Retreat Opening Part Two

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We can think of ourselves as being in our meditation hall together.

This retreat, this form of retreat—a couple of you mentioned it was your first retreat online. Some of you, your first retreat altogether. This is I think the sixth or seventh online retreat that I've taught since April, and I'm beginning to appreciate and discover that it's a whole new form of practice.

It does have this possibility of blending the intensive retreat that we do when we seclude ourselves at a retreat center with daily life. And it's been very powerful for a lot of people to enter into this form in which the intention and the cultivation of the practice is infused right into your home environment, your daily lives, some of your more normal interactions—with family perhaps, or with neighbors, or going to the grocery store even. Some of you may be choosing to seclude yourselves a little more, and that's absolutely fine. As I said a little while ago, this practice carries between intensive, silent, formal practice and daily life practice.

But this form where we are practicing as a community, but in our own environments, has a power that I was not really prepared for. I wasn't really prepared for the depth of new kinds of learning that seemed to be happening for people in this form. And we are creating this form together. It is a little bit of an experiment, how these retreats work. But I like to think in this way: that our meditation hall has become enormous. We span the globe from California to Europe to China. It's kind of amazing that we have this huge meditation hall. And so maybe when you walk out your door, you might think of that being your meditation hall too.

Our practice, the reason we practice—I just like to remind us all of this at the beginning of a retreat—we practice so that we can understand our minds, understand how our minds habitually get caught in stress, in suffering, in confusion. And that understanding, the wisdom that comes through understanding: the natural consequences of that understanding are that the mind, our organism, our system begins to reorient, to let go of those patterns and habits that tend to take us to suffering, that tend to create stress, dissatisfaction, unhappiness in our lives. And the system moves in the direction of qualities of heart and mind, of action that supports happiness, that supports ease, peace in our lives.

And yet this is not an instantaneous kind of transformation. It is a gradual path. The Buddha speaks of the path as being a gradual path. And so it requires patience and trust also in watching our minds do the things that we do habitually. That's a lot of what we get to see when we open our attention to what's happening in our experience. We get to see the ways in which we're struggling, the ways in which we're caught. And just simply seeing it usually doesn't make it go away. The understanding that develops takes

time. It takes time for that wisdom to grow.

And so part of what we get to do is to watch those habits and patterns. We watch them from the perspective of being curious about them. One analogy that I really love in connection to this practice is that what we're doing is really studying nature. Our systems are a form of nature. We are studying our hearts and our minds as nature, like a naturalist who goes out into the world, into the forest, to be curious about how the systems of the forest work. What kind of animals feed at these plants or where do they live? What kind of communities do they form? How do the plants and animals interact? A naturalist sits in nature and observes and learns. And that takes time. You don't sit down for one day or even two or three days and learn everything there is to be learned.

This is the kind of approach we are taking here. We are curious about our systems. How do our systems work? Where do they tend to get knotted up and constricted? How does that happen? And the seeing of that, the understanding that grows with that, begins to release those patterns in a skillful way.

And the key tool, the key tool in many ways to this being a naturalist, being an observer of our own system, is mindfulness. Awareness. Being aware of what's happening in the present moment. And as with a naturalist, if you're sitting out in nature and falling asleep while in nature, you're not going to learn very much. Awareness needs to be there. There needs to be an establishment of that mindfulness, establishment of awareness over time.

And this is our work. We explore how we can become aware moment after moment after moment.

Going to help the mind learn and understand, to shift the mind and heart away from stress and suffering—it is a kind of awareness that has a particular perspective. A perspective of curiosity about experience. A perspective of curiosity about what is this human system.

Like a naturalist who goes out simply to be curious about how these systems interact, what is this nature? The naturalist isn't going out to try to find those things that will make them rich, or to try to get rid of the things they don't like. It is simply to be curious. This is the form of mindfulness—this curious, balanced curiosity about what is this human experience. And so that's the kind of mindfulness we explore establishing.

Tonight I'm just going to take a few minutes to overview some of the tools that help this establishment of mindfulness. Then tomorrow morning, we'll go into a little more depth.

The first tool that is incredibly helpful—not only for this form of practice, which I would call receptive awareness—is relaxation. In receptive awareness, we are not necessarily choosing what we pay attention to. Instead, we are seeing what our system is up to. What is already happening? What's already going on? We settle back like the naturalist and just receive what's happening, not trying to control it.

Relaxation is a key support for this kind of receptive practice. Sayadaw U Tejaniya talked about relaxation

a lot, and it finally got into my head how important it was for this form of practice. But subsequently, I've seen how valuable relaxation is for any form of meditation practice—whether you're doing loving-kindness practice, concentration practice, breath meditation, or receptive awareness practice. Relaxation is key.

Starting with relaxing the body, allowing the body to relax. You can play with this now while I speak about it. Just letting the body relax. Allowing the muscles of the body to relax. As the body relaxes, it helps our mind to relax a little bit.

The body and mind are very tightly connected, very tightly coupled. When the mind is tense, it reflects in the body, and the body tends to become tense. And likewise, that reflection goes two ways. When the body is tense, it also reflects on the mind, and the mind tends to become tense. It's a two-way street.

If you can relax the body—in particular, there are a few areas of the face. The face is such a reflection of what's going on in the mind. If the face can relax, that sometimes really helps the mind to relax. So letting the face relax, maybe the neck and shoulders and other parts of the body. And perhaps inside the body can relax—the throat, the heart, the stomach, the intestines. As the body relaxes, maybe you'll notice there's a little bit more relaxation of mind.

The body relaxing supports the mind to be more relaxed. A mind that is not relaxed, that is tense, tends to be caught up in past and future, wound up in thoughts, worries, concerns. When the mind relaxes those thoughts, those worries and concerns, what happens is that the mind tends to land in the present moment—being here, available to know what's happening.

Relaxation—relaxing the body, relaxing the mind—creates the conditions for a very natural awareness, for mindfulness to be present. With this relaxation, perhaps you notice that you're aware.

This is actually simple, although not something we tend to orient to. Mostly, when we are aware, we are curious about what we are aware of—body sensations, thoughts, emotions, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch. But can you be curious about whether you are aware?

You may not quite know how you know you're aware. You don't have to figure that part out. But do you know that you're aware right now? If you're listening to me, you're not lost in thought or asleep in this moment. You are aware. Just knowing that you're aware, having that understanding—that's enough in this moment.

This aspect of recognizing that we are aware is a key support for this practice. Because if we can recognize that we are aware, it doesn't matter what we are aware of. The establishment of mindfulness, the continuity of mindfulness, is connected with just knowing that we're aware. This is how mindfulness is established in this practice—the recognition that we're aware.

And what happens in that is a flow of changing experiences. We don't have to try to stay with one object

or experience, such as the breath.

Often we have practiced or cultivated meditation practices around being with the breath or being with one particular experience. That is a way, and a very helpful way, to cultivate mindfulness. This practice is slightly different. We're not choosing what to pay attention to, but rather anchoring or connecting with the experience of being aware, and then simply noticing what's here.

It doesn't matter moment to moment—just aware of a body sensation, then a thought, another body sensation, perhaps a sight, perhaps a breath, perhaps an emotion or a feeling. Moment after moment: are you aware? And what is happening? What is obvious?

This is the other piece of being mindful. There's the knowing that we're aware, and then: what is awareness aware of? Recognizing awareness, and what is obvious. What is the mind already paying attention to? We don't have to choose it. We don't have to choose what to pay attention to.

This was a shift for me. Early in my practice, I thought that if I was not choosing the object of meditation, if I didn't have control over what mindfulness was paying attention to, then it meant I wasn't being mindful. This more receptive practice helped me understand that mindfulness is a different function of mind than attention.

Attention is what pulls experience out of our environment to orient to. And there is a way that attention is subject to our conscious control. We can choose: I'm going to pay attention to my hands right now, I'm going to pay attention to a breath right now. So attention is amenable to conscious control; attention can be directed. But it doesn't have to be consciously directed.

If we are settled back like the naturalist, our attention may be drawn from one thing to another without our consciously choosing where it lands. We can watch, or be curious about, where attention goes—not being in charge of it.

Another analogy that might support this approach is to think about being the passenger in a car as opposed to the driver. When you're driving, you're making the choices. You're deciding where to go, which turns to take. You're in charge and having to navigate. As the passenger, you can just sit there and watch the scenery go by. You don't have to be concerned about making the choices. You don't have to check out and go to sleep either, though. You can be there, alert and curious about the environment passing by.

This is the form of practice we're exploring. Are you aware? And in each moment, what is obvious?

How about right now? Maybe something in the body—body sensations are often pretty obvious. It could be a breath. But how about now? Maybe it's hearing, attending to the sound of my voice. Or maybe it's a feeling, an emotion or a mood. Are you aware? What is obvious?

There will be times when we can't be with what is obvious—when what is obvious is too painful, too habitually sticky, and it pulls us out of awareness. I sometimes use the analogy from Alice in Wonderland

of going into the rabbit hole. Sometimes our mind states that come, that naturally come, can pull us into them. It's like they're quicksand or a whirlpool. We get pulled under.

When that's happening, sometimes we can't simply be with what is obvious, and we may need to redirect our attention, to choose a place for attention for a time. Use some of your familiar tools—perhaps those of you who've practiced before know tools that help you regain your mindfulness. We'll talk more about working with difficulty, working with it when we can't just be with what's obvious.

And yet, very often, we have more capacity to just be with what's here than we give ourselves credit for.

Can you just know right now what's happening? Are you aware? And what is obvious?

If it feels like the mind is flailing, unable to simply take that stance of settling back in the car and watching things come through, then just start by picking something easy to connect with. Maybe it's the contact of your hips against the chair, cushion, bench, or couch. Maybe it's a breath. Maybe it's the sensations of your hands. Just let your attention land somewhere.

But then you don't have to hold on to that. Once you've let your attention land somewhere, it can stay there for as long as it wants to. But at some point, the attention will be pulled to something else. You'll be paying attention to your hands and then suddenly you'll notice that the attention is listening instead. Then you can just notice, "Oh, the attention has shifted to listening. Aware that listening is happening." And then maybe it shifts to a breath, and then maybe to an emotion—a kind of following where the attention goes.

Our effort in this practice is very light, very settled back. We simply receive what's here, what's here now. What's the next thing? Just enough effort to stay connected with this moment. Just enough to be with what's happening now. And then do it again, and again, and again. Just this light—the lightest touch of effort. A little bit of effort each moment.

The other piece of this practice, alongside relaxing, recognizing awareness, and noticing what's obvious: from time to time, it's useful to check your relationship with experience—how you are in relationship to experience. This is a place where, in the mind, we tend to get caught in stress, suffering, dissatisfaction, and aversion.

Something is happening, an unpleasant experience, and we don't like it. Sometimes that not-liking is hidden behind the scenes. We're not consciously aware. We're not recognizing that there's something unpleasant and that not-liking is part of what's happening. Instead, there's something unpleasant and we are not liking it, in a way trying to adjust or figure out how to get rid of that thing. We're not clearly aware of the not-liking. It's not an experience that we're knowing as another creature that's come out of the forest—"There's this unpleasant experience, and the not-liking creature has joined it."

That's the approach: exploring what the relationship is begins to reveal hidden creatures. And then we can simply become aware of them.

So notice, from time to time, how you are in relationship to experience. It might be a flavor of wanting something to happen, a flavor of greed. It might be a flavor of aversion, of wanting to get rid of something. It might be a flavor of confusion, uncertainty, not sure what to do—views or beliefs, a flavor of delusion at work in the mind. Or it might be the flavor of balance of mind: "This is okay, not a problem." The mind is calm, connected, with a feeling of compassion or kindness toward experience.

This is what Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls wise attitude or right attitude—a perspective that allows us to be at ease with whatever's happening in the present moment. It's useful to notice when that's happening, because when the mind is at ease, wholesome qualities are present in the mind. It's useful to recognize those wholesome qualities.

We'll talk about all of this more in the coming days. This is really just a basic overview of the teachings that Sayadaw U Tejaniya offers: Relax. Recognize the awareness. Recognize that you're aware.

That's so important. Are you aware? What is obvious? And then, from time to time, noticing how you are in relationship to experience.

So the instructions are pretty simple. And yet what they reveal in terms of the workings of our mind is amazingly complex. The practice itself, however, remains simple—a simple mind meeting experience. It's like the simplicity of the naturalist sitting there observing, while the vast complexity that is observed unfolds before them. But the naturalist's job is simple: just to observe. In that observing, our natural intelligence begins to put the understanding together. You don't have to do that part.

Another piece of the opening evening is an entry into the retreat container in the form of commitments, agreements that we make together to practice together. And so we'll talk about the refuges and the precepts.

A few words about what the refuges and the precepts are and why they are important to talk about at the beginning of retreats, as is usually done in this tradition on the opening evening. The five precepts are five ethical guidelines introduced by the Buddha, five ethical practice guidelines. In Finnish, we usually say *vii si harjoitusohjetta*.

If you're new to this practice or to this tradition, you might be surprised to hear that actually quite often when the Buddha taught meditation—or actually before he taught meditation—he taught ethics, taught about ethical behavior in the world as an important foundation for practicing meditation.

The essence of these precepts is to refrain from harming any living beings. In Finnish we would say, *pidätt äydytään vahingoittamasta eläviä olentoja*. So refraining from harming the other yogis on the retreat, refraining from harming the managers or the teachers or anybody around here, your family members, friends, colleagues. Also including yourself—we so often forget about ourselves, and our attitude towards

ourselves might be quite harsh and demanding and judgmental oftentimes. So this retreat could also be taken as an opportunity to really take care with your attitude towards everybody else and yourself, and then see if it could be about acceptance and kindness and compassion.

The first precept really encompasses all the others, but traditionally we chant these precepts. That's kind of challenging on Zoom, we have noticed. So I would actually like to invite you to pause for a moment, closing your eyes if you like, and just silently in your own mind, in your own words, take this first precept in your own way—to refrain from harming living beings for the duration of this retreat.

As I was already beginning to say, the first precept really encompasses all the others, but the Buddha chose to give us some more detail in the form of the four others.

The second precept is about refraining from taking that which is not given—refraining from taking the possessions of others. What we want to avoid is that our own happiness and well-being wouldn't come at the expense of others. And we might discover with practice that our well-being and happiness and contentment is actually much more about inner life and what happens inside rather than about our material possessions. So again, inviting you to pause for a moment and committing to this precept in your own way—refraining from taking that which is not given for the duration of this retreat.

The third precept asks us to refrain from harm through our sexuality. All kinds of impulses can arise and do arise in the human mind, and that's okay—we can allow all that. But what we are trying to do is to let go of any impulses that lead to harm, in this case, any harmful sexual impulses. So again, pausing for a moment, committing to the precept of refraining from harm through sexuality.

The fourth precept is about refraining from harmful speech. This one looks a bit different depending on your circumstances. As has been said before, some of you might be sitting this retreat in seclusion and silence, not meeting anybody the entire time. Some of you might be interacting with your family, even going to work. There's no right or wrong way of doing this retreat. Definitely, if there's any comparing mind, you can try to let go of that as best as you can. This practice and these precepts can be applied to any situation.

If you are in a situation where you're interacting with others, this is a really great and valuable place of practice. Really paying attention to how you speak to others—trying to do it in a way that's not harmful, saying things that are truthful, saying things that are useful, saying things when it's a good time to say them, saying things with a kind intention in a kind way. This is a practice that can really carry over till after the retreat, because harmful speech creates so much suffering in our lives. Something really valuable to practice if you have the opportunity.

So again, pausing, and in your mind, in your own words, committing to the precept of refraining from harmful speech.

The fifth and final precept is about refraining from taking intoxicants that cloud the mind. On this retreat,

in this practice, we are trying to create conditions that best support clarity of mind, alertness of mind, to support the arising of wisdom. If we take that beer or that glass of wine, it's rather counterproductive. So perhaps not the thing to do here. However, if you're on medication prescribed by your doctor, please do continue taking that. It's very important that you don't quit your prescribed medication on retreat.

I like to extend this precept to a more general situation. Our mind has such a tendency to want to avoid the unpleasant, to not feel the unpleasant, to distract ourselves from the unpleasant. If you're in a home environment, you might get interested in impulses—impulses in the mind. When you meet something unpleasant in the body or in the mind, like an unpleasant emotion, perhaps there's an impulse to open that beer, or maybe there's an impulse to look at the phone, or maybe there's an impulse to turn on the TV, just to distract yourself or escape from that unpleasantness.

So perhaps we can expand this precept to mean refraining from distractions to the practice, distractions to awareness, distractions to presence as much as possible. Instead, we give ourselves a chance to actually feel what's going on, to turn towards what's going on, to allow what's going on. This can be a really healing thing to do, a wise thing to do. So again, in your own words, pausing to commit to this precept—to refrain from taking intoxicants that cloud the mind.

A few words about the three refuges. Refuge is a word that refers to a place of safety or a source of support. We all take refuge in something. We all need to take refuge in something in life. When things get difficult, we need some help and support when facing something challenging. Our refuges can be more or less skillful, and in the context of this tradition, we offer you three skillful refuges to take. These are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—the so-called Triple Gem.

Taking refuge in the Buddha doesn't mean anything like blind adoration of a statue or anything like that. Rather, it's about remembering that there was this real human being living in the area of Nepal and India about 2600 years ago, who was practicing and one day sat under the Bodhi tree and became awakened. He found freedom—full, complete freedom from suffering and distress and dissatisfaction and confusion. Remembering this reminds us that it's not just one special being or a few special beings who have this capacity to find freedom and awakening, but actually all human beings have that capacity, including you. So taking refuge in the Buddha means taking refuge in knowing that you have that seed of awakening inside you, that capacity yourself.

Taking refuge in the Dharma—Dharma is a word with many meanings. One of them is the teachings of the Buddha. Taking refuge in the Dharma could mean trusting that those teachings work. They are teachings about how the mind and heart get caught in suffering and distress and confusion, and teachings about how the heart and mind can be freed. Taking refuge in the Dharma means trusting that these teachings actually work and are enough to lead where you want to go.

Finally, taking refuge in the Sangha, the community of practitioners. The manager so beautifully spoke about this, how all of us are here to support each other, how the managers themselves find it so important

to feel this connection and offer support, even feeling gratitude for being able to do that.

Perhaps at this point, taking a look at your screen, all these small tiles, really taking in everybody here, seeing all these people who are going to be here on this retreat with you for these five days. Most people feel that it's so much easier to practice in a group than alone. Imagine being just alone for four or five days without anybody—no yogis, no teachers, no managers. But you have all these people here in front of you who are going to sit with you and practice with you, go through challenging times with you and perhaps more joyful times with you.

This is your sangha for the retreat. Taking refuge in the support that everybody here is going to offer to everybody—the yogis, the managers, and the teachers. So inviting you one more time to pause for a moment, closing your eyes, and in your own way, in your own words, taking refuge in the Buddha, in the Dharma, and in the Sangha for the duration of this retreat.

When you're ready, at your own pace, coming back to your screen.

We have just a few minutes left together this evening. So let's sit together. Finding yourself a posture that feels relaxed and yet alert. Relaxation and alertness are not opposites. The body and mind can be very relaxed and very alert at the same time. Sometimes I find a way into this with a word or two: sitting with dignity. An expression of integrity. Relaxed dignity. Allowing the body to relax, the mind to relax.

Maybe taking a few moments to scan through the body. Just noticing if there are areas of tension and seeing if they can be softened, relaxed, released.

As you're relaxing the body, you are using awareness. Awareness is present. Aware while relaxing. Being aware while relaxing the body.

As the body relaxes, it supports the mind to relax. Maybe the mind can relax.

And checking in, curious about being aware. Are you aware? Starting with aware while relaxing, and then just shifting to aware. What are you aware of? What is obvious?

Settling back like that naturalist, curious perhaps of the feeling sense in the body and mind.

We often use language about looking at, seeing, observing for mindfulness. And yet some other language might serve us—perhaps feeling, being with, experiencing, receiving. It's receiving. It's already here.

In each moment this may change, and that's okay. You don't have to chase after experience. Let experience come to you. Relax. Recognize awareness and notice what is obvious.

It's the end of your day, and you've been on the computer for quite a while. You're welcome to turn off your computer, but I would encourage you—if you are planning to find your way to resting at this point—can you be aware? Exploring that possibility: aware while taking care of your shiftings to get towards bed. Being aware.

For some of you, you may still have some energy, perhaps to do some walking or another sitting. The hall is always open, and you're welcome to stay connected with people in this way as well.

But if it is time for your rest, please take your rest—and rest with awareness until you fall asleep.

See you in the morning.

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