Retreat Opening: Establishing Mindfulness, Refuges, and Precepts

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:07:50

So welcome everybody. Most of you are arriving today. There's a couple of you who are staying on, so thank you for welcoming us into your space. I think to track what the weekly schedule will be, I'll say something about that tomorrow morning. I do know that for some of you, the introduction said there would be a two o'clock optional sitting and a Wednesday Q&A in the hall. That was the last retreat, so that's not happening. The posted schedule is our schedule.

I thought I'd start by saying a few words about the kind of practice we're doing. But first, I should say something about the absence of my fellow teacher, Diana Clark. Diana agreed to step in when Nisha Patel had to pull out of teaching this retreat. Only Diana is teaching another retreat this weekend, so she'll be arriving on a red eye from Sunday night, getting here Monday morning. I'm going to do the heavy lifting of the teaching for the first few days.

It actually ended up working out for me. I have a family situation—my brother passed away a couple of weeks ago, and I'm going to go down to New Jersey to participate in a memorial service for him. So I'll be leaving on Friday and returning on Sunday. Diana will be holding the load at that point, and I just feel so grateful to have a colleague that I can navigate this with.

So I thought I'd start by saying a few words about the style of practice that we'll be offering this month, the form of the practice. Not a lot tonight. I got here pretty late last night, and it was a lot to get here. For all of you too, it's a lot to get here. So I don't expect you have too many brain cells functioning. There's not going to be a lot of information tonight. Tomorrow morning at the 8:30 sitting, please come to that sitting. That will be where I offer the basic overview of the instructions. The instructions for this style of practice are so simple, it may seem like we don't need to elaborate, but elaborate we will.

Just tonight I thought I'd offer a little bit of an overview about this form of practice. How many of you are familiar with the style of teaching that Sayadaw U Tejaniya offers? Many of you, a few of you not.

I met Sayadaw U Tejaniya about twenty years ago now. I met him when I was helping out at a retreat in Burma, and I was hearing a lot of people talk about this teacher. I was really intrigued by what they said about him—in particular, the orientation towards observing the mind and the emphasis on relaxation.

So I went and met him. One of the things that had happened to me was in a prior retreat when I had been practicing in Burma. I had been sitting for long periods, and it injured my body a little bit to do that, so I

had to shift to lying meditation at that retreat with those Sayadaws. When I asked them, "When should I come for my next interview?" they said, "Oh, you can come back to interview when you can sit again." And I felt kind of abandoned.

I felt like I could continue practicing in lying meditation, but they felt the practice required the upright posture. And so I left thinking I wouldn't be able to practice in Burma for a long time, not until my body healed.

Then I heard about Sayadaw Utejaniya and went to meet him. One of the first things I said was, "Sayadaw, I can't sit for very long. I do most of my meditation lying down. Would that be okay? Can I come to your monastery to meditate and practice with you if I'm in the lying posture?"

He looked up at me and said, "If you know how to meditate, it doesn't matter what posture you're in."

Yes! Thank you, Sayadaw.

So the next year I came back for six weeks and learned his method, which is different in many ways. I'll describe a little about how it differs from the forms of meditation practice that may be familiar to many of us. But first I want to say a few words about the motivation—why we practice.

I think we all understand that there's a lot of suffering in the world. In our own hearts and minds there's a lot of struggle and stress. Many of us come to meditation practice hoping to understand something about our minds, hoping to understand how we might have more ease and peace in our lives.

This is really what the Buddha pointed to in the Four Noble Truths: that suffering is a part of experience. The first noble truth, the truth of suffering, the truth of dukkha, the truth of stress—this is part of being human. And much of the stress we experience, what we call suffering, is actually not what we might think suffering is. It's not simply unpleasant experience—it's our relationship to experience that creates the stress and suffering in our minds, that creates the tension, that creates the difficulty in navigating our lives.

The second noble truth is that this suffering arises with craving, with greed, with aversion, with delusion. And there is a possibility for an ending—the ending of suffering, the ending of greed, the ending of aversion, the ending of delusion. This is the ending of suffering. That was the way the Buddha spoke about it.

Now, this doesn't mean there aren't difficult things, unskillful things that people do in our lives. It doesn't mean everything is suddenly all wonderful. But it means our hearts are not fighting with what is happening. In that not fighting with what's happening, we come into alignment, recognizing: okay, this is what's happening.

This is my understanding of equanimity—an orientation of mind that is in alignment with what is actually happening, what has already arisen. We understand that it has arisen, and we're not fighting with the fact

that it has arisen. The heart that is not fighting with the nature of what's happening can respond skillfully to what's happening.

Equanimity doesn't mean we just say, "Oh yeah, that's what's happening, okay." Equanimity also includes the capacity to respond—but to respond skillfully, to respond with kindness, with ethics, with wisdom, instead of responding from greed, from anger, from hatred. The movement of our hearts around suffering shifts radically.

The practice of meditation, the practice of mindfulness, begins to help us understand the forces at work in our own hearts and minds—how greed, aversion, and delusion are operating within us. I think this also helps us understand how they're working in the world. As we see how to navigate them in our own minds, we learn how to navigate them differently in the world. This, to me, is really the purpose of our practice: to cultivate a new relationship with our own hearts and minds that will support us in a new relationship with the world.

The key teaching the Buddha offered for understanding our hearts and minds—understanding how greed, aversion, and delusion create stress and suffering, and how their release creates conditions for ease and peace, for skillful action, for compassion and wisdom to lead our choices instead of greed, aversion, and delusion—this teaching is mindfulness.

Awareness. Awareness is the word Sayadaw Utejaniya uses for mindfulness, and I like this word. For me, the word mindfulness feels kind of up here somewhere, feels a bit heady. But the word awareness is more evocative of what the experience actually is when I am aware, when I'm mindful. So I like using awareness for mindfulness. Other teachers use awareness in different ways, but I wanted to clarify at the beginning: the way I'm using awareness in this retreat means mindfulness.

One of the functions of mindfulness, one of the ways awareness works, is this: when we are meeting, when we are receiving qualities of mind based in greed, aversion, and delusion—when we meet those with mindfulness rather than reactivity, with just a simple, basic recognition of "this is what it's like, this is the human experience of someone experiencing anger or frustration or greed, this is the human experience of that"—

When mindfulness meets those kinds of qualities in the mind, it creates the conditions for them to weaken. My understanding of how this works is that when mindfulness feels—and really, I feel like mindfulness, awareness, has a feeling quality to it. There's a feeling that comes when we are aware of experience.

So the experience of recognizing anger, for instance: when we are mindful, when we are aware with anger, we will feel the experience. And the feeling of these states of mind that are based in greed, aversion, and delusion—generally they don't feel very good. This is actually not a mistake. When we're recognizing them with mindfulness, when we're knowing, "Oh, this is what it's like to be a human being

that's frustrated," we feel the suffering of that, we feel the dukkha of that. And we understand in feeling that, that it's not helpful.

So it's not a mistake when we experience the tension, the contraction around these difficult states of mind. But as some teacher said—it's an apocryphal statement—it's the kind of suffering that leads to the end of suffering. That kind of observation of experience allows the mind to begin recognizing, "This is not helpful," and it begins to find its way to letting go of those states. Now, it doesn't happen in a split second, usually. It takes time.

And yet that experience of recognizing, "Oh, this is the experience—when there's greed in the mind, this is what it feels like; when there's aversion in the mind, this is what it feels like"—the feeling of that tension, that contraction—the very experience of being aware of it can create some space around it, so that there's a sense of, "Oh, it's okay that it's happening." And there's the sense of the awareness and the wisdom that are being cultivated while witnessing that difficult state of mind. At times we can touch into those. There have been times when I was witnessing really strong anger and feeling genuinely happy—because it was being seen, and because there was an understanding of how the wisdom works, that the wisdom will begin to release, will begin to help the mind let those states go.

Simultaneously, when we bring mindful attention to compassion, to wisdom, to patience, to love, it creates the conditions for those to get stronger. So this very simple capacity of awareness, when it is brought to bear with a curiosity about "What is this experience?"—that's crucial. The perspective we bring to observing experience matters tremendously. If we are observing experience in order to make it go away, or in order to hold on to it, to get more of it, that's cultivating greed or aversion in the back of the mind, in the perspective through which mindfulness is meeting experience. It's meeting experience with that kind of lens on it.

But if instead it's more of a curiosity—"Oh, what is this experience? What is it like to be feeling this right now?"—that perspective, it sounds like such a small shift, like nothing almost, just to understand this is an experience happening in the present moment as it's happening and to be curious about it. That makes all the difference in the world. It makes the difference between continuing to be caught by our reactive habits and patterns and beginning to free ourselves from them.

And so mindfulness, awareness—very powerful, very powerful function of mind. This is the main thing we will be cultivating here: mindfulness, awareness. We'll be cultivating it from a slightly different perspective than some of you perhaps are familiar with.

Many times mindfulness practices begin by orienting toward a directing of the attention to some particular experience, like the breath. That's a choosing, a selecting something out of experience, and then we let our attention rest there. When the attention wanders from that, we come back. We notice the attention has wandered, and we return. In this way, we're cultivating mindfulness around a particular experience. This is a fine way to cultivate mindfulness. It develops, it grows, it begins to strengthen. Then

over time we begin to expand to include more and more different kinds of experiences.

The style that I'm going to be offering, the style that Sayadaw U Tejaniya offers—instead of exploring the directing of attention to cultivate awareness, to cultivate mindfulness, it's a receptivity. Instead of choosing what to pay attention to, we are simply settling back and noticing that awareness is already receiving something. Fundamentally, awareness is receptive. The function of directing the attention—that's something connected with the factor of attention. Attention and mindfulness are different things.

I'll talk more about that probably in a day or so. But the aiming or directing of attention is a way that we can know we are connecting to an experience. We can also know that we're connecting to an experience because attention is always connecting to something. Whether or not we are choosing to direct the attention, attention is connecting with something. And that attention is directed essentially based on our conditioning—what we have cultivated our attention to go to, or where it's gone habitually in the past.

So attention will always be with something, and we don't have to choose to direct the attention in order to be mindful. This was a big shift in my understanding about mindfulness. When I first started practicing, I thought if I wasn't choosing where the attention was, it meant I wasn't being mindful. But that's not true. Mindfulness is essentially receptive. We can choose to direct the attention to the breath, but then what mindfulness does is receive that breath. Mindfulness just receives whatever attention is connecting to. Mindfulness in its nature is receptive. This awareness—its nature is receptive. And so what we're exploring here is attuning to that quality or functioning of mind: that mindfulness receives experience.

To begin connecting with this receptive quality of mindfulness, one of the things Sayadaw suggests at the beginning of practice is to relax. Relaxation is a huge support for this connection with receiving experience. We can start by consciously relaxing the body. When we explore this in a guided meditation, I'll probably do a bit of a body scan to support relaxation—just allowing there to be a relaxation of body.

And then allowing there to be a relaxation of mind. The mind often has quite a bit of tension in it around needing to do, needing to fix, needing to change. Thoughts about the past, thoughts about the future. There can be a sense of also relaxing the mind. Maybe the worries, the concerns can soften a little bit.

As the body and mind begin to relax, there's an invitation to just notice what's already happening. What do you already know? Like right now—what are you aware of right now? It might be something like just sitting here in this room and listening to me. It can be very broad. This is another piece of how this style of practice helped me understand that I was often thinking attention was very precise, landing on very specific things. But attention can land on very broad things, and so it's also possible to just be aware of sitting here in this room in a very open way. Or it might be something more specific, like the sensations of your hands, or a breath. So if you relax, what's obvious? You don't have to look for anything. One teacher, Gil Fronsdal, sometimes says, "What's coming to you? What experience is coming to you?"

If you have not practiced in this style before, likely what might happen as you relax—and this is what happened for me when I began this style of practice with Sayadaw U Tejaniya—he encouraged the relaxation, so I relaxed, and then it's like, okay, what's obvious? Well, what was obvious was bodily vibration. That had been my primary object for a long time. And so when I relaxed, that's where the attention went. Of course it went there. That had been conditioned.

So if you haven't done this style much, when you relax and check in to what's happening, you may find that whatever familiar meditation experience you're used to paying attention to, that's what's happening. That's okay. You don't have to say, "Oh, I shouldn't be paying attention to that because it's supposed to be receptive." Well, that's what's being received. What I would like to encourage is to notice the difference between when it feels like it's just happening—like you relax and then, wow, there's the breath, it's just being received, it's so simple.

It's so easy. It's so obvious. And there's a difference between that and when it feels like you are aiming, when you are doing it. If it feels like you're starting to do that, then it can be useful to, well, first of all, notice that—notice that directing of the attention. And then perhaps, again, encourage a relaxation. Because that directing of the attention probably has some tension in it. So relaxing and again, then receiving. And maybe what's received again is what you're familiar with, and that's okay.

When I finally went and reported this to Sayadaw, I said, "When I relax, what I'm noticing is the body. I'm noticing body sensations. I'm not noticing what's happening in the mind." And he said, "Well, you need to do that too." But he didn't tell me much about how to do that. He'd given this other instruction, though, which I'll cover a little more in a bit, but I'll mention it now. And that is to check the attitude—to notice how the mind is in relationship to what's happening.

So I began the practice by just letting the relaxation and the attention rest with the body sensations, as I was familiar with. And then I kind of checked in. It's like, okay, so how's the mind with this? What's the relationship to the fact that this is what's happening? And I noticed that the mind was really calm and very happy. I had not noticed that before. And that was the beginning of really understanding how to watch the mind.

So this practice—we begin with a relaxation and then we just check in and see: Where is awareness? What is awareness naturally receiving? The entirety of our human experience is possible in terms of what's received. It can be any of our six sense-based experiences, and it might be something happening in the mind.

Over time, this style of practice—partly because of this checking of the attitude, because of the encouragement to be curious about "this is what's happening, how am I in relationship to it?"—we begin to recognize more and more how the mind is working. Is there wanting something to continue? Is there wanting something to go away? Is the mind balanced around it? Is there ease? Is there calm?

And the mind is where that greed, aversion, and delusion are working and creating stress and suffering—and where the release from greed, aversion, and delusion happens. So this practice begins to help us understand really clearly how to watch the mind. And from the beginning too. It's not just like some long stretch of time after you've done this practice. It happens pretty quickly that we begin to see, "Oh, I see." In my case, it was like, "Oh, there's happiness and ease in the mind. That's... wow." And I'm seeing it. I was seeing it—seeing what it was like to have that experience. What's it like to watch the mind?

So this practice, we begin with relaxation. And actually the instructions for this practice are pretty simple. There's four basic aspects. Relax. Recognize that you're aware and then know what awareness is receiving—that's two and three. Recognizing that you're aware—for some of you, that may be clear. At times, that can take a little bit longer to really understand what it means to know that I'm aware. And we'll talk about that. As I said, we'll unpack this.

Multiple layers will unpack this. So there's a relaxation, then we recognize that we're aware and what awareness is receiving. Notice what's being received. And then from time to time, checking in: what's the relationship with what is being received? What's the relationship to the experience that's happening?

Now this piece—the relationship—there's so much that gets revealed here. So many different ways that we assume certain things about meditation. One of the things I found in this style of practice is that it really showed me how many ideas I had about meditation: views about what was good meditation, what was bad meditation, what kind of objects were appropriate for meditation, what needed to be happening. All of these ideas and beliefs. And they can get pretty subtle. They can get pretty quiet. This practice begins to help us see this.

A simple example is around sleepiness—that experience of falling asleep in meditation. How many of you have experienced that? I think all of you, for sure. And how many of you have had the thought, "I can't be mindful while I'm sleepy"? But sleepiness is just another experience. Mindfulness can receive any experience, even that thought, "I can't be mindful while I'm sleepy." You're already aware that you're sleepy. There's already some awareness of it. But the idea—that's a belief. There's a view there. "Sleepiness is not a good thing to be while meditating." And so what happens? We fight it. We think we need to get rid of it. That sets up an aversive relationship to it. The belief "I can't be mindful while I'm sleepy" creates the conditions for aversion to arise. Then we're relating to the experience through aversion, fighting the sleepiness.

There's so much to see in looking at the relationship to experience. It begins to make a beeline for how we might be relating to experience in terms of greed, aversion, and delusion. And then we observe that. The checking of the attitude isn't meant to say, "Oh, there's aversion in connection with sleepiness—how do I get rid of the aversion?" That's more aversion. Rather: what is the experience of aversion? "Oh, there's sleepiness and there's aversion to it. What's it like to have sleepiness with aversion? This is that—this human experience. What's that like?"

The checking of the attitude isn't meant to try to get rid of the attitude, but to understand it—to understand something about how it's affecting the mind, how it's affecting the body.

So that's a little bit about this style of practice. Tomorrow I'll give a more structured teaching around it. For now, just let this be an offering. You don't have to figure it out.

There's so much about the way the Dharma works—if we allow the Dharma to come in, I think of it like rain. Rain hits the landscape and filters down through the soil, absorbed into the earth, and then plants' roots begin to take it up. Think of the teachings as being like that. Just let them hit your system. You don't have to do anything with them. You don't even have to remember them. I will repeat myself a lot.

So, coming into a retreat, we honor in a way the container that we're creating.

We step into this container at the beginning of a retreat with the refuges and the precepts as an expression of the way we want to be together in community. You're all experienced students, so I'm not going to say too much about these. We've heard many talks about the refuges and the precepts. I'll just say a couple of things.

The refuges are really the orientation, the perspective of how we want to orient our lives towards the Dharma. We take refuge in the Buddha as the being who discovered, who found—he didn't create, but as he said through analogy, he found this ancient city and he found a path to this ancient city. He was not claiming to have created this. But he discovered, he found his way to the Dharma. And in finding his way to the Dharma, he woke up. He realized the freedom, he realized the possibility for the ending of suffering. That was his whole purpose on his journey: Is there a way to end suffering in this life? Through discovering the Dharma and then creating the teachings for us, we take refuge in the Buddha as an expression of the being who both found the Dharma, created a teaching around it, and then woke up.

And that the Buddha is a human being—to me, this is the beauty. When I take refuge in the Buddha, I think of this. It's the refuge in the possibility for a human being to awaken. It's possible for me to awaken. And the way to awaken is to connect with the Dharma, to take refuge in the Dharma—the teachings, the instructions, the understanding, the wisdom the Buddha offers. This is our path. This is how we wake up. We get lost, we wander off the path, but whenever we wake up, whenever mindfulness returns, in that moment we can essentially take refuge in the Dharma again. This awareness—this can free the mind.

And the Sangha, the refuge in the Sangha. To me, there are a couple of pieces around this. First of all, the lineage—the way that we know what the Buddha did and how he taught is because of this lineage of the Sangha, beings who practiced and carried the teachings 2,600 years to us. It's amazing. So much gratitude for that. My colleague Gil Fronsdal says that Dharma is passed from warm hand to warm hand. We can think of this as a lineage of beings that have supported, passed from warm hand to warm hand, for 2,600 years.

And the Sangha also is a support for our practice—here, this is our Sangha. It's lovely to practice in

community. There were times when I was sitting retreat, my first long retreats of two months or three months, I would just be sitting with my eyes closed feeling all the dukkha of what I was experiencing. Then I would open my eyes and see somebody sitting calmly. Or at one point I remember watching somebody move their hands very mindfully to a new position. It brought me right back into mindfulness. If they can do it, I can do it. So we support each other here.

One of the ways we support each other and support the world is through a commitment to ethics, a commitment to non-harming. This is what the precepts are really speaking to—that commitment to not harming. Not harming through physical action, refraining from killing living beings. Not harming through taking things that are not freely offered. Not harming through containing our sexual energy. Not harming through speaking falsely—and here, more noble silence. And then not harming ourselves and the possibility of losing clarity of mind through refraining from intoxicants.

These precepts are an ethical ground for our connection in community. And these are not small things. If every human being on the planet decided to refrain from killing living beings, it would be a different world. Completely different world. If everybody decided they would not tell lies, it would be a different world. So these commitments, they're not small things. Honor yourself for committing to them.

It can happen that we do break the precepts. If you find that you have broken a precept—what happened for me at one point on retreat was that I told, I can't remember exactly what it was, but it was a skew to a report that I gave to my teacher. I went to him and said, this is what happened.

I did not speak truthfully in the meeting. And I was in quite a state, actually. I was really in a lot of dukkha over having done this. This was my teacher in Burma—not Sayadaw U Tejaniya, another teacher—and he said, "You need to take the precepts again. You need to take the refuges and precepts again." I said, "Sayadaw, I've done that." And he said, "You need to take them in front of me." So I did. In front of him, I took the refuges and precepts, and he said, "Now your sīla is purified."

That was what I needed to hear—that the act of committing again to the precepts, even if I had broken a precept, the act of committing again purifies the heart. You understand that it was not skillful to have done that. But you take, you commit again. You recommit.

We make it easier here to follow the precepts, since you're not speaking much. It's just easier on retreat. But I definitely found at times, even in the interviews, it would be, "Oh, I did it again. I skewed that report." It was very painful. Very painful. But I learned a lot. I learned a lot about how breaking the precepts harms me, creates the pain here, and how to move forward, how to continue, how to carry on.

So we will take the refuges and precepts now together. Tonight we'll take the five precepts together, and then each night before the dharma talk, we'll take the refuges and precepts together. The dharma talks will be on Tuesday night and on Friday night. Those of you who are taking the eight precepts, we can take the eight precepts on Tuesday night.

The refuges we'll do together in Pali. The precepts we'll do call and response.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

And call and response for the precepts:

Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Abrahmacariyā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Surāmerayamajjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

Idaṃ me sīlaṃ...

That last part means: through my connecting with the precepts, may I find the deepest freedom.

So we'll just do a short sitting, just a few minutes. Finding your way to a posture that feels comfortable, alert, and yet relaxed. We're not going to do a whole scanning of the body for relaxing, but maybe just an invitation for relaxation. Maybe there can be a softening of the body. And maybe a softening of the mind.

Exploring the possibility of receiving with awareness. Whatever is easy, whatever is easy to connect to or receive, what is most simple. It might be something in the body. It might be hearing. Maybe it's the breath. What's being received? Now what's being received?

When we're not directing or aiming the attention, it's quite common for what's being received to change. So maybe for a few moments with the breath, and then with hearing, and then another body sensation, and then maybe a thought. The shifting of the attention is not a problem. We can settle back and allow, as Gil said, let experience come to us. Relax and receive.

The mind will wander into thought or drift off. If we lose mindfulness, not much we can do about that. And yet the moment that we recognize that we have lost mindfulness, in that moment mindfulness is

already back. We're aware again already. So what's being received? There's nothing particularly to come back to.

We're already back. So what is awareness receiving?

Relax and receive. Again, allow what's happening, bringing that sense of curiosity to the receiving. What's this experience like? This human experience.

So many of you probably need some rest. You're welcome to take your rest or continue to practice as you wish.

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