Words of Encouragement

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 59:39

Hi everyone.

Many of us here in this hall tonight are new for the first time during this retreat—all of us on the stage and those of you arriving today—and so we all feel welcomed by those of you who've been here already for six weeks.

This evening we are going to introduce ourselves to start, just so you know who we are. Then Brian will offer a talk, and then we'll also have the Refuges and Precepts together. It will be a simple evening, but we hope that it will be the beginning of joining the energy of those of you who've been here with the energy of those of you who are arriving, including us.

My name is Andrea Fella. I've been teaching this retreat for about twelve years or so, most years. I'm happy to be back here this year with this team, particularly my friends here, and just really looking forward to getting to know you and to exploring your hearts and minds together in this form, which is so precious—this time here. It's so precious. The moment of time in this country really, I feel, needs this kind of energy. So I bow to you all for being here at this time. Thank you for your practice. It's really a great gift to the world. And I look forward to getting to know you over the coming weeks.

I'll add my welcome to Andrea's, to those who've just arrived, including my colleagues up here, and greetings to those of you who have prepared this space so beautifully for us. We get to piggyback on your weeks of practice, and it's a great gift to us to be able to come into the energy that's already been established here over these days.

My name is Greg Scharf and I've been teaching this retreat most falls for fifteen or more years now. I've kind of lost track, but around that many, which is hard for me to believe. And I've been spending the fall in this hall often for well over thirty years now, sitting where you are quite a bit—which is a better place to be sitting than up here, I promise you.

I've just come from my home in Flagstaff, Arizona, in the northern part of that state at the foot of a sacred mountain there, a beautiful part of that southwest part of the country. I've been associated with IMS for a long time in different capacities, including time on staff. I've spent a lot of time, and still do when possible, in Buddhist countries in Asia, a lot of time also in India, and especially in Burma or Myanmar, which is a place that's very deep in my heart. I have spent time there practicing as an ordained Buddhist bhikkhu, so I have that in my background, and a deep love of long retreats. I feel just deeply honored to be here with you, to be entering into this next six weeks of practice together. It's a great honor and privilege to spend

this time with you.

I want to briefly introduce Eowyn Ahlstrom, who's a dear friend and will be teaching movement on this retreat. She will be here tomorrow morning and can introduce herself, but I wanted to include her as part of the team this evening. So you'll meet her tomorrow.

I want to echo Greg and Andrea's words. I am so honored to be here with you. I see so many of your sweet faces that I've seen before. We sat these long retreats—it's beautiful, it's unique, something special. For those of you for whom this is your first time, it is special to do this. Difficult, but special. I appreciate both the times I've sat here in this hall on long retreat and the times I've taught here, and I just feel very honored to be here with you, to walk this path with you.

I'm a guiding teacher at Seattle Insight and one of the co-chairs for the Guiding Teachers Council at Spirit Rock. That's where I spend the bulk of my short retreats, but the long ones are here and at Spirit Rock.

I guess the only thing else I would probably want you to know is that I have been practicing sitting for over thirty years. There is nothing—nothing—that you are going to go through or have gone through that I haven't gone through too. So somehow I think we can work through whatever arises.

Good evening. My name is Tuere Sala, for those who don't know me.

So, good evening. Likewise with the others, I really warmly welcome you and appreciate those of you who are welcoming us into what probably has been feeling like your space, as all these new energies are coming in.

My name is Jaya Rudgard, and I'm from the UK. I've been sitting and teaching on these retreats here at IMS for over the last ten years. I'm on the teacher's council at Gaia House Retreat Center in the UK, and my background is that I was a nun in the Thai Forest Sangha in the UK for eight years. That was my foundation.

I will confess that this is my favorite retreat in my favorite retreat center, and I'm so happy to be here with these wonderful colleagues, all of whom I've taught with one or many more times before. I really love this team, and I hope some of that vibe will flavor our retreat.

At this particular time, more than ever, I feel acutely how fortunate we are to have this opportunity. It's something I don't take for granted. Every time I come here to IMS, I realize we don't know what's going to happen in the world. This could be the last time I ever get to be here. It could be the last time I get to teach here or share Dharma here or practice here. And so I really want to make the most of this. My personal intention is to enjoy it as much as possible, and I really hope that you too will enjoy it. I don't think enjoyment and deep practice are opposed—I think they go together. You don't have to suffer too much. You will, and we all will. But I'm really hoping that we can enjoy ourselves also.

Good evening. My name is Marjolein Jonsson. I also want to welcome you all. I'm so very happy to be here

and very grateful to get this opportunity. I'm originally from the Netherlands and now live in Richmond, Virginia with my wife. I'm the guiding teacher at the Insight Center in Richmond and also teach retreats on the East Coast.

I'm here in the role of assistant teacher, which means I'm here to support you all as much as I can, as well as the team. I'm also here to learn and grow as a teacher—I'm actually in teacher training with Andrea and also with Gil Fronsdal. Part of the assistant role is that I'll be offering sign-ups most days of the week, and I might sit in with practice discussions some days so that I can learn and grow in my development as a teacher. I'll also be offering some talks sometimes. I'm looking forward to this retreat with you all.

My name is Brian Lesage, and I'm coming from actually the same town as Greg. We probably live about five or ten minutes away from each other, even though we see more of each other here than there.

What I'd like to share with you about my background might be a little different. I'd like to share what I was doing just a week and a half ago, because it seems like it fits with this retreat. I was on a self-retreat with my partner in a wilderness area outside of Flagstaff—a juniper pinyon forest with no trails in it. There's nobody around, and there can be a real vast, potent silence on this land.

While I was on retreat, what inspired me was the sense that I would be coming here to be on retreat together with you in this role. Because for me, there's something about the silence itself on this retreat that has such potency for one's heart. So you've already inspired me before I've even met you, while I was on retreat.

And it feels so beautiful to be here now at the beginning of this retreat. For me, it really is an honor and delight to get to support you on this journey, whether it's your journey of three months or a journey of six weeks.

As Andrea said, what I'd like to do now is share with you some reflections to begin this retreat together, to begin this journey together. And as a way of beginning, I want to share a ritual that's more in the Zen tradition than this contemporary Theravada tradition—one that's also about the beginning of a journey.

There's quite a striking tradition called *niwazumi* in the Zen tradition that marks monastics' entrance into the monastery. In particular, in Japan, monasteries have different sections to them, and there's a section called the *sōdō*. The sōdō is the place where monastics enter into a life of intensive practice.

What happens in this ritual is the monk goes to the monastery, often with papers from their home temple. They're in their robes. They go up the stairs to the monastery, show their papers, and formally ask to enter. And when they ask to enter the monastery, somebody comes and says to them, "No, you can't enter the monastery. There's no room for you here. What are you thinking? You need to go away, leave."

Then the monastic walks down a few stairs, sits down, usually puts his head in a bowing posture, and stays there.

The midday meal comes. The guest monk comes out and says to this aspiring monastic, "Didn't I tell you we don't have any room? What are you doing here? I told you to leave." And then they'll say something like, "But since you're here, I'll give you some food."

Day goes on, night comes. Somebody from the monastery comes out, exasperated. "Didn't I tell you to leave? There's no room here. But since you're here and it's night, I'll let you sleep in this room for the night. But once the sun starts to come out, you need to get out of here."

So then, sun rises, the monk goes back on the stairs, bowing. And usually this dance, this ritual, goes on for two or three days. At the end of the third day, there's another ritual called *tangazumi* or *tangario*, where it's basically the same process, but then the monk at least gets a room inside the monastery. And then eventually after that, they enter into the sōdō, they enter into the community.

Don't worry, we're not changing things. You don't have to do that.

What's up with this ritual? What is this ritual getting at about beginning a practice period? What comes of this?

For me, when I slow down with the feeling sense of what is kind of now formalized, it's pointing to a particular heart quality: the heart quality of sincerity. The monastery wants to make sure—oh, is this heart that's in front of us, that's on the stairs, is it sincere? Is it really sincere about Dharma practice?

For me, sincerity is the necessary foundation for my Dharma practice, especially for long retreats, whether that's three months or six weeks. To be sincere.

I want to be clear: at least for me, sincerity doesn't need to be stern or rigid. Yes, Zen has that kind of culture to it. But when I sense inside, real sincerity arises for me from a soft heart. A soft heart filled with ease and kindness. A soft heart that says, "Oh, I'm sincere about this."

In the Theravada tradition, there are a couple of Pali words that come to mind that seem similar to the sincerity that this ritual is pointing to. For example, in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, there's this word that's part of the refrain that gets repeated again and again: *ātāpī*, which is often translated as "to be ardent"—to be ardent to practice. Or this other phrase that you find: *dh ammachanda*—this zeal, this love, this sincerity, you could say, for the Dhamma.

What I want to point out about this sincerity at the beginning of this retreat—for some of you, the part two yogis, and at the midway point for the three-month yogis—is that all of you already have this sincerity. I find it so important to start to sense into this sincerity that you already have.

For both the part two yogis and you here for three months, it's actually sincerity that carried you here to IMS. You may think that what carried you was a plane or a car, but that's not really what got you here. What really got you here was your sincerity.

And for you three-month yogis, it's your sincerity that carried you through the first six weeks. It's there, even if it's not acknowledged or recognized. Because sincerity has that quality—it carries me forward in these ways towards the Dhamma.

If I were to ask all of you about what you're sincere about, it would be quite interesting, because I think all of you would probably articulate that in very different ways. And there's something beautiful about that. What makes one person feel the sincerity might be different than another person, and yet we're all practicing this path together at the same time.

Maybe for some of you, you are sincere in your aspiration for healing or for awakening. Or you're sincere because you aspire to discover a deeper way of being in this world. Maybe you're sincere about wanting to learn how to truly love yourself and to truly love others. Or perhaps because you're simply in love with the Dhamma, or maybe for the benefit of all beings.

What I'd like to invite you to do right now is to take a moment in the silence to sense into your heart so you can touch your heartfelt sincerity. Notice what comes—how you articulate that sincerity, what you're sincere about, to yourself. Share that with yourself, feel that in the silence for just a minute or so.

Thank you for taking a few moments here to touch your sincerity. I invite you during this retreat to find ways to keep in contact with that sincerity. Because what I've discovered in my practice, especially on long retreat, is that when I'm connected with that heartfelt sincerity, it actually doesn't matter what happens on retreat. It doesn't matter if it's a bad retreat or a good retreat or whatever. What's important for me is just to be sincere about practicing. That's it. That's all that's needed—just to be sincere in your practice. Maybe sincere in your intention to be kind. Sincere in your intention to be present.

And when I'm connected with this sincerity, it doesn't even matter how much of my time I am kind or present. Because it's the sincerity that's important. And that's quite significant, because I'm not in complete control of how often I'm going to be kind and how often there's going to be presence. Have you noticed that, especially the three-monthers? It's not like you get up in the morning and say, "This morning I'm just going to be present every single moment, and then the afternoon I'm going to decide to slack off for a while, and I'll get back to it in the evening, and then I'm going to switch it up tomorrow." That's never happened for me on retreat. If it has for you, please leave me a note—I'm so curious if that's possible. This mind, it's wild. So I can't completely control, but I can be sincere. And this is the whole art that I'm sure many of my colleagues and I will talk about.

I also find this connection with my sincerity helpful because on retreat, especially long retreat, I've noticed how subtle and sometimes even unconscious notions of "success" can be percolating in my mind, often unbeknownst to me. These are like subtle forms of craving that can creep into this mind. I want to point out that those notions, if you've noticed them creeping around, those notions of success are not the same as sincerity. Sincerity is something deeper. It's not swayed by success and failure. Those words don't even mean anything to my sincerity.

So I invite you to stay close to your sincerity, to keep it close to your heart. And as all of you enter this community of silence together, I want you to stay in contact with your sincerity in a particular way for this transition time. For those of you on the three-month retreat, I want to acknowledge—this isn't always the case for everyone—but this transition time can feel so bumpy and disruptive in so many different ways. You have all these new teachers up here on the stage. Part one, there weren't as many yogis, there was more space, and now there are all these new faces, more of them all around. The heart can be so sensitive. So important, the sincerity, especially around kindness and compassion for oneself and for others.

And for you coming into the middle of this retreat for six weeks, the same thing—being in contact with that sincerity of kindness and compassion as you transition into retreat time. When I'm in contact with sincerity that way, and recognizing that other yogis are doing the same, it allows me to have a sense of kindness not only for myself but for those around me as well. And it's in this way that we can offer each other the needed silence and solitude for the unfolding of this path.

I'd like to end by sharing with you this quote by the poet Rilke, where he's talking about solitude, which I liken so much to retreat. And interwoven in it, what I hear are these threads of him pointing to sincerity. He says, "What is necessary after all is only this:

Solitude. A vast inner solitude. To walk inside yourself and meet no one for hours. That is what you must be able to attain.

To be solitary means as you were when you were a child, when the grown-ups walked around involved with matters that seemed large and important because they looked so busy, and because you didn't understand a thing about what they were doing. And when you realize that their activities are shabby, that their vocations are petrified and no longer connected with life, why not then continue to look upon it all as a child would? As if you were looking at something unfamiliar out of the depths of your own world, from the vastness of your own solitude—which is itself work and status and vocation.

Why should you want to give up a child's wise not-understanding in exchange for defensiveness and scorn? Since not understanding is, after all, a way of being alone. Whereas defensiveness and scorn are a participation in precisely what, by these means, you want to separate yourself from.

So for this retreat, remember, as Rilke is pointing to: you don't have to be like those grown-ups. You just need to be sincere.

I love this idea of vast solitude. It really speaks to so much of what I feel is precious about this retreat. And it also seems precious to me that we get to experience this vast solitude at the same time in the warmth and the structure and the support of community. To me, that is a very powerful combination.

I'm very aware that those of you who are continuing have lost some of the community you've probably become quite fond of this morning. You probably did some kind of ceremony that we often call "parting of the ways." It's as if a river that was flowing together forked—one fork left, another fork flowed on. This evening there's another confluence, and a new river is joining our stream. We continue to flow on, merging these energies together.

We're going to do that in a ritual way, a traditional ritual way, by chanting the refuges and the precepts together. This will be our chance to blend our voices as this particular community—blend our voices and our sincerity and our intentions.

The refuges and the precepts give us a sense of direction: putting our trust in the Buddha, in awakening; in the Dhamma, the teachings, the truth of the way things are; and in Sangha, community. How each of us imagines and experiences those refuges—again, there will be nuances of difference, and it will unfold for us in the course of the retreat. But we're all here because we have some trust in this, or we wouldn't be here on a six-week or three-month retreat.

And then this common intention of ethics—the precepts by which we practice harmlessness towards the world and towards ourselves. They give us a kind of structure. The riverbed is safe and secure, the practice energy is not going to leak, and it's going to move in the right direction. We will look after one another by keeping to the refuges and precepts.

We're also flowing with the tradition and the momentum of everyone who has been practicing in this way, who is practicing in this way, and who will practice in this way in the future. We can tap into some of that energy as we align our intentions with skillfulness—skillful behavior of body, speech, and mind.

And then the piece at the end: *Idam me sīla*.

SĀDHU SĀDHU SĀDHU

I'd like to share a quote from the Majjhima Nikāya about these rivers that we're joining together:

Just as the river Ganges inclines towards the sea, slopes towards the sea, flows towards the sea, and extends all the way to the sea, so too the Buddha's assembly with its homeless ones and its householders inclines towards Nibbāna, slopes towards Nibbāna, flows towards Nibbāna, and extends all the way to Nibbāna.

May it be so.

We're going to have a little sit here to close this session. But before we do, I always think of this little reflection that Ian McCrory wrote in his book, *The Moon Appears When the Water is Still*. He said there were two monks walking together on a long journey. At some point, one of the monks said to the other, "I really like walking alone." And his companion responded, "I like walking with you too."

That's sort of what we're doing here. Each one of us is really walking your own path, your own practice,

your own unfolding. It unfolds in its own way based on your own karma and your own life circumstances, causes, and conditions. It unfolds on its own. And at the same time, it's truly beautiful and special to walk that path with other people. We're kind of walking together here, and I really appreciate that we're all going through whatever is in front of our path. We're doing it together, and yet we're doing it alone.

This is the nature of this practice. It's the nature of Sangha that we are alone and together at the same time.

So let us begin this retreat. Our opening ceremony is sitting together, alone.

You can start by just getting a sense of the room itself. Even if you don't close your eyes, you can sense into the room and the people in the room. The sounds. The silence. Your ears have been hearing the same sounds and silence since we came into the room, but now we're turning our attention towards that also.

You can have a sense of just arriving here in the room. It's not a really big effort. You don't have to make the mind go anywhere. You can just let the ears do what they're already doing and hear the sounds that are arising here in the room, and the silence, and the ebb and flow of that—my voice coming in and out of that silence. You could actually sit here, just here. And as Brian was so beautifully reflecting, the sincerity of just being willing to hear the sounds is enough.

You could feel your body's posture sitting here. You could feel the weight of the body on the cushion or the chair. Weight from the underside of the legs or the back of the arms. Feel the hardness of the bones. It doesn't matter that it's soft tissue or flesh—you can still feel hardness, heaviness, pressure. You could feel the tingling sensations of movement that has been moving since you came into the room, but now you're inclining your attention towards it. You could sit here and just feel that movement.

Or you can let your attention rest on the breath and just feel the body sitting here breathing. No big effort. Not needing to go anywhere, do anything. It's really just these simple few moments of sitting here together with each other, and alone with your own breath, body, sounds.

Just have a sense that this is enough. For right now, this moment, this is enough.

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