

The Golden Cave

Alan Zundel speaking at the HeartAwake Center, Sep. 27th 2007

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Well, I told you a few weeks ago, I think—or maybe a month or more—that I was going to tell you the story of the Golden Cave, and then instead I decided I'd talk about something else. And you wanted to know what the story was, so I'll tell you the story of the Golden Cave tonight, okay?

So, once upon a time there was a young girl, not quite a teenager yet, about twelve or thirteen. She lived in a village at the foot of a great mountain. One day she was walking through the woods and she saw a figure approaching her. She was a little afraid, and then she recognized this figure as the wise old woman who lived in the forest.

Now this made her very nervous because she had heard a lot about the wise woman and didn't know—she had never talked to her, so she didn't know what was going to happen. The wise old woman called her, beckoned over to her and said, “Come here, I have a task for you.”

Well, the girl came up to her; she said, “What do you want? What do you want me to do?”

And the woman says, “I want you to climb to the top of that mountain there, and then come back down and return to your village.”

And the girl said, “That mountain is so high it'll take me *years* to get up there and to get back. And it's cold and it's difficult; I don't know if I can make it to the top.”

And the wise woman said, “You can make it to the top if you go and do this, and it's important because by the time you get back you'll have become a woman. And when you return to your village, the village will be in a crisis; it'll be in great danger and difficulty and they'll need your leadership as a young woman to take them out of this difficulty. You're the one that's destined for your task and that's why I'm asking you to do this, for the sake of your people.”

Well, the girl was very overwhelmed by this, but she said, “Okay, I'll do this then.” So she set off towards the mountain, she began climbing and she went for a while—for months, maybe even a year. She was going through the fairly easy part, although patches of it could be quite difficult, and she was getting tired. She looked, she felt she was about half way up the mountain, and she came upon a cave.

And she thought, ‘You know, I'm so tired I need to rest, and this cave looks like a good place to go in and rest, and maybe even sleep. Look, there's a little mountain stream nearby where I have water, and there's some berries and things nearby that I can eat, so I could be okay here if I even stayed a little bit to rest up and recover my strength. Because it's such a long way to the top.’

So she went into the cave, and she noticed as the sunlight came in through the mouth that it was gleaming off the sides of the cave, the walls were all golden colored. It looked warm and glowing and inviting. She went in and she felt very safe, and very comfortable and protected. So she lie down and she went to sleep in the golden cave.

And when she woke up, she didn't know how long she had been there. She had just lost all of her sense of time into this state of forgetfulness, and she decided it was so pleasant there she would stay longer. So she did, she stayed there for a while. She would drink from the stream and eat from the food around, picking berries and nuts and whatever she could find, and sleeping in the golden cave, which was such a delicious sleeping experience for her. She felt so rested, she felt so refreshed, whenever she went into this cave and slept for she didn't know how long, such a deep sleep would come over her.

And so finally she decided that she would just stay in that cave for the rest of the time that it would have taken her to get to the top of the mountain and come back down. Because she thought, 'It's such a pleasant place here, why go through all the great difficulty of getting to the top and exposing myself to the elements, and being cold and uncomfortable. Who knows what could happen to me on the way up? It's very dangerous, and I don't know if the wise woman was right that I would make it to the top. But if I stay here for a few years, I'll be a young woman and can go back down and help my village.'

So she stayed there and she enjoyed sleeping in the cave. And time went by, and she decided it was time to go back down. So she left the cave, and she made her way back down the mountain and she headed toward her village through the woods. And as she came upon the village she saw the people that she remembered; they all looked older and they were very sad.

And she said, "What's the matter?" And they said, "Well, there's a great crisis now. We're not sure what to do, we're looking for someone to lead us and tell us what we need to do, to help us overcome this great difficulty that's overcome our village."

And she said, "Don't fear; take confidence, because I am here to help you." And they looked at her and they laughed. And they said, "Don't be ridiculous; how can you help us?"

And she said, "Well, the wise woman said that I'm the one destined to lead you." And they said, "We don't believe you; that can't be true."

So the woman thought, 'I should go find the wise woman and bring her back here to tell them that I'm the one that has to save them.'

And she went out into the woods and looked where she had last seen the wise woman. And she came up to the wise woman when she found her, she saw her, she came up to her and said, "Wise woman, I'm back!"

And the woman looked at her, and she said, "You didn't go to the top of the mountain, did you?"

And she said “No.”

And the wise woman said, “You were sleeping in the golden cave, weren’t you?”

And she said, “Yes, how did you know?”

She said, “Come over here and look.” She took her to a little pond where she could see her reflection. And she looked down into the reflection, and what she saw in her reflection was that she was still a girl thirteen years old. She hadn’t become a young woman, and she was not now ready to lead her village out of danger.

The end. That’s a sad story, isn’t it? [*laughs*] Most concretely, this story is about states of meditation.

[*Surprised laughter, then a voice:*] All right.

Trace states.

[*Voice:*] Mountain versus cave meditation, huh?

Uh huh. Mountain versus cave. Making that little effort versus staying in the comfortable place. It’s about perseverance as opposed to comfort and safety in the spiritual life in general.

Let me tell you a little bit about an experience that I had. When I started meditating decades ago, I tried different forms of meditation and seemed to be growing in different ways. And then eventually, I don’t remember when, but I discovered that when I meditated I could go into this state of mind where just everything dropped away, everything. And I was just in this place that was very peaceful and relaxing; had no sense of myself or anything else. And I would just stay there, and twenty minutes, thirty minutes later I’d come out of it.

I felt very relaxed, and it sounded to me—seemed to me like it fit the description of some, you know, this state of, uh—higher state, let’s say, where your self falls away. And so I thought maybe this is it, because I had no sense of self during that state of meditation. It was very pleasant, very calming. But what I noticed, after a couple decades maybe, [*laughs*] was that I really wasn’t progressing a lot. That a lot of the personal characteristics I had didn’t seem to be changing at all—still as prone to certain kinds of temper, getting angry over little things, and other things. But I didn’t feel that I had really moved forward very much that I could tell.

So I went back to a form of meditation where I tried to stay alert, and not allow myself to go into that state. At first I did half and half, and then I felt like this is better to stay in the alert state, so I did that. So trying to stay alert, trying to pay attention to your breath—if that’s what the focus is—or just trying to become aware, maintain your awareness of the present moment; of your thoughts, of your feelings, of your bodily state, of what sounds are reaching you, all that. The alertness is important, and allowing yourself to go into real quiet states—peaceful is okay, but when you find yourself just losing yourself in a quiet state, there may not be much growth

there. It may be very pleasant, it may be very comforting, it may be very relaxing, which are not bad things, but I think the growth comes from perseverance.

And extending that to the spiritual life, and to life in general really, life presents us with struggles, and if we try to avoid struggles and stay in a safe place—stay in a place that's comfortable, that feels warm and inviting, where we feel that our needs are being taken care of—we don't grow as much as if we exerted ourself a little bit, pushed on, exposed ourself maybe to things that are uncomfortable in order to reach a true peak in our life. To become the person we're meant to be. To become fully mature, or human, or whatever you want to call it—fully realized in our own—presenting our own sense of who we're meant to be. And taking up our role in life, so that we can effectively meet it.

So that's what the story of the Golden Cave is about.

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