflection that supports both inner and outer movement. As we are walking the unfolding path of pilgrimage, we are

moving inwardly toward our own deepest knowing, our own true and unguarded selves. We are moving resolutely toward our own Buddha nature.

The pilgrimage practice of deep listening allows us to walk in the company of Avalokiteshvara, the great bodhisattva of compassion, who hears the sounds, and the cries of the world. We too can hear it all, and can allow our hearts to open.

I think of the sounds of India, never silent, the honking and ringing of traffic, the crying of the dogs, the shuffling feet and sonorous chanting of the pilgrims, the urgent Indian voices, the wild cawing of the birds, the screaming of the jackals; all is heard.

I think of walking with the heart of a pilgrim into the wilderness of Prajna, where solitude and fasting thins the veil of perception, and heightens the practice of truly seeing clearly, and of hearing silence. One is alone, but not alone, and the heightened sounds of the forest floor moving in the moonlight become a companion, and a gateway to the practice of the dharma.

I think of the astounding depth of silence in the rock cut Buddhist caves of Ajanta, India, where centuries of devotioned practictioners have carved deep viharas and immense Buddhas into the face of sheer rock cliffs. Practicing the pilgrimage art of deep listening, while sitting zazen in these carved monuments to silence and solitude, I could hear the ancient messages emanating from the stone, the hearts of the bodhisattvas beating in me.

The unfolding path of the dharma, and of the bodhisattva, the peacemaker, is a never ending path of deepening, continuous practice. It is a path of letting go of knowing, of bearing witness, and of allowing compassionate action to surface in the practice of attentional awareness.

The pilgrim knows this crucible, as she can both see clearly the truth of joy and the truth of suffering, and has walked the challenging path of her own joy and suffering, including that which is in her own mind. This mutuality knows no separation.

Going deeply into the dharma requires courage, and the arts of seeing and listening unflinchingly, as peeled back by the layers of pilgrimage, can take us into this depth, as we encounter everything needed on the unfolding path.

'Learn to live in the marvelous moment,and listen to the calls of the Buddha'

Thich Nhat Hahn

Practice Renewing Yourself Every Day

Pilgrimage in its core nature can be difficult, challenging and painful. While continuing to walk in circumstances that are often tough and unpredictable, the heart, and indeed the body, can open and crack at the same time. The alert pilgrim is often faced with a terrible beauty, and a complicated reality.
Compassion can overwhelm the open heart of a pilgrim, and the soft front of tenderness can collapse.

There is a critical need for practices that strengthen the strong back of equanimity, and that create health and balance in the heart, mind, body and spirit of the pilgrim.

The way of the pilgrim requires that one is able to fully presence whatever is encountered on the unfolding path, and in order to do this, one needs to maintain a practice of renewing one's self every day.

Pilgrimages have traditionally been seen as journeys of both risk and renewal, and it is not uncommon to see references to practitioners receiving more merit when the hardship of travel is seen as more extreme. This thinking makes the need for self-care and restorative practices even more important.

When one is fatigued and wavering on the path, the pilgrim needs practices that can be relied upon, and that have indeed been practiced so that they are available when

needed in a way that is reliable, dependable and restorative. These practices are not sentimental, but rather are deeply of the true heart, and are able to provide strength and meaning. They can be based solidly in one's tradition of Buddhist practice, or in one's personal practice.

In our Buddhist tradition as practiced at Upaya, our central practice is zazen, and it's restorative quality became for me, and I know for many others, a critical practice of renewal while on pilgrimage.

Those many hours of sitting practice, of sesshin, of putting in time on the zafu, all made the deepest sense when one was able to just sit in the presence of utter chaos and beauty, profound silence and noise, acute pain and ordinariness.

The ability to stabilize one's heart and mental continuum using sitting posture and breath, the ability to both rest and restore in zazen, was for me an invaluable practice of renewing myself every day.

During pilgrimage, I came to understand zazen as what Robert Thurman describes as 'seated inquiry', and to appreciate the training in being able to simultaneously drop down and rise up. I came to understand the deep restorative quality of being able to rest on one's breath, regardless of the circumstances.

Practices of renewal often carry an element of ritual and repetition that are practiced and meaningful. Prayer, chanting, drumming, devotional practice, journaling, drawing, restorative yoga, kinhin, and dancing are all examples of practices of well-being. Eating as well as feasible, having access to clean water, connecting with sangha and laughter can all create ease on the path.

I think of the Japanese culture of the ryokan, the traditional inns often used by pilgrims in Japan, that are a unique fusion of private and communal living, and where the coded etiquette is an embodiment of rest and restoration. Wearing the traditional Japanese robe, the yukata, symbolizes an entry into relaxation, where ease and renewal of the traveler/pilgrim are culturally recognized as an integral part of the journey.

Practices of renewal support the process of inner transformation on the path, while allowing one to continue and persevere in the embodiment of the outer journey. They ease the way, allow an inbreath and encourage one's ability to begin anew again every day.

A profound source of renewal for me, and for many others, lies in an attentional relationship with art, beauty, and the natural world.

Objects of artistic merit have long been associated with pilgrimage, as objects of beauty that raise the spirit, and provide a focus for contemplation and devotion.

Art naturally supports the inner journey, and carries a transformative quality that can shift our perspective into a shared beauty and consciousness.

Art can be seen as a destination, an offering, an object to bring back on return, or simply as something of genius to stand alongside and be transported into a deeper place. Art, like nature itself, carries a quality of the universal that supports the deep inquiry of the seeking pilgrim.

I think of the Japanese island of Naoshima, a small community dedicated to the creation of space for contemporary art, and of being transported through the form of a fully actualized vision of art and architecture as created in the Chi Chu Museum.

I think of standing in the company of the story high rock cut Buddhas of the ancient caves of Ajanta, knowing that I was standing alongside generations of devotional practice.

I think of standing face to face with 1000 life-size Kannons in the Sanjusangen-do Temple of Kyoto, their gold leaf glimmering in the dark, their company being kept continuously from the time of Dogen, our knowing together the universal stream of compassion.

All are invitations to the spirit.

Exposure and connection to art and to beauty restores the soul of the pilgrim, allowing an opening of the heart to the universal shared experience of seeking, and dissolving the illusion of duality as understood in Buddhist practice.

The pilgrim can return over and over to a single painting, stupa, or temple, experiencing depth in each return. One can also have seen a carving, pillar, or mandala only once, yet carry its impact in the spirit and imagination for many years.

The power and stillness of our natural world has long been a source of renewal for generations of pilgrims. The strength and resilience of no company, that is no human company, can be a profound connection to beauty, and to restoring wonder.

Walking is the way of the pilgrim, and puts our footsteps literally upon our earth, in an embodied relationship with the natural world we encounter. One notices flowers, trees and insects that are similar, but different. One notices the relationship of what grows to how people live. One notices our shared moon and shifting constellations.

The comfort of the human body in natural surroundings is universal, and beyond culture. The pilgrim is reminded of the story of the Buddha who delivered a dharma discourse by holding up a single flower in silence.

I think of the sense of profound renewal and humility experienced by looking up to the sky through the dense trembling crown of the bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya.

I think of the Japanese temple gardens in Kyoto, where an individual tree has been tended and shaped by generations of gardeners practicing in samu with no separation.

I think of lying in deep aloneness in the meadows of Prajna, and welcoming the restorative ritual of a death lodge, and the nourishment of pure water. All so renewing of a state of wonder.

The pilgrimage practices of renewing yourself every day have an exquisite range of forms and disciplines, and are as individual as the pilgrim himself. It matters not the form or content, but rather the intention to rejuvenate, and the association with the spirit, and the inner journey.

Through practices of renewal, the pilgrim balances the challenge and endurance of pilgrimage with a return to tenderness, a renewed courage, and the possibility of transformation.

Balance and health are respected and restored, allowing the pilgrim to continue to journey forth with the heart of a bodhisattva, and the intention to serve.

'There is nothing you can see that is not a flower.
There is nothing you can think that is not the moon.'

Matsuo Basho

Practice Meandering Toward the Center of Every Place

As a pilgrim I have learned that on arrival at the threshold, meandering toward the center of things allows the soul to create it's own opening.

The way of the pilgrim is a practice, a transformational journey to a sacred center, where the winding road leads to depth and meaning. Allowing oneself time and space to move toward what is important, what is at the center of every moment, gives the pilgrim a sense of both spaciousness and focus.

Buddhist pilgrimage is inexorably linked to walking, to walking to the centers of practice, walking the circle of Siddhartha Gautama's life, walking around stupas, mountains and zendos. Some pilgrims meander with a sense of wandering, others tread the dedicated pilgrims way, the paths and grounds considered sacred, and walked by generations in formations.

I have read many accounts of pilgrimage, but the zenith of the form, in its poetry and simplicity is the account of Matsuo Basho, the Japanese Zen poet, the ultimate pilgrim wanderer.

In his small but remarkable text, " Narrow Road to the Interior", (also translated as " Narrow Road to the Deep North"), Basho begins his account as follows:

"The moon and sun are eternal travelers. Even the years wander on. A lifetime adrift in a boat, or in old age leading a tired horse into the years, every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home.

From the earliest times there have always been some who perished along the road. Still I have always been drawn by windblown clouds into dreams of a lifetime of wandering." (7)

This exquisite text establishes the archetype of perpetual wandering as a spiritual activity. Basho's account of his pilgrimage makes clear the Mahayana Buddhist perspective that the path itself is the practice, and that the journey and the path of practice are one.

The pilgrimage practice of meandering toward the center of every place, implies the ancient form of a circle, where the journey is taken in wholeness, with a sense of the completion of a circle.

In Japanese calligraphy, the 'enso', the Japanese word for circle, encapsulates the Zen concepts of void, universe, enlightenment and strength. As an expression of the moment, and of movement, it speaks to the pilgrim continuing on in the journey without beginning or end. It speaks to Dogen's concept of the circle of the way, the continuous practice throughout space and time, that links all of us who practice.

The profound masters of the practice of moving in circles are the Tibetan Buddhists, whose pilgrimage practice involves circumambulation. Moving clockwise around stupas, mountains and sacred sites, the Tibetan pilgrims walk in unison, with their awakened selves over their right shoulders, their malas and prayer wheels in constant movement.

In "The Art of Pilgrimage", Edwin Berhbaum's description of the mastery of the practice of the Tibetan pilgrims is stated beautifully:

"Pilgrimage comes naturally to the Tibetans, a people characterized by movement. Tibetan practice is realized in the ritual circling of mountains, a time tested method of devotion that has come from Indian Buddhism, where it began as a means of paying homage to a sacred person or object. The word 'gnas-skor' means circumambulation to a sacred place.

The great round from departure to turning homeward is considered a larger circle of circumambulation within which wheel around the smaller circuits." (8)

This passage again speaks to the concept of movement itself as a devotional practice, whether in massive processions or individual wandering.

The embodied practice of walking to the proverbial center has the potential to carry the heartmind and spirit into a place of deeper inquiry, and deeper knowing.

I think of meandering through the village on the art island of Naoshima, Japan, and coming across a James Turrell art installation… and meandering further into the center of it's room without edges or perspective, suspended in light.

I think of meandering toward the Mahabodhi Temple, the center of Bodh Gaya, the spiritual center of Buddhist pilgrimage itself, floated upon a river of devotion and a sea of the maroon robes of the chanting, circumambulating Tibetan pilgrims.

I think of meandering to the center of the meadows at Prajna, making a forest altar there, and resting on the wings of birdsong and humming bees. All moments of wonder, all moments of not knowing.

The pilgrimage practice of meandering toward the center of every place creates a point of practice, a movement of spirit toward the essential, and a sense of depth and continuity.

In our embodied practice of walking to the center, we move our open heart and curious mind towards discovery.

We walk toward the center of our own Buddha nature.

"The wandering monk Fa-yen was asked by Ti-ts'ang,
" Where are you going?"
" Around on pilgrimage", said Fa-yen.
Ti-ts'ang asked, " What is the purpose of pilgrimage?"
" I don't know." Said Fa-yen.
Ti-ts'ang nodded, and said, " Not knowing is nearest."

Zen story

" Glorious it is when wandering time is come.'

Eskimo song

"Everything sacred moves in a circle."

Black Elk

Practice the Ritual of Reading Sacred Texts

The pilgrimage practice of reading sacred texts crosses all faith traditions, and is as old as written language. The traditional sources of Buddhist scriptures are rich and enormously varied., The Pali Canon, the Dhammapada, and the sutras, there are so many.

For Soto Zen practitioners, the remarkable volume of Dogen's "The Treasury of the True Dharma Eye" is itself a treasure.

A wider understanding of the practice of using sacred texts includes all language based practices, including prayer, chanting of vows, recitation of sutras, and attending to dharma discourses and talks. It includes reading the writings and interpretations of great teachers, and the poetry and pilgrimage accounts of great writers.

Again, the importance of the practice of attending to sacred texts for the pilgrim lies in its spiritual relevance, and its ability to ease the pilgrim into a greater depth of the inner journey. Well spoken words are inspirational, and can create a rich connection across generations of practitioners and pilgrims, in the recognition that our human experience is unutterably shared.

Language shapes our experience and can give it form, context and meaning. Inspirational language can shape and reshape our thinking, shifting the thoughts of a discouraged pilgrim from despair to hope. Meaningful, poetic language of the sacred, of the mutuality of our human experience,can restore one's optimism in a difficult period of pilgrimage, and renew one's resolve.

Language, like art, can support the transformational, and the practice of reading sacred texts, chanting vows, and repeating significant lines of a sutra, can deepen the intention of a pilgrim, and restore strength and courage when resolve is weakening. Reading sacred texts is a ritual of inspiration, and reconnects the pilgrim to wisdom and love, the two imperatives of Buddhist practice, as well as the vastness of the field of practice.

I think of the poetry of Rilke, Rumi and Leonard Cohen, lines committed to memory, that I carry as familiar and reliable companions on the path.

I think of the voice of Stephen Batchelor, reading the text of 'The Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma' from the Pali Canon, while sitting together in the Deer Park, India, exquisitely aware that this same earth and atmosphere have held these original words from the Buddha himself.

I think of walking in the Peace Park in Hiroshima Japan, with Roshi Joan Halifax, a place where unspeakable pain emanates from the earth itself, and where one can only stand and wholly bear witness to this most terrible face of hatred and delusion.

Roshi began to chant/vow " Creations are numberless…", and in joining her I recognized that paralysis is not an option, and that the task is only working more deeply with one's resolve, the core of which is embedded in our vows.

I think of later that same night, returning in the dark to the site of the stupa at Hiroshima, which contains the ashes of hundreds of thousands.

Two lone Pure Land priests had arranged deep rows of hundreds of stainless steel kitchen bowls filled with the offering of water around the full perimeter of the stupa. They were reading and chanting from their book of scriptures, and sitting with them in practice, chanting our Upaya vows until the light began to break, I recognized the immense restorative power of mercy.

The Bodhisattva Vows:

"Creations are numberless, I vow to free them.
Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to transform them.
Reality is boundless, I vow perceive it.
The awakened way is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it."

Upaya Zen Center

Practice Gratitude and Praise Singing

The pilgrimage practice of gratitude and praise singing is one that is shared amongst virtually all faith, native, and spiritual traditions.

The holding and expressing of gratitude sustains the pilgrim in maintaining an open and stable heart, in the face of whatever suffering and joy is encountered on the

path. It takes one away from the delusion of separateness and duality, toward a true appreciation of our oneness.

One comes to travel as a pilgrim holding the questions of:‘ How can I respond to my world with gratitude?’ ; “ How can I serve?”

Our Buddhist practice is based on gratitude, and on the love and compassion that it engenders. We practice in gratitude for the Dharma, for our ancestors and teachers, and for our own appreciation of having a heartmind and body that are capable of practice, and of making the journey.

The practice of the four brahmaviharas, particularly the practice of metta, cultivates a perspective of love and gratitude for whomever and whatever we meet.

The pilgrim loses and finds herself many times over the course of endurance required on the path of pilgrimage, and the practice of gratitude and of praise singing has the capacity to restore one’s strength, and stream of compassion.

There are many moments of profound solitude while on pilgrimage, and there are also many times when one is decidedly jostled and bumped by processional masses of other pilgrims on their focused routes of practice.

The pilgrimage practice of gratitude shifts the experience of being in these intense and powerful crowded migrations from unsettling to uplifting. One comes to practice patience, and to welcome the company of all of one’s fellow seekers, in this extraordinary shared river of devotion.

In the end, it was often the impact of the practice of my fellow pilgrims, from every corner and culture of our Buddhist world, that affected me the most deeply. One came to appreciate the monumental effort, determination and sacrifice that it took for so many to embark, and to continue. One’s heart became filled beyond capacity with humility, and with gratitude, for all that was given.

The experience of pilgrimage is very often beyond words, and I came to truly understand and appreciate the universal quality of our Zen practice of gassho. A fellow pilgrim observed that I seemed to be bowing my way through India and Japan, an observation that could likely be made of many of us who aspire to travel as Zen peacemakers.

Gassho offers an embodied expression of gratitude, mutuality, respect and love for others that is beyond words, and that is universally understood. In my experience, it was always appropriate, and almost always returned.

The gratitude practice of gassho is also of great benefit to the pilgrim herself, when there is a need to hold the balance, and presence the complexities of all that is being experienced. The practice of gassho returns the pilgrim to the body, allowing both an expression, and a restorative containment, of all of the deep experience on the unfolding path.

It turns out that one can hold it all.

The exquisite beauty, as well as the grief and sorrow, that is seen on the difficult path of pilgrimage, can help us truly understand the connecting force of gratitude. Gratitude practices return the pilgrim to the transformative intention of bodhicitta, to the awakened heart.

Whether one is chanting our Metta Chant, bowing in greeting, or being offered or receiving something, the intention of gratitude and generosity allows an ease, and a profoundly understood mutuality, to arise.

The wise pilgrim carries literal offerings to be given as modest acts of gratitude, acknowledging a touching person or place, or marking the thankfulness of simply being able to make this pilgrimage. There is a sense of appreciation in leaving something behind that was not there before.

Over the course of this year of pilgrimage, I have offered sand dollars, shells, gold leaf, lotus flowers, ropes of marigolds, money, hair ornaments, clothing, prayer and a hand.

The wise pilgrim understands the grace of receiving whatever is offered, in the same spirit of gratitude and acknowledgment.

Over the course of this year of pilgrimage, I have been given chai tea, lotus flowers, yak tea, ropes of marigolds, pachminas, prayer shawls, a mala, more food than imaginable, blessings and a hand.

I think of circumambulating the immense Damakha Stupa in Deer Park, immersed in a flow of chanting, worshiping Ladakhi women, chanting the metta chant alongside them, and being graciously received into a timeless stream of practice, with smiles, bows and a shared gratitude of the dharma.

I think of sitting, by invitation, on the cramped roof of the modest one-room home of an Indian farmer across the dry river from Bodh Gaya, a home shared with a treasured cow, partaking of laughter, chai and chapattis made by his 15 year old daughter, offering her shells and hair ornaments, and receiving their delight at my repeated, and poorly enunciated delivery of 'shukriya' ,Hindi for 'thank you'.

I think of sitting in the chapel of the Vietnam Veterans National Memorial in Angel Fire, NM, the first memorial of its kind acknowledging the losses of the heart wrenching Vietnam War. Sitting in the company of a solitary veteran, a saddened man of my age, wearing the leather jacket of the Hell's Angels, and singing Amazing Grace, I could only join his hymn, and bow in gassho to his utterly unresolved pain and sacrifice.

'Be grateful to everyone.'

Slogan #13 of the 59 Lojong Slogans

" I used to think that my effectiveness was what was important.
Now I know that it is my intention, my bodhicitta."

Joanna Macy

The essential practices of the pilgrim then, as encapsulated in the wise conversation of Confucius in the fifth century, remain an entirely relevant and well articulated guide for the contemporary pilgrim.

The practices, in all their manifestations, are just that. They are sources of renewal, strength, depth and resilience that are available to us because they have been practiced.

In Buddhist terms, this means that they have been practiced, and that they are embodied, that is, they are in and of the body.

They are accessible to us to call upon when we need a deep response. They are there for, and alongside our experience, to restore and deepen what we already know.

The practices of pilgrimage, the practices of the unfolding path of the inner and outer journey, serve to redirect us toward our own Buddha nature, and our own unfolding path of service in the dharma.

The deep practices that support the inner and outer journey of pilgrimage, mirror the practices that sustain the inner and outer journey of Buddhist chaplaincy, a path that is one manifestation of a path of service in the dharma.

The practices learned and honed in the difficult crucible that is pilgrimage, take us deeper into the dharma, and more resolutely toward the unfolding path guided by bodhicitta, the path guided by bodhicitta, the path walked by the bodhisattva.

They offer deep stillness, and are timeless resources on the unfolding threshold of the journey.

"The essential practices of pilgrimage are to go on the journey with an open heart, a mind that is curious, and a body that is ready to meet the elements."

Roshi Joan Halifax

‘ You can go through the motions of Zen, but it is the heart that finally counts.’

Dogen

The Return

“The ultimate aim of the quest, if one is to return, must be neither release nor ecstasy for oneself, but the wisdom and power to serve others.”

Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By*

The final arc of the ritual that is pilgrimage, occurs as one returns home. Re-entry can be a tricky business, as one works to integrate a new perspective into a familiar sphere of responsibility and routine. It is a time to be particularly mindful, and demands an astute tenderness with both oneself and others.

People in one’s familiar life may be curious to hear one’s stories, or they may not be. The pilgrim has walked an extraordinary journey, on both a literal unfolding path, and in one’s inner experience.

The pilgrim returns home with a narrative that continues to unfold, a story where elements continue to emerge and deepen for months and years to come.

The pilgrim’s return home is often aided by objects ,or talismans, brought back from the journey. Just as the pilgrim has left offerings at places of spiritual resonance along the path of pilgrimage, she may return home with icons of significance, often for her own altar. These symbolic objects become treasured reminders of what the pilgrim has experienced. They can attest to the details of the journey, and can inspire continued contemplation of what has been learned. They may serve as tokens of inspiration for further pilgrimage, or as reminders of the grace of listening to the longing to embark, when it comes again.

I think of what I returned home with from India, the most significant talisman being a single leaf from a descendent of the original Bodhi Tree, given to me by Shantum Seth. The cutting from the original tree was given to Thich Nhat Hahn, who in turn gave it to his student Shantum, who then planted the now thriving eight-year-old sapling on a plot of land immediately across the river from Bodh Gaya.

I returned also with a bronze ' touching the earth' Buddha from a Jain elder in New Delhi, a pure silver threaded shawl woven in Varanasi, and a refined sculpture of the Indian hands of generosity carved from the white marble of Agra.
All reflect the exquisite culture and hand work of what is now India, and are iconic reminders of the depth and beauty of stepping into the stream of the universal.

Ultimately then, the question upon returning becomes, ' for what purpose am I returning?' What is the vision, the gift, the insight, or the wisdom with which one returns? How can I serve with greater depth and compassion? What have I really learned?

Most often, language and concepts are inadequate to describe what was awakened. Instead, one needs to live the learning, and allow oneself to be transformed by what has been experienced. In the integration of pilgrimage into one's own sphere, one needs to confirm the wish to continue to live with depth, and to not simply skim on the surface of one's life. One aspires to stay awakened, and to bring the practices of pilgrimage, learned with such intensity on the journey, into one's own unfolding path of life, service, and indeed, chaplaincy.

As Buddhist pilgrims, we have the opportunity to maintain our clarity through practice, and for me, the inspiring Five Excellent Practices of Pilgrimage, spoken so many centuries ago,have become intertwined with the Four Noble Truths, the Eight Fold Path, and the three tenets of the Zen Peacemaker.

As a combined beacon of practice, they encompass the intention to live as a bodhisattva, and to maintain an enduring sense of living out one's life with the ever present possibility of the essence of pilgrimage.

It turns out that pilgrimage is as much about returning home, as it is about embarking. One returns home with tokens, talismans, and a narrative, that serve to reconstruct the pilgrimage in one's imagination. One is able to revisit the vision, and retell the testimonial story that has so reshaped one's heart. One lives in a body and mind that are somehow the same, somehow changed.

The enlightened pilgrim returns home with an altered understanding of embodied compassion. She has embarked with a sense of personal inquiry, and returned with an unalterable understanding of interconnectedness, of knowing that separateness is truly a delusion, and of rejoicing in the truth of no separation.

Her heart has been ripped and torn, and put back together again, on pilgrimage, more times than she can count, and in the end, it has opened to the world just as it is. She returns with the depth of a crone, the lightness of a maiden, and an unspeakably full grandmother's heart.

She comes home to the ordinary, knowing that it is all extraordinary.

"I am circling around God,
around the ancient tower,
and I have been circling for a thousand years,
and I still don't know if I am a falcon,
or a storm, or a great song." Rainier Maria Rilke

"The path around our house is also the ground of awakening." Thich Nhat Hahn

The Unfolding Path of Buddhist Chaplaincy

I have come to view our Buddhist chaplaincy training program at Upaya Zen Center, as envisioned by Roshi Joan Halifax, as a pilgrimage itself.

The presence of both an inner and outer journey as experienced in the taking of a pilgrimage is mirrored in the inner and outer journey of chaplaincy, as undertaken at Upaya.

The chaplaincy candidate, with the heart and the intention fitting that of a pilgrim, applies, enters, and engages in the program, and the story has begun. As one works on the requirements of the outer chaplaincy, the inner chaplaincy is working within. Walking as a pilgrim on the unfolding path of Buddhist chaplaincy, strengthens our resilience, and deepens our resolve to serve others. It gives a richer palette to the brushstrokes of invoking spiritual legacy, both in our own lives and in the lives of those we serve. It gives us a wider range, and a deeper understanding, of the tenderness of spiritual care.

Physically traveling to Upaya to study is itself a pilgrimage. One comes with the intention of inquiry, and goes through the three stages of ritual, separation, threshold, and return each time. One leaves home, enlists in challenging studies and experiences of intellectual and spiritual depth, and engages in practices of resilience and renewal.

Ultimately, we will leave Upaya, and return to our own places of influence and responsibility, carrying both the knowledge gained on the outer journey, and the enormous spiritual shifts that have occured on the inner journey.

We return with the half cloak of the chaplain, a concept denoting both our own spiritual evolution, and the enriched possibility of relational spiritual care in the service of others.

As Buddhist chaplains, we have also undergone the parallel ritual of jukai, itself a rite of passage, itself a pilgrimage. The core of the pilgrimage of jukai is the embodiment of the vows of service, as symbolized by the sewing and wearing of the rakusu, and the receiving of the precepts. We return having been changed by the experience, and having entered the stream of Buddhist practice, as symbolized by our newly given dharma name.

As Buddhist chaplains, our own pastoral authority is dependent upon our having walked the difficult and inspiring path of continuous practice, the circle of the way, the unfolding path of the dharma. The pilgrimage of chaplaincy marks our inner journey as we proceed on the unfolding path of service.

Roshi Joan Halifax has described our Upaya chaplaincy training as "a karmic accelerator", and one could say the same of the parallel crucible that is pilgrimage.

In a series of personal conversations and communications with several of my fellow chaplaincy candidates, the concept of our chaplaincy as pilgrimage was discussed with great interest.

Many of their remarks dovetailed remarkably with what I have already postulated in this paper, some typical examples of which follow:

- ' In reflection, I would admit that the entire two-year training is a pilgrimage. The program is designed in such a way that allows participants to intentionally plan our individual ' pilgrimage' and in doing so we can be as radical or ordinary as we please. Like a true pilgrimage, we have no idea what the end result will be, but most have a sense, an internal knowing, a faith if you will, that we will be a fuller, more complete, more awake human being for having journeyed on such a pilgrimage in the first place. Most importantly, when we take the jukai vows, and receive the precepts we make a pledge to lead our lives in a certain way, to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and the Sangha, to intend to alleviate suffering in the world.'

- 'Quite honestly, I've never really thought of our training as a pilgrimage but having thought of it in this light, I now realize that this is a good way of seeing it. Each time I've prepared for a trip to Upaya has been a new leg of my journey toward chaplaincy. I view pilgrimage as an enveloping movement, an intention to incubate and then midwife something into existence. I certainly see the training at Upaya like this too.'
- 'Although I did not set out on this path of chaplaincy as a pilgrimage, I simply answered the call to jump in. As the formality of the program comes to an end, I see that the willingness to respond to a whisper, has opened the door to the possibility of living life as an expedition, a journey to what is needed.'
- ' The journey of chaplaincy has been a validation of the life I had already chosen, an absolute command to live on the path. To really be with chaplaincy brings you to attention. It is a tough, brutal path, and you have to let go. A pilgrimage, yes, absolutely.'

Again, in a series of personal conversations and communications, I was curious about what practices my fellow chaplaincy candidates felt were of most benefit to them during the demands of the chaplaincy program in maintaining their focus and resilience. There was a great deal of overlap in the practices that people felt were sustaining, typical of which were:

- ' Without doubt, zazen, and more recently metta practice, and always living in a mind of inquiry as much as I can.'
- ' Without question, the most important for me has been the constant, consistent practice of sitting meditation. Reciting the chants and sutras/ prayers has helped enormously when I wanted to give up. Intending to eat properly, taking the time to get proper exercise and rest all assist in my resilience. And last, but not least I try to make continued attempts to read and learn new things about Buddhism and my world.'
- ' Zazen, A sense of humour, and T S Elliot's poem Ash Wednesday.'

- ‘ Zazen, trying to conduct myself according to the precepts, and the Three Tenets, remembering to be grateful, and not taking myself too seriously.’
- ‘ A dedicated yoga practice, reading the poetry of Rumi, spending time walking outdoors, and full on chanting.’
- ‘ Remembering beginners mind, maintaining a consistent meditation practice, and chanting the Metta Chant.’

These practices cited are illustrative of a wide range of forms and habits used to maintain health and resilience on the path of chaplaincy, and are remarkably similar to those used on the path of pilgrimage.

The scope of practices virtually always included a traditional Buddhist form, eg zazen or metta, as well as personal practices that are highly individual,

The practices serve the inner journey in maintaining focus on the depth of inquiry, that is, staying with the intention of Dogen’s Way Seeking Mind.

They also serve to create a restoration of heart and body, so that one is able to keep walking on the arduous outer journey.

One recalls the five excellent practices of the pilgrim, that are: practicing the art of attention and clear listening, practicing renewing yourself every day, practicing meandering toward the centre of every place, practicing the ritual of reading sacred texts, and practicing gratitude and praise singing.

My hypothesis is verified, in that the practices of pilgrimage that take us deeper into the dharma are the same practices that serve our unfolding path of chaplaincy, a deeper and deeper actualization of the dharma, that is the way of the bodhisattva.

The practices of pilgrimage are virtually one and the same, as the practices needed to sustain depth and renewal on the path of inner chaplaincy. The renewal practices of the chaplain restore one’s intention to persevere on the path of the precepts, and of actualizing the dharma in the form of service, while swimming upstream.

As pilgrims, and as chaplains, one of the most important elements is that we be ready for the call, the call to serve. As chaplains we are asked to be alongside others during times of transition, struggle, suffering and loss. Drawing on what we have learned as pilgrims strengthens our resolve as chaplains to maintain our vows of alleviating suffering in all beings.

In conversation, one of my cohort described our chaplaincy as burning away the extraneous, and being a call to respond to the cries and the laughter of the world. Understanding our chaplaincy as pilgrimage supports us in seeing and framing transformational possibility, both in ourselves, and in those we serve.

Chaplains are change agents, shifting perspective by creating openings for change, and opening up the field of perception so that change can arise. We are working primarily to change the view that the self is separate from other, and the profound experience of being laid bare as a pilgrim, teaches us this.

Over the course of the unfolding path of inner chaplaincy, I have caught in myself, and certainly observed in my fellow pilgrim chaplains, a sense of being altered, deepened, and becoming both more resilient and more tender. We have shifted collectively to not turning away, and to understanding the embrace of the bodhisattva.

We are walking more resolutely in our own skins, as pilgrims on the unfolding path of Buddhist chaplaincy. The way of the pilgrim is the way of the chaplain.

Led by the toughly won tenderness of ourselves, and having been peeled back to essence as pilgrims over and over again, we are able to embody a freedom that allows the grace of mutuality.

We can offer those we serve the possibility of inner transformation, only because we have walked this unfolding path ourselves, this path of deep not knowing, the circle of the way, the unfolding path of the dharma.

The pilgrim endures, and keeps walking under all circumstances. The Buddhist chaplain is called to do the same.

"I would like to live
like a river flows,
Carried by the surprise
Of it's own unfolding."

John O'Donahue, *To Bless this Space between Us*

'Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgata, bodhi, svaha."
" Gone, gone,gone,all the way over, gone with all other things to the other shore, enlightenment, rejoice."

Mantra from the Heart Sutra of Realizing Wisdom beyond Wisdom

The Gift of Pilgrimage

"Ring the bells that still can ring,
Forget the perfect offering,
There is a crack, a crack in everything,
That's how the light gets in."

Leonard Cohen, From the song, *The Anthem*

Pilgrimage is a journey into fearlessness, a profound gate to the dharma.

Pilgrimage taught me about deep cracks, and about the grace and beauty of imperfection, what the Japanese refer to as 'wabi sabi'.

Pilgrimage teaches us about non-duality. We journey alone, but we are not alone. The rivers of pilgrims before, after, and alongside us, give us the courage to continue. We carry with us those beings unable to go, and we travel as we practice, by ourselves but not for ourselves.

Pilgrimage is a tool of the examined life, a form of profound inquiry as old as humanity itself. The pilgrim undertakes a hard, deep passage, digging deeply into challenge and sacrifice, and in the end, experiencing a profound humility. Standing in the axis of her own suffering, the pilgrim softens into the universal, and develops a more skilful and tender ease, a peace beyond that of her own.

Pilgrimage requires sacrifice, and the pilgrim is rubbed raw, has the extraneous layers of self-peeled away, and returns to essence, over and over again. Ultimately what is sacrificed is any illusion of separateness.

The gift of pilgrimage is the truth of interconnectedness.

As a Buddhist pilgrim, being able to walk in the footsteps of the historical Buddha, is an experience beyond words. In the immense complexity of the Indo Gangetic Plain that is now India, one is taken to the literal and metaphorical edges of practice. Walking in what is now a terrible beauty, the Buddhist pilgrim is able to truly hold both the truth of suffering and the truth of joy at the same time.

One's heart can break with the deep truth of what is being felt and seen, while smiling at the tenderness and dignity of all beings encountered. In the face of fully knowing the grace of such dukkha, the myth of duality is entirely clear.

Seeing the famous sculpture at Bodh Gaya, depicting the Buddha as two human feet with ten toes, the heart of the Buddhist pilgrim understands beyond knowing, that the seed of walking as a Buddha resides in us all.

The Buddha was a man whose life unfolded as a pilgrimage, and whose sacred geography unfolded over the arc of a human life. His hardships, struggles and humanity are acutely clear when one walks as a pilgrim over the holy earth of his biography.

The Buddha was compelled to continue walking.
The Buddhist pilgrim is compelled to keep walking.
The Buddhist chaplain is compelled to keep walking.

The gift of pilgrimage is the courage to continue with the strength of clear conviction, the courage to serve.

The pilgrim has gone beyond her own fear, and has been peeled back to her core by the arduous, formidable outer journey of pilgrimage. Dukkha is fully known, and as the body is strengthened in grounded equanimity, the heart opens in kindness and compassion.

The pilgrim learns to stand, sit and walk in her own stillness, in the face of unutterable chaos and suffering, and earns a grandmother's heart that is full to breaking. She has become a crone. Compassion is no longer an idea, but an embodied expression of all that has been experienced.

Released from the limitations of her identities, the pilgrim is freed up to continue walking on the path of her inner journey, with a sense of renewal, deep knowing and a calm abiding.

The gift of pilgrimage is the restoration of fearless compassion.

The pilgrim is liberated into a deep tenderness, and into a clarity of knowing, that the way of pilgrimage is to walk resolutely on the path of awakened inquiry, the unfolding path of life and death, the path of a bodhisattva, and truly the path of a Buddha.

"Walk on.

Ask what is in the wind. Ask what is sacred."

Margaret Atwood, Canadian poet

'The greatest gift is the gift of the dharma. It is the gift of no fear.'

Maezumi Roshi

In Beauty May I Walk

In beauty may I walk,
all day long may I walk,
through the returning seasons may I walk.

With beauty before me, may I walk,
with beauty behind me, may I walk,
with beauty above me, may I walk,
with beauty below me, may I walk,
with beauty all around me, may I walk.

In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk,
in old age, wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk.

It is finished in beauty.
It is finished in beauty.

Navajo Prayer

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**Authors Note: Additional quotes cited throughout this paper are attributed to their authors. However, they are pieces that I have carried in my journals for many years, the original references now lost. I have also cited parts of recent personal conversations with fellow pilgrims, teachers and chaplains. I appreciate them all.*

Epilogue: The Pilgrim at the Bedside

A Beginning Example of Spiritual Care

As Buddhist chaplains we are asked to become wisdom carriers, and to share our practice with the world. The metaphor of the chaplain as a pilgrim invokes one who has walked the inner and outer journey of transformation, and can be alongside others as they do the same.

The pilgrim's path is the path to becoming your own hero, and in the spiritual care of others, the chaplain pilgrim, through their own awakened presence, can invite others to be their own hero and to access what they already know.

The chaplain is often called upon to be alongside others during periods of transition, times in the life-cycle of individuals and families when there are changes and shifts. Births, marriages, deaths and times of great loss and of great celebration, all have the potential for rich connection.

Family systems are by their nature multigenerational. I have long studied and practised the work of Murray Bowen, itself based on the conceptual thinking of Gregory Bateson, who describes with great clarity the emotional fields of families as living systems that move and shift over generations.

This perspective denotes an essential health in the family system being able to restore itself, and a trust in the healing power of emotional connection.

In entering a family system at times of transition and change, the chaplain is called upon to invoke spirit, and to bring tenderness, dignity, and the potential for transformation to those she is serving, often in a very short period of time.

My experience with this is that both entering the system with a perspective of chaplain pilgrim, and offering the metaphor of pilgrimage to the individual or family, can

invoke a transformational quality to their experience, and introduce the potential of spiritual legacy.

Spiritual legacy is not just about being comforted, but rather about deep connectedness to the essence of what truly matters. In this vein, I will speak to the practice of working with the combined perspectives of a chaplain pilgrim, and of family systems, in the area of spiritual care that I have gained some experience with, that is, end of life care.

As part of my chaplaincy training requirements, I have volunteered in two palliative care settings, one hospice, and one hospital-based palliative care unit, over two years. I offer these practice possibilities gained there as a beginning discussion of one aspect of spiritual care at the end of life, one that was inspired by my own experience of pilgrimage, and one that I see as having true healing potential.

At the bedside of a dying person, the chaplain pilgrim can intervene in a family system in a way that creates health, connection, and continuity. Offering a compassionate presence that comes from having walked as a pilgrim, literally or metaphorically, the chaplain pilgrim can offer a perspective that focuses less on loss, and more on legacy and continuity.

The chaplain pilgrim can offer the concept of pilgrimage to both the dying person, and their family members, as a way of inviting not just the idea of a journey, with a beginning and an end, but rather a transformational journey which has the potential to invoke spiritual legacy over generations. The ancestors before, and those generations yet to come, can be included in the conversation.

A dying person, an elder regardless of age, can be seen as a pilgrim, creating ' a pilgrims' way' of life and death that is unique to their family system. Offering a person the metaphor of walking as a pilgrim, when that person is confined, restricted, or no longer able to physically move, encourages an open journey in the heartmind, where seeking and evolution are still possible.

By her presence and experience,the chaplain pilgrim conveys that while there is still breath, there is still spirit, and still the potential for meaningful contribution, and the creation of legacy.

In my previous professional work, as both a Speech Language Pathologist, and as a Family Systems Therapist, I have long been interested in the language of healing conversations. I have found the form of the open question often invokes a sense of inquiry, curiosity and a shifting of understanding, both to those asked, and those listening.

Serving as a chaplain pilgrim alongside the rite of passage that is death, one wishes to offer questions that have the potential to create meaning, peace of mind, and a greater connection amongst those affected.

Recognizing the ancestors and the future generations in the room, the grounded presence of one who has walked as a pilgrim is able to ask questions that invite the spirit, that go beyond a limited sense of birth and death, that frame dying as a sacred pilgrimage, and that draw on the individual's, and the family's spiritual understanding.

This is not a technique, or intervention with any expectation of outcome, but rather the restoration of love and wonder in the process.

In no particular order, some examples of questions offered follow:

If you think of yourself as a pilgrim, and of this experience as a pilgrimage, what do you think of?

If you think of your mother, grandmother, great grandmother as pilgrims, what important journeys did they take?
How do you understand what they were seeking?
How do you understand the core of what you have learned about spiritual meaning in your family's legacy?

Where have you wandered in your own life?
How do you understand what you were seeking?
Where are the places that have sustained your sense of beauty, imagination and courage?

If there were one place that you would want to walk with your son, grandson, nephew, to teach him about, where would that be?
What would you want him to know?

If there was one place that you would want to meander to the centre of now, where would that be?
What is it about that place that gives you strength and spirit?
Walking as a pilgrim to that place, how would you lighten your burden on the journey?
What would you take as offerings to be given?
How would you renew yourself on the journey?
How do you understand what is no longer important, and can be left behind?
What would you bring back? And forwhom?

Thinking of yourself as a seeker on pilgrimage, what questions have you asked yourself, and what have you learned?
How have you been able to communicate what you have learned to your daughter/ niece/ granddaughter?
How do you think of your own spiritual legacy?

Healing conversations have the potential at the end of life, or indeed at any of life's transitions, to frame an open path of pilgrimage, where nothing is taken that is not needed, and where spirit and essence enter the conversation.

At the end of life, as an example, healing conversations can be initiated and nurtured with those dying and with those by the bedside, with a profound sense of

creating a deeper understanding, and a sense of true discovery and fresh communication amongst those in a suffering family system.

The potential for emotional and spiritual reconnection in times of great suffering is extraordinary, although sometimes difficult to access.

The metaphor of pilgrimage offers the possibility for newness and true emotional transformation at a time that is often seen only as an ending. It can be an invitation to a family's authentic and sustaining path of spiritual legacy.

As a pilgrim at the bedside, I have observed many extraordinary, poignant, and tender exchanges of spiritual legacy unfolding in families, many healing conversations. Although the reporting of these is beyond the scope of this paper, the form and perspective of practice is one that I know has richness, and that I will continue to consider. I offer it here only as a beginning example.

As chaplain pilgrims, we are never outside our vows, and the metaphor of pilgrimage gives us another tool to invoke depth and meaning in the shared experience of spiritual care. It gives us a model of open heartedness, and awakened inquiry that we can live and practice in our own unfolding path of chaplaincy.

We can walk in the resonance of our mutuality, walking together as pilgrims, to our collective "Deep North."

" No birth. No death." Dogen Zenji

Vast is the robe of liberation.
A formless field of benefaction,
I wear the Tathataga's teaching,
Saving all sentient beings.

The Robe Chant, Upaya Zen Center