Opening of 3 Month Course

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:13:36

Before we begin this evening, I'd like to introduce some people who will be helping to hold the energy of the retreat, the container of the retreat.

Of course, you've met all of the five teachers: Carol, Guy, Stephen, Michelle, and myself. In addition to us, I'd like to introduce Rebecca Bradshaw, who is sitting to the right of Carol. She is a teacher trainee who will be here throughout the retreat performing many supportive functions—sign-up interviews on days off, leading some sittings. You'll be seeing her around, and we're really grateful that she can be here. Tomorrow morning I'll introduce the two IMS resident teachers, Amy Schmidt and Annie Cohn, who will also be here in a supportive role during this retreat.

I'd like to introduce Alan Cooper, who is here all the way in the corner in the back. He is the night contact person in case of emergency. He's a trained nurse, has worked in hospice for many years, and is a longtime and very experienced practitioner of meditation. So again, we're very happy he's here.

I hope you get the sense that you're well supported. There are a lot of people holding this. And it didn't always used to be like that. This is the twenty-seventh three-month retreat, so you're coming into an accumulated energy in this hall and in this place which is really quite profound. You'll be adding to that stream of energy.

We've learned a little bit over these twenty-seven years about how to run these retreats. In the late seventies or early eighties, we came up with the idea of what we called Independence Week, and all the teachers just left. We thought it would be good for the yogis to be independent. It wasn't that helpful. We came back to disaster. So I think in all of these years of doing this we have learned, and I think you'll find the benefit and value of the support of all these people helping you to hold the practice.

Coming together on retreat is always a special time, and it's especially so when people come together for six weeks or three months. That's a significant commitment, and it reflects that deep commitment within yourselves. I could feel it starting Friday as you began gathering. It was like an in-gathering of people from so many different places. As we did the go-around this morning, it was quite amazing—from so many different parts of the world and of this continent and this country, gathering together to join in this, especially in these times, in this very difficult time. There's a tremendous power in the coming together, in the being together, and practicing the Dharma of freedom, the Dharma of liberation.

Joining together in this way is the beginning of an amazing and wonderful journey. Starting tonight as we ring the bell and enter into the silence—three months of silence—we're really entering into a whole new

realm, very different than our ordinary lives. We're entering into a realm of silence, of depth, the kind of depth that in our ordinary lives we don't often touch. We enter into a realm of solitude, even amongst one hundred, one hundred twenty-five people. We create a space of solitude for each one of us. And most amazingly and profoundly, we enter a realm where we come face to face with ourselves, where we're no longer so caught up in the distractions of our lives, but we stop and we turn inward and we really see ourselves.

This is a very rare thing in the world, and as is obvious from the events of the last weeks, it's tremendously needed. We need to understand ourselves. In some way I see Dharma practice as being the master game of life, because it is an exploration of life itself. It asks the most fundamental questions. What is the nature of this mind and body? What is the nature of birth and death? What is the nature of consciousness, of awareness? A great mystery.

Dharma practice is the exploration of the nature of suffering and discontent, both in ourselves and in the world. As you all know very well, this is not a running away or avoiding of suffering. It's a looking into it, into its depth, so we can begin to understand it. And it's also the exploration of the possibility of a genuine and transforming happiness and freedom.

You all know that this journey is not always an easy one. Buddhist meditation practice is not a bliss trip. And so if you have that expectation, please leave a note for one of us, because that's not what these three months are about. We have such strong mental habits of judging and comparing and restlessness and agitation and sleepiness and dullness and doubt and living in the past and living in the future. All of these things are within our minds.

It takes a strong commitment—which obviously you all have, because you're here for this length of time—and it takes a certain fire, a certain passion to be awake, to be mindful, to be aware, because it's in the face of many other habits.

So the question as we start on this journey: Where does this commitment, where does this passion for awareness, for wakefulness, come from? How can we connect with its root, with its source within ourselves?

First, it comes from the quality of a deep and great interest. It's that interest in understanding ourselves, that willingness to know ourselves fully. Most people in the world do not have this. They're simply acting out all of the conditioning of family and education and culture. This is a rare thing in the world—to have the interest and the willingness to know oneself completely.

There's a poem from an eleventh-century Japanese woman poet, Izumi. She's talking about looking at the moon at dawn, solitary mid-sky: "I knew myself completely, no part left out." In a way, that's the challenge to us. As you're here on retreat for this extended time, can we foster that commitment?

It's possible because everything is workable. There's nothing in our experience that is outside the realm of

dharma practice. Whatever arises—and many different things will arise in the course of this time—whatever arises within us is workable. We can be with it with that attitude of: let me see, let me understand, let me open to it.

For so many years in the beginning of my practice, I would get into these amazing struggles with myself about all the defilements of mind that I would see arising—the greed and the anger and the fear and the pride and the jealousy, whatever it was. My tendency would be to see it and then feel terrible about myself, or to judge myself, or to be reactive against my teachers for pointing it out to me.

At a certain point there was a major shift, and I recommend the shift to you early rather than later, if you can manage it. That shift happened when I deeply and truly wanted much more to see the defilements in my mind than not see them. It was almost like taking joy in seeing them, because in the seeing, that was a way of working with them. I could also see the transparency and the impermanence and the non-selfness of them.

We don't have to fight or struggle or judge ourselves for what's arising. If we have that attitude of interest and the joy of interest, of seeing it all—"I know myself completely, no part left out."

You are all experienced practitioners, and so you know very well that in the course of this retreat there will be many surprises. There will be many ups and downs, where you're feeling happy and inspired and full of energy, and at other times you feel bored and depressed or angry or fearful—and then it changes again and again. It's all part of this passing show.

The foundation for this interest, for this willingness to open, is a quality of heart that we will be talking about and practicing a lot. But it's helpful to connect with it right at the beginning of this long journey. What supports the interest in this exploration of our minds and our bodies, of suffering and freedom, is the quality of mettā, of loving-kindness. Loving-kindness towards ourselves, loving-kindness towards others.

And it's not some great, fantastic mind state of ecstatic bliss that we're looking for. This quality of mettā, loving-kindness that I'm speaking of, is really the very simple quality of friendliness. Just basic, easy, simple goodwill towards ourselves, towards our fellow yogis, towards the world, towards everything that arises.

There's a line from a Japanese samurai poem. One of the lines says, "I make my mind my friend." That is a wonderful line. If we did nothing in this whole retreat except that—except making our minds our friend—that would be a great accomplishment. We need to remember, we need to plant that seed within us, and know that it's this energy, this quality, which supports the immensity of the journey.

The second support for opening to every part of ourselves is something that Michelle talked about quite a bit last night, and that is the quality of renunciation. I'd just like to mention a few aspects of it that I think are particularly relevant as we move forward. Renunciation is so often misunderstood—even just the

English word.

Who wants to renounce? It sounds so gloomy and heavy and burdensome. But that's really a misunderstanding of what it's all about. Renunciation is a lightening. It's a relaxing back into simplicity. It's not being so cluttered in our lives. It's letting go of addiction. When we hear that word, we really want to understand the joy of it, not see it in this heavy, burdensome way. It's about lightening. It's about lightening up on so many levels.

The implication of renunciation in understanding our meditative journey is enormous. Because when we understand it correctly, we see that the meditation practice is not the struggle to get something. It's not to get something that we don't have. It's to let go. It's settling back and letting go again and again and again on the deepest levels. It's about not clinging, not grasping.

Well, that's a huge relief. You can really relax. There's nothing to get. I can stop the struggle. Now it's a question of simply settling back and not holding on. It's a very different mental stance.

This understanding of renunciation really is the power of every great monastery. In some way the great monasteries have understood, in a way that most societies don't, the power of this letting go, the power of not grasping, of not clinging. For these three months it's as if we are creating this great meditation monastery together. And this is the understanding, this is the energy that is at the heart of it.

It's renunciation of pleasure as being the guiding principle in our lives. Mostly in our ordinary lives, that's a major influence. We keep going for what's pleasurable or what's pleasant. This is the normal conditioning of our lives. But on retreat, as we're looking deeply at ourselves, everyone will face at different times enormous challenges and difficulties. They are definitely going to come. The tendency or the temptation would be to pull back from the difficulties and to try to find some more agreeable way, some more pleasant way.

A couple of years ago I was at a conference with some academics who had constructed a study on contemplative experience, but they really had no experience or real understanding of contemplative experience. They had gotten a big grant from a foundation to do this study, and so they went around the country interviewing people about their contemplative experiences. The one that really struck in my mind and stood out for me was this whole report on the contemplation of snorkeling.

I thought, oh, that's the one for me! Snorkeling is great. But this ain't snorkeling. It's not just swimming along in the pleasantness of things. That's nice enough, but it's not really what this contemplative path is about. We want to go much deeper than that. And what that means is really facing the difficulties that will come.

A basic understanding that's necessary as you begin this journey is that difficulties are part of the path. They're not a mistake and it's not that you're doing something wrong. This is part of it. And this is true of any discipline. If you want to become a great athlete or musician or whatever, in any discipline we always

come up against boundaries and edges. And it's not about simply trying to find the easiest way. It's trying to find balance. How can I be with what's arising? How can I extend myself?

In the last couple of years I've become a great mountain biking enthusiast. Of course I'm still in the very beginning stages of this, but it's been very instructive. At first, I'd be going with friends, and we'd be going up these hills, and they were all more experienced than I was, and they'd be at the top. Maybe ten minutes later, I'd get to the top, totally panting and out of breath and feeling like I was dying.

And I would only go up these hills if I was pulled along in their wake. When I was biking by myself, I would never think of going up them. But then, as I just kept going out more and more often, I found that my body was getting stronger. It was becoming easier. I could go up the hills with less effort. And it was really a pivotal moment for me in this whole endeavor when I would be out by myself and looking for a hill to go up. Being at that edge, playing the edge with balance.

A lot of what we'll do together is finding that balance. But that's how we get stronger. The difficulties are part of the path. We incorporate them and learn how to be with them skillfully. There might be times to back off a little in order to have the strength and balance to go forward.

So this is the first understanding of renunciation: the pleasantness of the moment is not always the measure of what's valuable.

This time is also a renunciation in a very immediate and real way of family and friends and your familiar life. It might be particularly striking in these times that are uncertain and unsettled. When you come here, it is a renunciation of that. And we begin to appreciate the great beauty and power of silence. This is such a rare event in the world—a hundred people coming together and being together in silence. There's a great power in that. There's a huge relief in not having to present ourselves to anyone. That's the beauty of the silence and the solitude. We can relax back into ourselves, into being just as we are, so that we can see ourselves clearly with no part left out.

It's a renunciation of pleasure as the main guiding principle in our lives. It's the renunciation of family, friends, our usual support system. It's the renunciation of fixed ideas of ourselves, of who we are. Renunciation of fixed ideas of the spiritual path. If you have any idea of how these next six weeks or three months are going to unfold—renounce. It's going into the unknown, going into a mystery. We can't possibly know, and the not-knowing becomes a source of tremendous energy. We don't imprison ourselves in these little boxes of preconception. Letting go of ideas of self-image, of who we are, of how our practice should be, of how the path unfolds. Just imagine for a moment letting go of all that—the relief and the ease. We just settle back right into the moment exactly as it is.

So a few suggestions as you begin this journey. These are really reminders of things you already know well. Given that it is completely natural to go through all of the ups and downs of practice—the easy times, the difficult times, feeling happy, feeling sad, feeling bored, feeling interested, all of it—given that this is

part of it, a quality that serves us so well, and that the Buddha spoke of so often, is the quality of patience. The Buddha said it leads to nibbāna, leads to enlightenment.

But we need to be careful with that word in English, because sometimes we hear the word patience and it has a slight connotation of endurance. "Okay, I'll endure through this." That's not the quality the Buddha was talking about. It's not an enduring. Rather, as Suzuki Roshi used to speak of it, he said it's more the quality of constancy. We just stay with it. We have that kind of patience through all the ups and downs and cycles and rhythms of these days.

You really have one very simple job. You have a secondary yogi job, whatever the particular work assignment is, but your main yogi job is to sit and walk. When you finish sitting, walk. When you finish walking, sit. When you finish sitting, walk again. It's very simple. And if you just keep that constancy of practice, the whole dharma will unfold.

It's important to remember that all of your experience, the whole range of it, is really like the changing weather.

It's just appearances of changing conditions. There's a saying in New England: if you don't like the weather, wait five minutes. Because from hour to hour or day to day, it can change a lot. Well, that's so true of our dharma practice. There'll be some great thunder and lightning storms. Can we open to them? Can we enjoy those as well? Being patient, having that sense of constancy.

The second piece of advice that I'd like to offer you, if you take it, will serve you very well. It will be a wonderful strengthening of your practice. And that is the understanding that meditation is not thinking about things. There are some useful dharma reflections, and we will talk about these later, which can be a help. But what I mean when I say that meditation is not thinking about things—I'm meaning all of those endlessly meandering thoughts.

There's a meditative disease, a yogi disease, which I know very well. I'm a survivor. It's called Vipassana brilliance. It's like we sit and the mind gets a little quiet, and all of a sudden our minds become so brilliant. We have all of these wonderful ideas and we get lost in them. We have these creative ideas about our lives or some project. It could be wonderful new insights we have about ourselves.

At one point in my practice, I was so caught up in the fascination with my own mind and thought process. Because it was fascinating. It was completely interesting. But I was going through this period where I was just lost in it for such long periods of time. I remember saying to myself—it's like I got just disgusted with my mind—I said, "Joseph, do you want to think or do you want to get enlightened?" It jolted me a little bit out of the habit of simply going with it.

It needs a certain understanding and resoluteness from the beginning of the retreat, really the beginning of each sitting, the beginning of each walking, reminding oneself. Because the habit is so strong, so easy. We just get lost in thought meandering, and it's enjoyable, and the hour goes quickly, and we think that

was a good sitting. It's not productive from the meditative perspective.

So we need to set a strong intention in our mind from the beginning. It doesn't mean that thoughts aren't going to come. They will come in vast numbers. But it's just to remind ourselves that the practice is really to let go of that meandering, to come back again to a moment of mindfulness, of awareness. And if we do that with some regularity and commitment, it's tremendously strengthening for our practice.

Just in support of that, I'll offer you the first of the many Vipassana mantras that will be suggested throughout the retreat. You can use this just as a reminder to yourself: Nothing is worth thinking about. Whatever you're thinking about, nothing is worth thinking about—from the perspective of this practice, now. There are times when thought is useful, but meandering, discursive thought? Now it's not. Because we begin to understand that insight and wisdom are not discursive; they're intuitive. They don't come through thinking. They come through silence of mind, where all of a sudden, quite intuitively, we simply drop into a new space—seeing in a different way, relating to experience in a different way. So this is a renunciation of our usual habit. And it opens us to an entirely different kind of space.

The Buddha said that the gift of dharma is the highest gift, the greatest gift. This is the gift that you have given yourselves for six weeks or three months. You're really giving yourself the highest gift in this world. It's the gift of coming back again and again to awareness, to mindfulness, to loving-kindness, to compassion. And out of the silence and awareness,

comes a wisdom that can hold even the greatest suffering. And that's why what we're doing here is so relevant to the conditions in the world now. The Dharma of understanding, the Dharma of freedom, can hold it all. We create a context of meaning and understanding for everything that's happening. It's a wisdom that allows us to break through the cycle of fear, of violence, of hatred. The Buddha pointed this out 2,500 years ago, and it's what we need to find for ourselves, in ourselves, so that we're able to share that understanding and wisdom with the world.

I'd just like to close with a poem that was just published in the last issue of the New Yorker magazine, which dealt with everything that's been happening. It's by a Polish poet, Adam Zagajewski. It's really a beautiful poem. I think it sets the tone as we enter this retreat.

Try to praise the mutilated world.
Remember June's long days and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew,
the nettles that methodically overgrow the abandoned homesteads of exiles.
You must praise the mutilated world.
You watched the stylish yachts and ships.
One of them had a long trip ahead of it, while salty oblivion awaited others.
You've seen the refugees heading nowhere.
You've heard the executioners sing joyfully.
You should praise the mutilated world.

Remember the moments when we were together in a white room and the curtain fluttered.
Return in thought to the concert where music flared.
You gathered acorns in the park in autumn and leaves eddied over the earth's scars.
Praise the mutilated world
and the gray feather a thrush lost, and the gentle light that strays and vanishes and returns.

I wanted to make sure that you each had one of these sheets, because as you know, we always begin retreats by taking together the three refuges, the triple gem, and at least the five training rules—five precepts, guidelines of non-harming behavior. And I think it's really important, at least in my heart, that it's not just another habitual routine that we go through at the beginning of a retreat. "Oh yeah, the refuges and precepts, *namo tassa*, blah blah blah," and then into the retreat. Some of you have done it many, many times.

Because I actually, as I sit here, feel very deeply about refuge in particular. In times like now, when things are very confusing, enormously painful, both personally and globally, the sense of refuge, the importance of examining for each of us personally, quietly, in our minds and in our hearts—what really, truly, for me, is my refuge? Where do I go in my mind, in my heart, when things are really difficult? When I'm afraid, or when I'm cranky, or when I'm needy, or when I can't handle the pain that's in me and around me? Where do I look, both habitually—meaning unconsciously—and also consciously when we're awake? Where do I go for refuge?

We start our retreats this way. The Buddha began all his teachings this way. Everyone who came to the Buddha and, after hearing him, said, "Yes, I want to be your disciple. I want to practice this way of awakening"—that was formally begun by the taking of the refuges. So it's by no means an idle tradition. For me, I feel that it's a very deep setting of our conscious intention, our conscious commitment to what is most deeply true and important for us in our life. It's very personal, too.

So refuge, of course, in the English word, means a place of safety, a place we can rely on for peace, for protection—something trustworthy, that we can have confidence in. And so when we talk about taking the three refuges, using the terms that have come down to us from the Pali...

How do we, if that's true for you, that you really feel you can take refuge in this triple gem, how does that translate for you in your heart, in your actions, in your consciousness? How does that manifest in the way that we live, in the way that we take decisions, the things that we do?

I think it's at the core of our whole practice. For me personally, the taking of refuge is something that I do on a daily basis. And when I'm on a retreat, which as Joseph said is not always a walk in the park, during difficult times I might be taking refuge many times a day. I find that it reconnects me with the strength and the confidence and the courage to keep opening to whatever is happening, because of my deep trust

in the refuge—that the Dharma is really the truth of this moment.

Let me offer my interpretation of the refuges, and I invite you to consider what they mean for you. This is a time when conscious reflection can be useful.

The first refuge is taking refuge in the Buddha, which can be a sense of encouragement, a sense of inspiration drawn from the historical Buddha. But knowing that Buddha means one who is awake, the essence of the inspiration of this refuge has nothing to do with him as a person anymore, because he's long gone. When we take refuge in the Buddha, we're also taking refuge in the living potential in each of us—that is, our living potential for awakening. Not in some other lifetime, but here and now, just as we are in this situation. It's immediate. It's real.

Taking refuge in one who is awake is recognizing, acknowledging, and establishing some conscious confidence in ourselves that this potential of awakening—and living from the wisdom of who we really are, that Joseph spoke of—this potential is alive in each of us. It's who we are. It's really what we hopefully come to retreat to touch and recognize and trust more and more. In taking refuge, we realize that's true now. You don't have to be a different person than you are for that to be true. It's about recognizing and going to this potential for refuge rather than to some idea or some other not so reliable source of momentary ease or comfort.

Taking refuge in the Dharma, or Dhamma in Pali, encompasses many meanings. It means the doctrine, the teachings of the Buddha, which can be conceptual and serve as a way to help us understand and guide our practice. Dharma also means truth, the way things are—the way things are right now, the laws of nature, which is us, which is the way the whole world is manifesting. When Joseph was speaking about the aspect of meditation in which everything's included, that we can open to whatever it is—to me, that's what taking refuge in the Dharma is about.

The truth of how things are is manifesting right now. How can it be otherwise? It's not about whether we like right now. It's not about intellectually getting some really far-out meaning from what's happening. Taking refuge in the Dharma on a moment-to-moment basis is simply this: Can I trust enough that if I just open into this moment, this experience, true nature of mind, of heart, sense of awareness, who we are—that can reveal itself? If I can just stop fighting the present moment long enough and be fully here and present.

For me personally, taking refuge in the Dharma is the refuge that gets me through the really naughty times in life or in retreat, because it reminds me that the potential for awakening is here, but I have to open into this moment to be able to recognize it.

Taking refuge in the Sangha, in community. Classically, the Sangha refers to the community of awakened beings, past and present, often the ordained Sangha. And of course we also use it here to include the community of those of us who are practicing this path of awakening with sincerity, with our full-hearted

intention and commitment.

Many people in the go-round were saying already after two days that they feel the strength of support that comes from being here together. We catch the mindful effort, we catch the courage, we catch the strength to keep going from each other. It's luckily contagious. On the days when you get up and feel like you just can't put one foot in front of another in one more walking period—maybe that'll never happen to you, that might just be me—but on those days, when you see somebody out there just doing it again, it's contagious. You think, well, if they can do it, I can do it. And you just go do it. It's really wonderful. It stops being so personal.

When we take refuge in the Sangha, it's as if we're taking refuge in the enlightened mind stream that at different moments we all partake of. What would be wonderful is if we could all partake of it at the same moment—wouldn't that be an amazing world? So we're working towards it. Taking refuge in the enlightened mind stream, which we all manifest at times. Taking refuge in Sangha isn't taking refuge in each other's personalities. That's not much of a refuge, really. Can we even take refuge in our own personalities?

Not likely. And so, think of this broader sense of Sangha, of community, and how vital it is. Because imagine trying to do this all alone—three months of sitting, walking, silence. It's really hard. But sometimes, especially in these first days, it can be that after the glow of coming together wears off, there are little bits of thinking: "What's that person doing here? I can take refuge in the Sangha, but *that* person? Part of the Sangha? With that behavior? I don't think so."

Remember then, we're not taking refuge in personalities, but in our mutual intention, our mutual commitment. It's going to manifest in as many different ways as there are people here, which is beautiful. That's how it is. So just holding the bigger picture, remembering that community, Sangha, is one of the three jewels—we'd be lost without it, really, on this path.

I say this because I feel really quite deeply about it. Even though I talk about it a lot, in my heart I feel deeply committed. I know this to me is the true refuge. I find not only in really difficult times like now, but even in times when things seem to be going along okay, when I'm a little mindless and confronted with some sudden unpleasant or difficult situation—how easy it can be for the mind, the heart, to run back into habitual understandings or habitual behaviors, thinking that there will be refuge there.

We don't think it so consciously, do we? I'm making this almost too simple, but just to give you the idea: "If I would go out and get a pint of Häagen-Dazs now, everything would be okay." Or call up a friend, or initiate a new action, or get in a new relationship, or fix an old relationship, or get on the phone, or lash out in anger, or try and fix the world, or go for a drive—whatever it is we do. None of which is in itself necessarily a bad thing. But letting yourself discover, as part of this inward journey of a three-month retreat, where we have unconsciously been placing our trust, our reliance—this is essential. While each of these things might momentarily, or over some short period of time, really ease our life, give us happiness,

give us a sense of safety, there's nothing temporal that's going to actually be completely reliable. No other person can be expected to conform always to what we need them and want them to do or be to keep us safe. It's impossible. No situation can.

And this is even in our normal day-to-day routine when everything seems okay. In these last weeks, when we in the United States have been thrust into a situation that many people in the world have been in for quite a long time already—which is certainly not something new in the history of the world—I find it both paradoxical. At times it's so obvious: what else could I look to for refuge than our true nature, than our connectedness, than the natural radiant purity of mind and heart that is who we all are? And at the same time, with each new wave of confusion that goes on, I often find my heart and mind really challenged. Do I really, totally have confidence in this? When so much of the energy and the people we might meet or hear or talk to clearly don't have confidence, when they come from another place, when a lot of the world—and it seems like it always has been that way—places confidence in other ways of understanding, it can be really challenging. Challenging both to stay honest with ourselves—do I really go to these things for refuge?—and also to be honest and okay with the times when we don't have that confidence.

Because I find for myself sometimes it's so clear—there's not one second, not one iota of doubt or confusion. And other times I'm kind of groping: "Oh yes, the potential for awakening—can I touch that again? Can I have confidence in that again?" And I always have been able to. The space of the quiet, the space of the interconnectedness, gives us a chance to recognize it.

So I think taking refuge is essential. Essential, over and over, just from a place as honest and sincere as we can be with ourselves. And I find it really gives the strength, the confidence, to open into whatever it is we need to open into—whatever experience might be presenting itself in our mind and body or in the so-called outside world. We can meet it. And we start not so grandiose, but simply where we are. When we touch our place of refuge, it gives us the strength and confidence to carry into our actions a sense of what's really true.

And so we talk about how to manifest our sense of connectedness, our understanding of non-harming, the oneness of all beings. We manifest that by our willingness to undertake as guidelines for training what we call the five precepts—five aspects of non-harming behavior. Again, we could look at those as just rules: you have to act in this way while you're here at IMS. And you could look at it that way; minimally, at least look at it that way. Please do undertake to live with these guidelines while you're here. But really, these guidelines are manifestations of our inner motivation, our inner intention.

As Sayadaw U Pandita described it once, living with the five precepts is an actualization of our oneness with all beings. In our commitment not to act from harming, not to act from taking what's not ours, not to act in ways that cause harm verbally, emotionally, or physically to others—in our commitment to that, we're actually manifesting our understanding of oneness. By not harming another, I'm not harming myself, actually. We can't separate the two. And this is what's such a fascinating aspect of practice with

these precepts.

I'll just name them very briefly to remind you. The first is taking the guideline not to harm, not to kill, basically, other living beings. Other people, of course, but all living beings. Generally here that comes down to insects, which we occasionally have a problem with. It's easier on a three-month course than it is, for example, in May here, when we have these horrific black flies that bite and are little and swarm everywhere. Here it's easier, but it's something to pay attention to. We're taking the precept not to harm other living beings and watching our intention if we do harm another being. Watching it. And if we so-called break any of these precepts, it's not about getting out the whip and lashing yourself. It's keeping attention. In the mindfulness of how it is before, during, and after—in that mindfulness of after doing something harmful, we really can't help but notice how much pain that causes ourselves. And we see the interconnectedness immediately.

The second precept is not to take what is not freely given, which I imagine Michelle talks some about under renunciation. But again, it's the sense of whatever I have is enough. The mind space that allows to arise is really one of great happiness and contentment. I don't have this particular food, this particular shampoo, this particular thing I think I need. Oh, maybe I don't need it. There's such a sense of openness. It's lovely.

These two together give what the Buddha called the gift of fearlessness. It's a beautiful thing that we're giving each other here, this gift of fearlessness—a place where we can be, so many people, so close together, and you just don't have to worry that someone's going to take what's yours, that someone's going to harm you. It's really beautiful in this world to live like that for some time.

The third, in terms of lay life, would be not to harm ourselves or another with our sexual behavior. For the terms of the retreat, even though it's usually part of the eight precepts, even with five precepts, the guideline is not to engage in any intentional sexual activity while here on the retreat.

The fourth is not to lie, not to use harsh or abusive speech, not using speech to divide people. But here, obviously, we're in noble silence. That's a big help. Still, just watch what squirts out of our mouth when the occasion arises. Not with judgment. None of this stuff is about being self-judging. It's just about being open and seeing what causes suffering and what leads to happiness.

The fifth precept is not to drink or take any kind of drugs that cloud the mind, that cause confusion, that cause heedlessness. That's obvious—we've come here to cultivate clarity and wisdom. But that doesn't include, if you have a physical condition and you're on some form of medication, that's fine. This is about recreational substances and mind-changing activities. Believe me, you're having more than enough mind-changing activity going on here. You really don't need to stir the pot.

So these are the five precepts, five guidelines for mindful speech and action, for training, for cultivating and recognizing our connectedness. We like to begin each retreat with taking these refuges and precepts.

Really think of this as a conscious commitment to yourself. It's almost like we're entering a doorway into these next three months—really appreciating a sense of commitment and dignity for yourself, appreciation for what you're doing.

Dutiyampi Buddhang Saranang Gacchami. Dutiyampi Dhammang Saranang Gacchami. Dutiyampi Sanghang Saranang Gacchami.

Tatiyampi Buddhang Saranang Gacchami. Tatiyampi Dhammang Saranang Gacchami. Tatiyampi Sanghang Saranang Gacchami.

Panatipata Veramani Sikkhapadang Samadiyami. Adinnadana Veramani Sikkhapadang Samadiyami. Abrahmacariya Veramani Sikkhapadang Samadiyami. Musavada Veramani Sikkhapadang Samadiyami. Suramerayamajjapamadatthana Veramani Sikkhapadang Samadiyami.

I thank you all for your deep commitment and dedication. We really wish you a marvelous journey these six weeks, these three months together. Thank you so much for the light you bring into the world.

Just to mention, you see there are eight precepts on the sheet. Sometime later, in a week or so, if you're interested, we'll give an opportunity to take the eight precepts, and we'll talk more about that then.

One other thing: every Wednesday and Saturday at the early morning sitting, there will be another chance at the beginning to take the refuges and precepts together. If there's a second chanting sheet up here and you don't have one, please come and get it at the end of this sitting.

So again, this is really the formal beginning of the retreat. We're in noble silence. Please enjoy.

Thank you so much.

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