Starting a Retreat

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1:27:48

I'm going to explain this little ceremony just to open us into the retreat. And then I'll do a standing meditation, a sitting meditation, a walking meditation, and a loving-kindness meditation, by which you should be thoroughly exhausted and ready to go to sleep.

Now, what we do is the three refuges and precepts. So for those of you who don't know, this is very regular in practice in Buddhist countries. But there are special training rules. Let me go through that first. The first five are pretty straightforward. So not to harm any living being — that's pretty straightforward, not give up killing each other for the weekend. Not to take what is not freely given. Not to indulge in erotic and romantic delight — difficult, but we need all the energy we can muster to make spiritual progress. Not to use wrong speech. That's easy. We keep the silence. Not to take substances that cloud the mind. So even strong tea can make your mind race. So be careful.

Not to overeat. So we keep the rule of not having anything after lunch. Now, for those of you who've never done a fast or never passed more than three hours without a biscuit or something, I can assure you, one does not die. One continues. If anybody has problems with that, diabetes or something like that, of course, it doesn't apply. For everybody else — not to oversleep. A bit difficult in the first three days, especially for those who are for the weekends, because everybody comes with some sleeping balance. Either they're not sleeping well or they're oversleeping. So it just takes a couple of days to get that sorted. And then after that it is definitely dullness and lethargy, sloth and torpor. Don't kid yourselves.

Not to indulge in entertainment. So to observe ourselves, you have to stop the input. You want to observe the output. So you don't want to read. You don't want to write. I mean, to jot a few things down for a diary, that's not a problem. It's just when it gets into an autobiography. And for those of you staying long term, even to keep your eyes down, not to get involved in anything around, you see. Stop the inputs.

Not to indulge in self-beautification. Here we don't have to worry about how we look — it's a relief. To cherish the noble silence, very important.

Now these are called training rules. They are something that we take on to establish a boundary for ourselves. The other thing is the schedule. So that's also your discipline. It's not a word we particularly enjoy these days, but that's really something which you devote yourself to so that you get a rhythm. Sitting, walking, sitting, walking. That's important, to get that rhythm going. And if you can, to stay within the boundary of Gaia House. If you think you're going berserk, by all means take a walk up the street, talk to the cows — very cool and calming. Just watch them chew.

So we'll take those training rules now. When it comes to the *pūjā* — Buddhaṃ pūjemi, Dhammaṃ pūjemi, Saṅghaṃ pūjemi — bowing is a very strong physical language for surrender. And remember, the spiritual life always asks you to do exactly what you don't want. It's always against the flow. So bowing is one way of surrendering to it. If you don't want to actually do it physically, at least do it mentally. Just to give yourself to the course.

So you pronounce Pali as you read it. So this is just honouring the Buddha, honouring the teacher. So the teacher is both the one who has taught us — this is also the exemplar — and the Buddha is also an archetype because there's the Buddha within us that has to be liberated.

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi — going to refuge to the Buddha. So traditionally of course that's the historical Buddha, but spiritually speaking it's the Buddha within us. So it's an act of faith that there is — an act of trust that there's something in us to be liberated.

Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. So here it's the teaching specific to the Buddha, but you can also be quite universal about that. These days everybody has their own spiritual portfolio. So if you want to add other things that make sense to the Dhamma, then by all means. But it's that which is going to give you your spiritual teachings.

Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi — as the community traditionally refers to those people who experience *Nibb āna*, because they are witnesses to the Buddha's own awakening. But you can also open that out to everybody who's on the path. So all of us, each other. So we're taking refuge in each other. It's much easier to do something when it's with a group rather than by yourself — even painting a room, you've got somebody to come along and help, it's easier.

We'll repeat that three times. On the other side, you've got the three Vipassanā verses. And this is what we're investigating, really, all week. All conditioned things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self — not me, not mine. So for those of you who haven't come across that teaching before, by the end of the week, that should be pretty clear with a bit of luck.

And then a couple of verses from the Buddha himself just expressing the end game, and then his final words. That's what he said just before he died: "All conditioned things have the nature to decay. Work diligently for your liberation."

And then just before we say *sādhu sādhu sādhu*, I'll just ask you to spend a moment committing yourself to the course. Remember this is for you. This is an opportunity just to devote your time entirely to your own benefit. And remember, some of you might think, well that's selfish, but it's not. It's self-care, isn't it? It's looking after ourselves. And remember that if we get it right within ourselves, when we meet people they also get affected by our goodness, aren't they? I'm glad you're all shaking your heads vigorously.

So we'll start with that and then, as I say, I'll do this standing meditation.

Buddhaṃ pūjemi, Dhammaṃ pūjemi, Saṅghaṃ pūjemi

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

I undertake the following training rules: not to harm any living being, not to take what is not freely given, not to indulge in erotic or romantic delight, not to use wrong speech, not to take substances that cloud the mind, not to overeat, not to oversleep, not to indulge in entertainment, not to indulge in self-beautification, to cherish the noble silence.

And our verses:

All conditioned things are impermanent. When this is perceived with wisdom, one becomes disenchanted with what cannot satisfy. Just this is the path of purification.

All conditioned things are unsatisfactory. When this is perceived with wisdom one becomes disenchanted with what cannot satisfy. Just this is the path of purification.

All conditioned things and the unconditioned are not-self. When this is perceived with wisdom one becomes disenchanted with what cannot satisfy. Just this is the path of purification.

There is the unborn, the undying, the uncreated, the unconditioned — refuge, harbour and home, perfect contentment and peace.

Just as the great ocean has only one taste, the taste of salt, so *Nibbāna* has only one taste, the taste of freedom.

All conditioned things have the nature to decay. Work diligently for your liberation.

So just spend a moment there committing yourself to this course. Getting the best out of it that you can for yourself.

Sādhu sādhu sādhu

So we'll do some standing meditation. Just make sure you're standing on some firm ground maybe. It's a bit better, I think. Probably better. It doesn't matter what you do with your arms — by the side or joined in front.

And just lift up to the top of the head. Pass your attention down your face. Jaw relaxed. Lips together, teeth apart. If there's tension there, just waggle it about a bit. Shoulders — if there's a bit of tension there, just give them a good squeeze. If during this exercise you find yourself getting shoulders becoming tight and what not, just give them a good squeeze, keep relaxing.

Bring your attention to the soles of your feet. Can you distinguish two types of sensations? One to do with pressure, the other with heat, coolness. Are there parts of your feet that you — the soles along that side — that you can't feel or are very, very neutral? Any empty spaces? Can you acknowledge how the sensations are continuously changing as the body rebalances itself? And can you acknowledge that these sensations are arising whether you want them to or not? They're not under your control.

In the same way, make your way up the body and just be aware of any sensations on the surface, inside the body, areas where you don't feel anything — like an empty space. When you get to the abdomen, can you feel the breath there? Or is it tight? If it's tight, can you relax it? Not to worry if you can't. Feel the breath in the chest, maybe a heartbeat.

Shoulders still relaxed. The jaw. And when you get to the scalp, do what you did to the soles of your feet. Just scan it. See what sensations you can feel there.

Keeping your eyes lowered, not looking around, launch your attention outward. Just become aware of what you can see — shape, colour — what you can hear, the sense of other people, atmosphere of the room. Your attention is completely out there. Don't choose what to experience. Let the experience come to you. One moment we're seeing something, the next moment we're hearing and so on.

And now at the same time, bring the in here, feelings in the body, the breath. So you get a sense of a global awareness, both the inside and the outside. Don't look for something or listen out for something. Just let it come to us. And relax. Just relax into this presenting moment, ever presenting moment, always here, always now. Relaxing into the present moment.

In this way we're not trying to achieve anything. So remember, when we're trying to achieve something we're always doing something now for some future result. Being here like this, completely open, is the achievement. Being like this has no reason beyond itself. Relaxing, just relaxing into this present moment. No need to plan, there's no future. We're not going anywhere. We've already arrived.

Relaxing, just relaxing into this present moment, we're just in a mode of receiving. So there's no need to react or respond. No need to present a personality. Here we can feel the relief of abandoning that hope to

become a celebrity. Relaxing. Just relaxing into the present moment, achieving nothing, going nowhere, being nobody.

Relaxing like this, wide awake, full awareness, we're developing four factors that lead to liberation: this awareness itself, calmness, steadiness of attention — focus, concentration, steadiness of attention — and equanimity. Equanimity means not coming from a fixed position, not coming from a place of "I know, I'm sure," but from a place of "don't know, not sure."

This abiding in the present moment, inhabiting the present moment, you can take directly into daily life. After a job, leaving one room for another, waiting for a bus, waiting at the lights, walking upstairs — if you were to add all those times together you may be surprised it comes to an hour, maybe two hours every day where we let the mind wander. Relaxing into the present moment, wide awake.

The great benefit of this is that you can see an intention arising. When we see an intention arising we can discern whether it's wholesome or unwholesome. And because of our calmness, if we see it's unwholesome we can just wait — wait for that desire to exhaust itself. In this way we uncondition, we decondition those habits we see are unwholesome. And where we see a wholesome intention, when we empower it, we reinforce that habit. Just in this very, very simple way we can completely change ourselves. But it demands this level of attention, awareness, and paradoxically, relaxation.

Our next intention will be to sit. And as we make that intention, just really take your time. Be aware of all the actions it takes to get us into a sitting posture. And if it helps, using the little noting word — touching, pushing, leaning — just to keep the attention steady, we can use this labelling. Intending to sit.

Make sure your posture is comfortable. It's not so important what you do with your legs — whether they're cross-legged or sitting on a chair, it doesn't really matter. It does matter what you do with your spine. Make sure it has its natural curvature and that you're holding it up through the top of the head.

And pass your attention down your face. Eyes gently closed, jaw relaxed. If there's tension there, just waggle it about a bit. Lips together, teeth apart. Shoulders — give them a squeeze if there's any tension. And it can be quite relaxing to take a deep breath, hold it for a little while and just let the rib cage fall. Hands on your lap, palms facing upward is usually the most comfortable.

And bring our attention to the breath. In the Mahasi tradition we observe it at the abdomen — rising and falling of the abdomen. Or if you have a shallow breath, rising and falling of the chest. If you're already established at the nostrils you can choose to stay there if you wish. If you make an intention to come into the body, come down into the body to the breath at the abdomen or the chest, it might take just two or three days to establish a different habit.

And as you contact the breath, use a little noting word. The noting word is there to stop the mind wandering. But the intention is to feel, experience the sensations caused by the breath. And as the abdomen rises, "rising." The label has to be — the note has to be concurrent with what's happening. If you

say "rising" and then breathe, you'll get the impression you're controlling. Just let the breath breathe, let the body breathe. Rising, falling.

If the mind is wandering, really recognise and acknowledge what it's doing. Planning, planning. Dreaming, dreaming. Fantasising, fantasising. Judging, judging. Just be very clear as to what the mind is doing. You're not concerned with the content. You're concerned with the attitude. And then just gently turn away from that, back to the breath.

As you begin to relax, you might find that the gap at the end of the out-breath before the beginning of the in-breath grows. And if it gets a little too long, the mind can tend to wander. So choose a touch point like your hands. Rising, falling, touching. If you're observing the breath at the nostrils: in, in, out, out.

Rising, falling, touching. If the mind is wandering, be quick to recognise and acknowledge what it's doing. Worrying, worrying. Planning, planning. Not concerned with content, only with attitude. And just turn away from it, just turn back to the breath. If you're beginning to feel sleepy, tired, lift the spine. You can open the eyes a little, let the light in. You can even stand up.

Rising, falling, touching. If the mind is wandering, be quick to recognise and acknowledge, turn the attention away back to the breath. Feeling sleepy or tired, lift the spine, open the eyes a little, stand up.

Perhaps we are experiencing the sensations of the breath as calming, maybe even pleasant. Observing the breath silences the mind, calms the heart, stills the body. Observing, feeling, experiencing the sensations caused by the breath. Rising, falling, touching. If the mind is wandering, recognise, acknowledge what it's doing, bring that attention back to the breath. Feeling sleepy or tired, just make that effort.

Hopefully now you feel more steady in your attention, more focused, more calm. See if you can get a bit closer to the breath. Focusing in, catching the very beginning of the in-breath, following it to the very end, catching the very beginning of the out-breath, feeling that process to the very end. If when you do that you find yourself getting tense, pull back a bit, relax and keep going towards the breath.

Rising, falling, touching. If the mind is wandering, really recognise, acknowledge what it's doing, patiently bring the attention back to the breath. Feeling sleepy or tired, make the effort. Remember you can stand up.

The breath is our anchor, it's our reference point. When we get confused or lost, we return to the breath and just remind ourselves that this is the simplest of exercises — just to observe, feel, experience whatever is within our awareness. Whatever we become aware of, that we observe, feel and experience. We don't do anything. We don't try and change anything.

So hopefully now we feel more calm, more focused, we can open up. Whatever draws our attention within the field of awareness, inside and outside, that is the object to observe, feel, experience. It may be a sound.

We're not concerned with the object making the sound, with the bird. We're interested in the process of

hearing. Maybe a sensation in the body, pleasant or unpleasant. We go to it if it calls our attention, feel it, experience it. It can be a feeling in the body caused by a mental state, depression, happiness. If it calls our attention, we go to it, we feel it, we observe it, we experience it fully. We don't do anything.

If there's an image in the mind, as soon as we become aware of it, we just note "imagining" and bring ourselves back to the body. When we come out of a thought pattern, we just note what the attitude was that created it and just come back into the body. You may find that when you have an angry thought, for instance, as you come back into the body, you can feel it as a physical state. And whenever we get lost, we just begin again. Always with the breath. Rising, falling, touching.

Can you catch how you're reacting to what you're experiencing? How when something is pleasant there's a desire to maintain it, to increase it? How when something is unpleasant there's a desire to ignore it, try to push it away, turn away, resist? Noting that also, and you become aware of how everything you're experiencing is arising and passing away. Nothing remains.

Having accessed this observation post within ourselves, a perch from which we can observe, feel, experience the body with its sensations and feelings, the heart with its emotions and moods, the mind with its images, even thoughts if we're quick enough. Can you see that when we're in this mode everything is happening of itself? Not because we determine or will it. It's all happening outside our control. It's not me.

Perhaps you can sense a distance, a space between the observer, the feeler, the experiencer and what is being observed, being felt, being experienced. Although this isn't the fullest state of *vipassanā*, here at least we can see clearly that sensations, feelings, moods, emotions, thoughts, images are there, not here. They're objects. Not the subject. Not me.

Putting aside now all instruction, relaxing into the present moment, wide awake. Just observe, feel, experience whatever draws the attention within the field of awareness. And when we lose it, just begin again with the breath.

When we come to the end of a sitting it's good just to reflect upon it a little. How diligent were we at bringing ourselves back to the present moment? How did we deal with the various physical and mental states that arose? Were we skillful, unskillful, confused? Which of these three characteristics of existence – the impermanence of things, the role of wanting and not wanting, and this "not me, not mine" – which one of those was most obvious to us? Penetrating any one of these three characteristics leads to liberation. And then it's good to make a determination, a real intention for the next sitting or just as a general attitude.

And now we're going to do some walking meditation and being aware of that moment where we intend to rise. Just be aware of all the actions it takes to get us standing and then to put it on the circle. So if you just find a position on the circle all the way around the room, intending to stand.

Walking meditation balances the sitting meditation and it's very good for developing the steadiness of

attention, focusing, concentration. It's a much louder, more obvious action than the breath and it's still neutral. All we're doing is just feeling, observing, experiencing the sensations just around the feet.

We begin by just feeling the feet on the floor and a noting word would be "standing, standing." These words are just gently repeated and the purpose is to keep the intellect happy, stop it wandering. When we feel established standing, we make the intention "intending to walk." There are four parts to the footstep: the lifting as the foot peels off the floor, moving as it moves forward, falling as it moves to the ground or dropping, and then placing as your weight moves into it. At that point there should be two feet on the floor, and then the next step begins. "Intending to walk, lifting, moving, lowering, placing, lifting, moving, lowering, placing."

If you haven't got the balance for this, just "lifting, placing" will do. And bringing ourselves to a standstill, "standing, standing, standing." When that feels established, "intending to turn, turning, turning, standing, standing." When that feels established, "intending to walk, lifting," and bringing ourselves to a standstill, "standing." Normally you would choose a place where you can do this for ten, maybe fifteen steps backwards and forwards.

So now we're going to sit again and draw our practice to an end with goodwill meditation, loving kindness meditation. So make sure you take your time, being aware of all your actions, see if you can find a noting word to match them – stretching, pushing and so on. Intending to sit.

The practice of loving-kindness transforms our understanding into an attitude. We have to be careful that the equanimity that we experience in the process of *vipassanā* doesn't slip into indifference. And we do this by re-engaging with the world. *Mettā* goodwill is not an emotion, it's an attitude. So you can practice this even when you don't feel so good, if you feel depressed. In time of course the heart resonates with the attitude, but it's not necessary for it to do so to develop goodwill. That's why you can be kind to somebody even though you hate their guts.

The four or five traditional blessings which you can use if you wish. May you be safe. Everybody wants to be safe from danger, both inside and outside. From within ourselves and from the world out there. Everybody wants to be healthy, well. Everybody wants to be free of distress, mental distress. They want to be happy, and to live a life which is contented, more contentment in it, happy with what we have and in harmony with the world. Even when the world is not so pleasant, but to be in harmony with it, working with it. Safe, well, happy, contented, in harmony with the world.

We start with our benefactors, bringing people to mind who've helped us, raises gratitude, and with gratitude it's easy to wish them well. And then we offer it to those who are near and dear to us, to friends, people at work and so on. To neutral people, people that we know – or we see rather, but we don't know. Neighbours, people we travel with, even people at work. We offer them the same quality of goodwill. Then we turn it towards ourselves. And in that heart of goodwill we can bring somebody in we find difficult – not that they are difficult, we just find them difficult. Then we begin to radiate outwards, first of all to

each other, to our neighbours, and here you can relocate to where you live, all the people in our country, all the peoples of Europe, all peoples on earth, and finally to all beings in all directions, so that this attitude of goodwill becomes universal, not determined by whether we like or dislike somebody.

Bringing to mind a benefactor, somebody who's helped us in our lives. May you be safe, well and happy. May you live contented, in harmony with the world.

Bring to mind those who are near, dear to us. May you be safe, well and happy. Live contented, in harmony with the world.

Bring to mind friends, people at work, whomever we wish. May you be safe, well and happy. May you live contented, in harmony with the world.

Bringing to mind a neutral person or persons, people we see but don't know. Offering them the same quality of goodwill. May you be safe, well and happy. May you live contented, in harmony with the world.

Turning now that stream of goodwill towards ourselves. May I be safe, well and happy. May I live contented, in harmony with the world.

And into the heart of goodwill, someone we find difficult. May you be safe, well and happy. May you live contented, in harmony with the world.

Beginning now to radiate outwards, first of all to each other, our spiritual companions. May we be safe, well and happy. May we live contented in harmony with the world.

To our neighbours, remember we can relocate to where we live. All the people in our country, all the peoples of Europe. All people on earth, and as you scan the globe, hover a little while over those places where there's war, natural disaster, poverty. And finally, to all beings in all directions.

And we end with a little chant: *Sabhe satta sukhita hantu* which means "may all beings be happy," and then *Sadhu sadhu sadhu* which means "well done" three times. *Sabhe satta sukhita hantu. Sabhe satta sukhita hantu. Sabhe satta sukhita hantu. Sadhu sadhu sadhu.*

Take this mindfulness with you now until you fall asleep. Just take your time, make every action deliberate. Don't do an action which you didn't know you were doing. So these noting, this little noting can be very helpful to do that. You have to slow down, slow down all these actions that we do every day. They become numbed.

When was the last time you tasted your toothpaste? And if you really tasted your toothpaste, would you buy that one again?

And finally, when you get to bed, you're lying down, especially those of you who have difficulty sleeping, you do this practice of *mettā*. Make it very simple, just somebody whom you have no problems with, if there is anybody. If not, just somebody you don't have problems with. And then to yourself, and then to all

beings, and choose a very simple phrase, like, "may you be happy." And just keep repeating that, just very gently. And it creates a certain level of concentration, and that becomes the substrate of your sleep. That makes you sleep more peacefully.

Or just the breath, just the calmness of the breath. If you find yourself being very, very restless, tossing from one side to the other, try just lying very still and refusing, under all circumstances, to move. You may be surprised to find that you suddenly wake up tomorrow morning.

And of course, you mustn't fall asleep without making a severe determination to wake with the bell.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.