Taking the Practice Home

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 32:32

For quite a number of you, this has been your first retreat, and some of you have been practicing this entire time in silence and seclusion. It's important for you to be aware that during this sort of time in silence, we might become more open and more sensitive than we might realize.

So when you leave this retreat container, you might find yourself reacting to things more strongly than usual, having stronger emotional reactions than usual. You might find that your ordinary life all of a sudden seems way too busy and fast and full—and life in general out there. You might find that you get agitated, or you might find that you get really tired and exhausted, or you might find that it keeps changing in the next couple of days. This is all a normal reaction to the changing conditions.

It's going to take a while to transition back to your ordinary life if you've been in seclusion, just as it took a while to transition to the silence of the retreat. For you and for everybody else as well, it's wonderful if you happen to have the opportunity to take good care of yourself in these next days—to have some more quiet alone time for yourself than usual to ensure a smooth and comfortable transition back to your life. If possible, avoid too many demands on yourself. It might not be the best idea to go check all your emails right after the closing session and try to reply to all of them tonight. You might try to spread that over a longer period of time. Perhaps the to-do list can wait a little bit too.

Also, if it's been your first retreat and you've had deep experiences, take care about who you share them with. Somebody who hasn't been on retreat themselves might not understand very much, and it might feel dismissive sharing with somebody like that. So maybe just share with people who seem to be genuinely interested in your experience, to avoid any hurt feelings.

When you go back to your ordinary life and the retreat ends, it's really wonderful if you're able to keep practicing. You might be feeling energized and inspired and motivated right now at the end of a retreat, but you know that everything changes—so that will change as well. As months go by, the memory of the retreat might fade and the memory of those experiences might fade. It's helpful to maintain connection to what's truly motivating you to practice. Maybe you had a significant experience that put you in touch with something deep within that you feel is important to you. If you have an experience like that, try to bring it to mind every now and then just to remember what's important in life and why you want to be doing this. Or perhaps regularly listen to inspiring Dharma talks or read inspiring Dharma books—just keep that flame of inner motivation burning.

It's also very helpful to have a regular practice going on. If you don't have a regular daily practice yet, right after a retreat is an excellent time to establish one in your life. There's this momentum of awareness

going on, and motivation and energy. This is a really good time to establish daily practice. You might consider making a plan for the next month or so—something that seems realistic given your particular life conditions. How long to sit? What time to sit? Where to sit? For instance, making a plan that for the next month, it would seem wise and realistic to sit half an hour per day in the morning between brushing my teeth and having breakfast, in the corner of the living room where nobody disturbs me at that time of day. Then after a month, sit down to evaluate how it went and whether any changes need to be made.

When you get this practice going, when you get this habit built up, this regularity built up, it's going to start supporting you even more. When we have habits like brushing our teeth in the morning, we don't have to think about them every morning—whether we have the time and the energy to brush our teeth or not. We just do it. The same thing with practice. If you manage to build this kind of daily practice habit, it's going to be very helpful for you in the future.

Several things can support your practice and help you build up that routine. One is perhaps using meditation apps like the Insight Timer. You might want to listen to a guided meditation sometimes instead of doing silent meditation. There are also certain websites with helpful resources. There's a website called dharmaseed.org—there's enough to listen to there for the rest of your life, probably. There are tons of good books around as well. And of course, other people, a group of practitioners, a sangha, is a great support.

I'm going to mostly talk about practicing and how it feels a little different, perhaps, after the retreat ends. Some of you have been doing a more integrated practice in this form and have perhaps gotten more of a taste of what it's like to have that practice infuse regular activities. But what I would mostly say is that the container of the retreat itself is significant. Some of you have been doing just the morning and evening sessions while working during the day, and so maybe it feels like whatever momentum of mindfulness you've found will simply continue. But the container of those morning and evening sessions is a condition that really supports the momentum of mindfulness.

You'll probably experience some momentum continuing as you come out of the retreat—some elevated capacity and natural awareness happening. But it will change. It will not likely continue at that level. So I'm going to point to a few things, a few of the instructions that might support you.

As we said around sitting versus walking, or sitting versus daily activities, the instructions are the same. That's one great thing about this practice—there's no difference in the instructions. Allow there to be relaxation. Are you aware? What's obvious? What's the attitude? We can do this in our daily lives.

What is different, though—and for those of you who have been more secluded, this will be a bigger shift—is that in formal practice, the experience tends to be a little more internal, can get more subtle perhaps. We're noticing more about the subtlety of body sensations and thoughts in the formal practice. In daily life practice, the objects may be different. They may be just more ordinary—ordinary experience.

This is a place where recognizing the awareness is so important. Recognizing, "Yes, I'm aware of ordinary experience." It has a different quality. It's got that more panoramic quality, being aware of ordinary experience. To begin to recognize the awareness in the ordinary will support the continuity of mindfulness. And what I've seen is that as the continuity of mindfulness builds in the ordinary activities of daily life, then when you sit down to meditate, that momentum is more available. There's a kind of nice flow between sitting and daily life practice.

A couple of key pieces from the instructions to highlight: in the retreat form, we can notice the efforting potentially, although we've been encouraging a more relaxed and receptive approach. Still, the intention toward "Am I aware?"—the recognizing of awareness—has been your main focus this whole time. When we shift into ordinary life, into daily life, we have other things to do. Those of you doing the more integrated retreats know the shift that happens when we have to go to our jobs or our work. There are agendas we have to pick up and engage with. When we have those agendas in mind, holding two agendas—holding the agenda of writing this memo to my boss and being aware while doing it—can be quite challenging.

And so what I find in working with people in daily life, in terms of cultivating the momentum of awareness, is to not emphasize trying to do the mindfulness when you have a particular agenda that takes a lot of mental activity.

You can do it when you're doing things like being in the kitchen, perhaps. You've got the agenda for preparing a meal. We've been practicing that kind of awareness. And so in those times you could be trying to remember awareness. But when you have a particularly mental emphasis on the activity, trying to do the awareness is going to feel like it gets in the way. It's like, "Oh, I've got to think about what to say to this person. Oh, can I be aware? Think about what to say. Oh, can I be aware?" It just doesn't allow the natural flow of the mind following its train of focusing on that task.

And yet, we might think that this means we can't have mindfulness in that task, and that's not true. It is more that the momentum of mindfulness needs to build, and then that momentum can infuse that experience. The momentum of mindfulness builds over time.

One of the key ways for that to build, and I may have mentioned this earlier, is to notice the moments of mindfulness returning. It will return in many situations. And so that one practice—I would say that one practice in my daily life has been the key for building and inspiring and having the mindfulness begin to infuse everything.

Mindfulness will return even in the midst of a very intense activity. It will return even just for a moment, and just—oh, there it is. This is what it's like to be aware while focusing on writing an email. But then you don't have to try to keep doing it. Just take in that that is possible. Let it go and get on with your day. But notice those moments of mindfulness returning. It happens way more than you think. It happens a lot.

And yet we often don't notice it because when that moment of mindfulness returns, it's like, well, in some ways the attention shifts, and for a moment we know that the attention has shifted, but we're immediately picking up on what the attention has shifted to—and not aware that we recognized there was that shift of attention.

So noticing that shift of attention is another piece. Sometimes when the attention shifts, like we're sitting there doing something really intensive and then we get distracted, we hear a loud noise, there's a split second of being aware in that moment. But often we just leap immediately on annoyance for whatever made that loud noise. If we can attune ourselves to those moments of mindfulness returning, recognize the effortless nature of those, see that it's revealing something in that moment, but then just get on with your day—just get on with whatever you're doing. Not trying to hold on to the mindfulness there.

The other key piece, the practice tool that Sayadaw offers, is fifty-fifty mindfulness: fifty percent of the attention on the content of what we're doing, fifty percent of the attention on how we are. That's a great practice for daily life. And that can be used in many activities. The intensive focus, maybe not. But you can cultivate and practice with it.

For instance, if you're reading the news at some times, it's really great to practice this fifty-fifty awareness. You're essentially, in reading the news, taking in content, taking in information. It's kind of like you're receiving the contents of somebody else's mind there. So you're receiving information. And how are you while you're receiving that information? How does it land? How does it affect you?

In reading the news, you can slow it down a little bit so that you can practice this fifty-fifty awareness. At first it might feel like a going back and forth. You may like just look at the headlines at first. Okay, how did that land? Let yourself read the headlines, then take a moment and sit back, then read a couple paragraphs from an article. Okay, how did that land? How am I with this?

At first it can feel like a going back and forth, but over time we develop the skill to be able to read, to take in the content and know simultaneously, even as we're reading a word, how we're responding to that word. This fifty-fifty awareness can be used in so many different ways. And I really encourage exploration of that piece.

This is hard. Daily life practice is genuinely difficult. This is graduate-level practice, the advanced work of taking what we learn on retreat out into our ordinary lives. So please have some compassion for yourself about how challenging it is. Don't berate yourself when you find mindfulness getting lost more frequently, when the habits and patterns, the ways you typically respond to things, keep coming back or are just right there. If you're noticing them, that's great news. If you're noticing those habits and patterns, that itself is the practice working. So just hold some compassion for yourself around all of this.

There were a couple of questions I want to address before we shift the recording. One person mentioned that this has been helpful, that waking up consistently at six o'clock has been fantastic, and they're hoping

to keep it up. They wondered if there might be some support for that, perhaps groups meeting at that time.

The schedule here has been 6:30 to 9:30 Greenwich Mean Time plus two, which I think is about Finnish time zone. I don't know of regular meetings that happen at that particular time. Anna and I were talking about it, and we think it would have to be groups further east in Europe, perhaps Russia, that zone of the world. Neither of us is aware of groups meeting at that time, but you can certainly look online.

There are many regular meetings available at times that do work for that time zone, usually in the later afternoon. In California, Gil Fronsdal is currently offering sessions at 7:30 a.m. Pacific time, which I think is about 5:30 p.m. Finnish time. Every morning he offers about an hour with a guided meditation and a short dharma talk. It involves quite a lot of guidance, but he does wonderful series working with various themes in practice. So that's available.

I'll be teaching as well. I have a regular group that meets at 9:30 a.m. my time, which would be about 7:30 p.m. Finnish time on Tuesdays. That's available most weeks, though if I'm teaching a retreat like this week, I don't hold it.

I'll also be offering another Daily Life Retreat online. In August, I offered the first one, which uses this form of practice with an emphasis on integrating it into daily life. If you were interested in that small taste I gave you, just those ten minutes on working with this in daily life, I do a whole week retreat on that theme. The format involves two sessions a day, with the most important one being the instruction session happening 7:30 to 9:30 a.m. California time, which again is about 5:30 p.m. Finnish time. Then there's a second session just for questions later in the day that would probably be overnight Finnish time, but that's recorded so you can listen on your own schedule. This will be happening in the February-March timeframe. I just taught it in August, and after about six months, I'll offer it again.

But there's so much happening online now. I think there's actually a resource I can find, an Excel spreadsheet listing groups around the world with their time zones and meeting times. Someone emailed it to me. I'll see if I can locate that and have it sent as a resource following the retreat.

Anna added a few more possibilities. She's also not aware of anything happening early in the day Finnish time, but Gaia House, the retreat center in the UK, offers an online Dharma Hall with five weekly sittings. Some take place in the morning UK time, which would be a bit later in the morning Finnish time. There's also a website called Sangha Live with many teachers from this tradition, and they sometimes have daily morning meditations that might work. They also offer weekly classes. Bodhi College is another source for weekly dharma teaching classes. So yes, there's plenty available online, and Neroda's website lists some of these resources.

And someone just posted that at 9 a.m. Swedish time, a Vipassana group holds daily online meditation sittings for an hour. So that's also available a little later in the morning for those in that time zone.

And then another question about practicing for longer periods—where that might be possible. Longer

than one week, not possible in Finland at the moment, and feeling like this particular style feels right but not sure where to go. Clearly the pandemic is an issue.

The person asks about Gaia House or Shwe Oo Min, which is the monastery where Sayadaw U Tejaniya teaches. There's also the long retreats in the U.S. that are available. The three-month course at IMS is probably the first really intensive retreat that's been offered—for forty years now. Anna has been to that. I teach at that most years. That's not happening this year; it has been canceled. And so it will be a while before the long retreats come back.

I've not seen many teachers doing long retreats in the online form, although some are experimenting with that. Right now this month, Sally Armstrong and Guy Armstrong are doing a month following a week more intensive—and then one session each day for the rest of the month. So people are starting to experiment with long retreats online.

In terms of this practice, Carol Wilson and I are scheduled to teach a month-long in this style at the Forest Refuge in June 2021. I don't know if that will happen. It's possible because it's nine months from now. We'll see. That is a lottery; we just had it. So at this point, that's a waiting list.

But Shwe Oo Min is a good option. It is also at this point closed—no yogis allowed. But just keep an eye on that. And I would encourage you to practice in daily life because the momentum of that is valuable. Listen to Sayadaw's teaching. There's a lot that he's published online. I've got many talks online that support this style of practice. Carol Wilson and Alexis Santos are other teachers who teach in this style. Some of Steve Armstrong and Kamala Masters' talks teach in this style as well. So you can search out the teachings and support yourself in daily life in this way until the retreat centers open again.

I am working on creating a webpage for myself. At this point, my own teachings are hard to find because I don't have a way to collect them. I teach at five different centers, and that's where things are posted, so I haven't yet created something central. I hadn't felt a need to do that. But now in this time, it feels useful to have everything gathered together—where am I actually teaching? So that's in process; probably in the next month or so it will get posted. It's a bit harder to find right now, but I have some resources that I'll send to you in the email that will go out at the end, in terms of where my teachings are available.

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