Opening Night - 3 Month Retreat

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:44

So tonight we begin this six-week or three-month journey together in earnest—no more messing around. We're really starting to investigate this, what they call the great matter. The great matter of life and death, the great matter of suffering and freedom, of self-hatred and compassion. The great matter that in some way is at the heart, to me anyway, of all of life. Exploring what gives, for me, all of life meaning, which is just being fully present and understanding our hearts and minds and the world as it is.

It's so amazing to me that the freedom that the Buddha spoke about—this really purifying the habits of our heart and mind, really shifting the default mode from confusion and self-dislike and fear and the illusion of separate, isolated existence that gives rise to greed and fear and cruelty—shifting that default mode to one of pure wakeful presence with this moment, that manifests in our hearts and minds as wisdom, as compassion, as all those beautiful qualities that were mentioned this morning.

One time I had a teacher who said, however you want to describe the experience, the manifestation of heart and mind of awakening, we'll all have different words for it, because there's no word that accurately describes it. So I kind of love that go-around this morning, everybody throwing in a different word. Somehow we all get the mandala, just like we're a whole mandala of people here together, exploring this together and in solitude—like Stephen Batchelor's book, *Alone with Others*. That's how we are here, alone with others, and both of those are essential.

I personally feel like this choice of how to spend your time for six weeks, for three months, is really radical. In this world, in whatever culture we each come from, the choice to start where we are and to really turn our attention wholeheartedly, twenty-four seven—for you non-American English speakers, that means twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—you get time off to sleep in the beginning. But then mindfulness gets stronger, and you won't want any time off. You won't, because it's so much more rich and alive just to be awake, even when we hate what we're being awake for. Just being awake, being present, instead of falling asleep into our old habits of reactivity—it's so much more worthwhile, in my opinion.

This is really radical. The Buddha, as I'm sure you know, often described his path and his teachings as going against the stream. To really follow this path of awakening is moving against the stream of his culture and his society back 2,600 years ago in India. And so in all of our different cultures and societies, we are in some way going against the stream.

And yet, I mean, I'm certainly not a student of all the philosophies and religions of the world, but in various different ones I've read about, there seems to be a core of solitude, of the mystic, of the call to turn

our attention inward to our own mind and heart. To discover not only how we suffer and to free ourselves from that suffering, but as a way to share our being, our understanding, who we are with all of humanity, with all the people that we come in contact with. We can't help it. We are who we are, and whoever we come in contact with is going to be affected by that, just as we are affected by who we come in contact with.

So choosing this period of silence to really look inward, to choose to take refuge in awareness, in wisdom, in compassion, over the comfort of our habits of mind and heart, or over just the pull of reactivity—just the pull of wanting can be so strong. Have you noticed that? So strong, and not only wanting. Just choosing to give yourself, to give the world this time is, I feel, really radical. As the Buddha said, it's against the stream of what most people in all different cultures tend to do and the messages we get.

A big reminder of why: I probably don't need to mention to those of you who live in the States that today is 9/11, the anniversary of that huge terrorist act. One out of ten zillion examples on this planet, both in the history of this country and in the history of most other countries, in the past and in the present, of how much pain and sorrow and suffering can be created by even a few people filled and driven by fear, by hatred, by greed—never mind whole huge segments of any population. And it's also an example of all the history of violence and cruelty and oppression and war and bigotry for all different reasons, whether it's ethnicity or sexual identity or wanting someone else's property or some other cause.

Of course, these acts of cruelty and violence are not always responded to with cruelty and violence. There's as much nobility and courage and generosity in the world as well. So just to say with 9/11, to keep it with one example: of course we know in New York the courage of so many people and the generosity of those who responded immediately, who risked their lives and gave their lives. There was just such a general sense of people pulling together and caring for one another. What makes me a little sad in retrospect is how we remark on that as a special thing.

I heard on the radio, and I didn't know this, that a few people got together over some years and they got the US Congress to pass a resolution making the anniversary of 9/11 what they call a day of service, to kind of commemorate it in a wholesome, beautiful way. So I thought, okay, that's great that the Congress could do something like that. And they were giving examples of lots of people in New York all over the city who were going to different firehouses—because the firemen and women were some of the big heroes at that time—just painting the firehouses or cleaning up. It was kind of lovely because the fire people were like, "Wow, I can't believe someone's coming and painting our firehouse. How amazing." And the people that were doing it were like, "This is so wonderful to do something for someone else." Which is great. So there are wonderful responses too. I don't want to just harp on the negative.

But these horrible examples of fear, greed, cruelty, violence—whatever form they take—just keep on happening in this world.

So the radical thing, I feel, that we choose in coming to an experience like this is not an escape. Of course,

that's what people who don't understand meditation usually think. "Oh, you're going to go get calm." That's what people say to me all the time. "What do you do?" "I teach meditation." "Oh, I could use that. I need to get calm." You have no idea what you really face—coming face to face with all the habits in our own heart and mind, all the default mechanisms that would lead me to respond to cruelty with anger, to hatred with hatred, to feel that I need to protect by lashing out, to greed with greed.

And I'm not saying we should then think we shouldn't do that. I'm thinking more that the courage we bring to our practice of awakening is this interest, this willingness not to judge, but to really look in our hearts and minds and see what's going on here. Can I respond in another way?

There's a well-known story of the Dalai Lama. Someone was asking him, "How can it be, when your country of Tibet has been so overrun by the government of China, and so many of the Tibetan people have been killed or put in jail, the monasteries and nunneries destroyed, so many of you have fled to India—and yet you refuse to go to anger, and you still have compassion and forgiveness? How can you do that when everything's been taken from your country?" And he said, "Well, the Chinese government may have taken the country. Should I also give them my heart and mind?"

That's our choice. Not such an easy choice. It's not an act of will.

One of my teachers, a Burmese teacher named Sayadaw U Tejaniya, has little funny pithy comments. Someone asked him when he was here, "Okay, it's fine being on retreat, exploring when difficult habits of mind come up—greed, cruelty, hatred—and really being open to exploring them, not judging, not running, just seeing with affectionate curiosity, understanding, and trusting that that understanding grows naturally from awareness." Which is so cool. And that the understanding itself, wisdom itself, is the function that transforms our responses. So this person thinks, "Okay, that's all well and good on a retreat when people are in silence and enough comes up anyway. What about when we go back to life and people are basically mad? People are acting insane—not even in the big picture, but just who you run into in your life on the street. How do you deal with that?"

So Tejaniya said, "You realize that they're giving us a dhamma lesson. They're saying, 'Don't be like this.' I don't want to act like this or think like this or feel like this."

In my experience—I don't know if it's the same for you—that's not so simple, right? Easier said than done. If it were only an act of will... Have you ever thought, "I'm just not going to get angry at that person again"? Have you ever thought, in your relationship or with family members, "I'm never going to say that to them again. I'm never going to criticize that thing that drives me crazy. I'm never going to criticize it again"? And you know, how long? How long before it pops out of the mouth? Again, maybe I'm the only one. But how long? It's not an act of will.

So don't take that as a discouragement. Take that as an incredible relief. Because it's not an act of will. So when tomorrow you're standing in the breakfast line and somebody takes the last banana and your mind

goes into killer mode—but you won't act on it because Bhante is going to give us the refuges and precepts—you just see. Oh wow. You stand back and go, it's not an act of will to stop it. You bring affection and curiosity and go, "Wow, look at that. Isn't that amazing?" And that shift to affectionate interest, to awareness, to not taking it so personally, but really seeing how the mind works—that's the shift that can change our world.

Moment after moment after moment, that's our practice. It's not an act of will. So just put down trying, but show up twenty-four-seven for this moment. And the steadiness of awareness is really the condition that allows paññā, wisdom, to arise.

Just the recognizing accurately. It's so cool. Once we stop trying so hard to make what we think ought to happen happen—when we really have no clue what ought to happen, but we keep on trying—we just forget it right now. Just put it down and notice what's happening now in the body, in the mind, through all our activities of the day, with affection, with interest, without expectation. That's our job.

Another quote from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He says, "In the morning I practice to quiet and calm my mind." Apparently he gets up at like three or four every morning and practices for five hours. "And then the rest of the day, I use that quiet and calm to serve humanity."

So there's not really any way I feel that what we're doing is in any kind a running away. I mean, there's moments—God knows—we all run away. But ultimately, we're coming closer, like I think Andrea said, from A to A, but we really get to know and understand A, and then we stop fighting with reality. And that wisdom manifests as compassion, equanimity, all the beautiful things you guys said today.

So then I just want to offer, if it's helpful, a couple of reflections to start, to kind of set an attitude to begin. From Ajahn Sumedho—he's an American man who has been a monk in the Thai forest tradition, a student of Ajahn Chah for forty-something years, a really long time. I've found him quite inspiring in many ways as a teacher. And one time, I remember he said something that's really stayed with me. He said that in the heart, the mind, the attitude of gratitude and contentment are very supportive conditions for awakening.

And so I just want to mention that a minute. See that meditation isn't an isolated activity—something we do, do, do without paying any attention to what's the weather in our heart, in our mind, what's going on along with it. It's essential to include the whole package.

There are many places in the Buddhist suttas, the Buddhist discourses, where the Buddha, before he starts teaching someone, doesn't just go in and hit them with the highest teaching. Boom, you've got to understand anatta right now. Boom, there's no self. That's it. Get it. Some people could hear that, but we wish the Buddha were here because apparently he could read everyone's mind and know exactly what to say that they would be able to hear and understand. Wouldn't that be great? However, here we are.

Often he would, when beginning teachings, lead someone in what he called graduated teachings. He'd first talk about generosity and virtue, bring a lightness, a brightness, an openness to the mind and the heart, to

actually move it away from being caught in wanting or fear or any of the hindrances. Because when we're really caught in aversion, caught in wanting, and don't recognize it, we can't hear and understand non-greed, because greed's saying, "No way."

So there are many suttas where the Buddha really starts by brightening the heart. It's not that we need to practice from a place of misery. You'll hit places of misery, but you can bring an interest to it. We don't have to start from there if we have a choice. And we often do have a choice. We'll talk about that in many ways.

But just these are three little reflections that came to me. You might find ones of your own that are more specifically helpful for you. But they help set a tone, help to relax, to bring the heart and mind into a receptive mode, an awake and energized and interested mode.

So gratitude and contentment. For me, often reflecting at the beginning of a retreat like this—wherever, but since this is where we are—consciously tuning your mind into various aspects that you can feel an appreciation for, a gratitude for. In a way, it's like tuning into what we call dana, or generosity, metta, or loving-kindness. It's a field that we can all be in here together, held really through generosity and loving-kindness.

I first started noticing this when I was doing retreats in Burma at a monastery, really so supported by the lay women—mostly women, but some men too—who work there, who serve the food, who do the cooking. An amazing, amazing amount of work that these women mostly do to serve all the yogis.

Yogis is the word we use in Burma for anyone who comes on retreat. All the yogis who come there from whatever country—Burmese mostly, but some foreigners. And these helpers do it with so much happiness, at least externally. I mean, I can't read inside, but there's a smile. They're going so out of their way to help you get the food you need, to help you in whatever way they can, to support your practice out of love of the Dhamma.

So this I really would feel when I was having a hard time—just kind of look around. It started to percolate unconsciously, and then I started to use it consciously. I would just notice the people around working so hard with so much joy to support me.

Now, we could go to the bad side with that and say, "I'm so worthless, and here they are working so hard to support me." That's not useful. But rather to say, "Wow, feel the metta. Feel the loving kindness, the friendliness, the generosity." And let that brighten your mind and heart, because it's a circle, a cycle. Generosity doesn't work if there's not a recipient. And so to actively receive and rejoice in that, to actually appreciate and have gratitude—this brightens our heart and mind, and it becomes a much richer, easier field to keep practicing in.

So here I look around at all the staff who are supporting us and all the beautiful touches, and the fact that all of us here together, just by our presence, are supporting one another. I think you may start to feel that

as the days go on and you're dragging yourself through another walking period and someone else is going by. If they can do it, I can do it. You may not be grateful then, but later you will be. But just to consciously bring it in.

The work meditation that each of you are doing is a huge generosity to support all of us here together. As you're doing it, you can be grateful, appreciate your own generosity, and be grateful for the others. Or reflect on all the people in your life and all the circumstances in your life that are supporting you to be here. For everyone, it's a lot to be able to come here. There's people that are sacrificing and supporting and letting us be away. Really to feel gratitude for that—and that can brighten us. It's not like a chore; it's a real beautiful quality. All the generous donors that have supported IMS, that have made all these retreats possible—really appreciating that as another way of opening in our practice.

So consciously letting our heart and mind brighten through gratitude and appreciation. I often do a little gratitude practice at night just before I go to bed on retreat. Often when I start it, it's usually at the end of a day where you just—maybe you never had a day like this—where you just want to throw yourself in bed and go unconscious and think maybe tomorrow it'll all be different. Okay, gratitude. Yeah, I'm really grateful. I'm grateful the day's over. That's what I'm grateful for. And then I start saying a few other things. It's not very convincing. But you keep on going. And pretty soon, stuff just starts coming. I'm grateful I'm here and there's peace and I had enough to eat today. I'm grateful bombs aren't dropping. I mean, it just starts to flow. And then there's this energy to keep on going, to keep on looking.

The second reflection is something Winnie mentioned this morning. She spoke of lineage, appreciation of teachers. She went back to the Buddha, which is inspiring to me. That may not be what's inspiring to all of you. But again, bringing in a sense of gratitude and inspiration—to consciously call in whatever teachers have been inspiring and helpful to you on your whole path of awakening, that have gotten you to this point in your life.

Sometimes, for me, I can reflect on the Buddha and the fact that these teachings have stayed alive for 2600 years. That really does inspire me. And there's a saying, said to be true, that if even for one moment no one was practicing Buddha Dharma, then the particular teachings—not the truth, but the teachings—would die out of the world. So I always think, well, we're doing our bit here. We're keeping it alive. We're sitting with all different people all over the world. But again, whatever teachers, whatever beings have inspired your particular path—take time sometimes to reflect on that, to bring them here, to let that inspiration renew our commitment and our energy.

And the third reflection that sometimes helps me, often, is that of my aspiration itself.

This morning we just briefly mentioned aspiration, one word. And if this is something that's useful for you, to just get in touch with what's really most important to you, what deeply brought you—not only to this retreat, but to this whole path in your life.

So aspiration, not just hoping for a nice experience or something like that. That's okay, we can have those hopes. They'll only make you suffer, but you can have them. But the deep movement of your heart, of your intuition that brings you here, that brings you on your path—to tune into that, to reflect on it, and to consciously make a commitment. Not a commitment that this is going to happen, but just a self-reminder in times of difficulty: oh yes, this is what's important. Kind of like a shift of refuge. Taking this moment to consciously, for ourselves, remind ourselves of our commitment and why we're here.

And so with that, I'd like to turn it over to Bhante to take us into the retreat with the refuges and precepts.

Thank you for the wonderful talk.

So I'd like to talk about the three refuges and the five precepts. Traditionally, that's how we start this retreat, and most people think that's only for starting and don't use them in the middle or at the end. But I encourage you actually to use them throughout your practice. It's not just an appetizer.

I'm going to explain them because sometimes we take things for granted. I remember when I was teaching in Uganda, somebody wanted to become a Buddhist, and she asked me how to become a Buddhist. I said, "Oh, you know, you can take the three refuges." Then I explained, and the whole time she was frowning. I asked what was wrong, and she said, "I have a question. What if I cannot feed the three refugees?" She thought that in order to become a Buddhist, you have to feed the three refugees—the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. She was very apprehensive because she said, "That's too much for me."

So I always explain to people what this means, because I don't know—some people may not know this, though I assume most people know what they are.

In order for something to be called a refuge, it has to have two qualities. One is protection, and another is accessibility. Keep those two things in mind: protection and accessibility.

Think of an umbrella. When it's raining, you need an umbrella to protect you from the rain. Whenever you use an umbrella, you always have to protect it. If you don't protect it, there will be many holes, and next time you take it out, you'll get wet because you didn't protect the umbrella—so it can't protect you.

The same thing applies here: we have to protect the Dhamma, we have to protect the Sangha and the Buddha, so they will protect us also. This protection is actually very important. You can even ask, protection from what? Protection from tormenting mind states.

You all know what happens when you meditate. Some difficult mind states arise. Some mind states are very good, but some others are difficult. So we need protection. I think most of the protection we need is even from doubt. At the very beginning of the retreat, we might have doubt. Why did I come here? I could have stayed home and gone for vacation in Rio de Janeiro.

Actually, that's what happened to me when I came here. I came from South America. I'd spent one year in Brazil and Chile and Bolivia. I'd seen so many beautiful things, and a friend of mine said, "Krishnamurti said the truth is a pathless path."

So what are we doing here? Actually, my friend cast some shadows of doubt about this whole thing. I thought, maybe I should have stayed there. So there's doubt at the beginning, actually. We need to sail through the doubt by getting into what we call faith and confidence. Once we take the three refuges, that helps us to cultivate faith and confidence and overcome doubt. But of course, other mental states also—we are protected from them when we take these three refuges.

Then another quality is accessibility. If you are using an umbrella, you don't want to put it in the kitchen. You have to put it at the entrance of your door so that you can access it easily. If you spend one hour looking for an umbrella, that's not a good idea. You should put it very close to where you can see it. The same thing with the three refuges—they should also be accessible. It's not something that exists only in a book. It's really something that you can practice and that can help you. So that's protection and accessibility. As we go along, try to find out how you can use them for protection and accessibility.

The first one is the Buddha. Buddha, of course, means "awakened one." That's what it means. We remember the historical Buddha who figured out this path. Out of gratitude, as Carol says, we take refuge in the Buddha. In the ultimate sense, that's what it means. But in this retreat environment, we want to be able to access the qualities of the Buddha. There are many—nine of them—but at least we can summarize them.

One is purity: purifying your mind of greed, hatred, and delusion. That one you can access. You may not be the Buddha yet, and I'm not one, of course, though my name has "Buddha" in it. But I'm not one, just in case. The name means "protected by the Buddha." So yes, you need to access the qualities of the Buddha. That's the beauty of the Buddha—he didn't have a monopoly over the quality of Buddhahood. He said, you can do it. You can purify your mind of greed, hatred, and delusion. So that's the first quality: purity. The second one is compassion. The third one is wisdom. You can be deeply compassionate and you can be profoundly wise. These things you can actually access as we go. You can cultivate compassion. You can cultivate wisdom. And then you can enjoy the qualities of the Buddha. That can take you towards the path of liberation.

The second refuge is called the Dhamma. Dhamma literally means "to uphold." It comes from a Pali word called *dara*. It means many things depending on context, but here we can say the ultimate Dhamma refers to the various levels of enlightenment or awakening. We can take refuge in that. Dhamma also means doctrine—what the Buddha taught. So many meanings. In the ultimate sense, of course, these different levels of enlightenment are what we take into account when we take refuge. But in terms of accessibility, it's the qualities of the Dhamma.

One quality of the Dhamma is that it's well expounded. In other words, you don't have to figure this out on

your own. I think that's one thing I appreciate about the Dhamma. You don't have to scratch your head to find out where the Dhamma is. It's right there.

So "well expounded" means that the practice of sīla (morality or ethical conduct), samādhi (concentration), and paññā (wisdom) is clearly laid out. That's the beauty of this teaching.

For me, when I came to this teaching, I had navigated many teachings, and I really appreciated Buddhism and meditation in general. That's how I started—I didn't start with Buddhism. I started with meditation. After years of research and searching, I found that in this teaching, the Buddha gave us the address. And after giving us the address—let's say 1230 Pleasant Street, Barre, Massachusetts—he also gave us a map or GPS for how to get there.

I appreciate that because many times I've gotten lost with just an address. But when you have a GPS as well, that's enough. The map shows how to practice, and the GPS helps you navigate. But here's the problem: people ask the driver to do it for them. That's asking too much of the Buddha. The Buddha cannot meditate for you. The teachers cannot meditate for you. You have to do it yourself. This is the path. So you can take refuge in that—knowing that you are going to do this practice yourself, and it's accessible because you have the address, you have the GPS. You just have to do the work.

There are many other qualities of the Dhamma—six of them traditionally—but we can also understand that this Dhamma is calling one to come and see. It's directly visible. It's not hidden from us. From the time we start practicing, we can see the Dhamma. We can see our mind with all its compassion, mettā (loving-kindness), wisdom, aversion, fear, anxiety—it's all there. You don't have to go far away. It's just here. We find the Dhamma in the books and texts, but really, the Dhamma is right here in this body and mind. It's directly visible. That's another quality of the Dhamma.

There is also Sangha. Sangha means community—that's what the word means. Here, as a refuge, we take what we call the Sāvaka Sangha, the Ariya Sangha. Those who have practiced and attained enlightenment—whether they are monks, nuns, or laypeople—can be qualified as Ariya Sangha, Noble Sangha, provided they have practiced the Dhamma and achieved at minimum the stage of stream entry.

You can do it. Maybe on this retreat—it's available. You can go to the first level, second level, third level, and fourth level of awakening. The Buddha said you can do it. If you could not do it, he would not be teaching it. So it's possible. We can take refuge in that—the possibility of achieving awakening. And those who have attained are role models for us. If we knew that nobody had ever attained these stages, we wouldn't be here. Why bother if it's not doable? But so many people have done it. So many people have done it in the past. The Buddha said that wherever there is the Noble Eightfold Path, there will always be people who attain awakening at different levels.

Right. That's on one level, actually the ultimate level. But in a retreat environment, how can we access the sangha? We are living here as a community. For me, having lived in a sangha, a conventional sangha, at

Bhavana Society for eight years, I discovered some qualities that can be very helpful in this kind of environment.

One of them is support. Carol mentioned this as well. One of the qualities of the sangha is to support each other. When we live in a community, we need to support each other. Without that support, it's very difficult to practice. If you do one thing that is going to disrupt the community, then all the community will be affected. Let's say we all agree on noble silence, and then for some reason you get out your cell phone and hide, thinking, "Oh, nobody's going to see me," and you start calling or texting. That can disrupt us. Just one thing like that. And then we've all been talking to each other. So we need to support each other. In one way, the practice is individual, but on another level, all of us are involved together.

Another quality of the sangha is unity. We are here from different countries, different traditions, and all different shades of background, but what brings us together is unity. We are unified here under one umbrella. We are all aspiring to attain liberation. It's a wonderful aspiration, actually. Think of it. Take a moment to consider this: we all spent a lot of time preparing to come here. And when we come here, it's amazing that we are all unified under that theme. We are all aspiring to overcome suffering and cultivate happiness.

Another quality is to live in harmony. We need to live harmoniously here. At every level—when we are doing walking meditation, when we are getting our food—we have to maintain a sense of harmony.

So this is by way of protection and by way of accessibility. Whenever you take these three refuges, remember that. And it's not only at the beginning; it's also during the retreat. We use them as meditation themselves. Before you begin your meditation, you may want to reflect on the qualities of the Buddha—purity, purifying the mind of greed, hatred, and delusion. You don't have to remember all of them, but you can use perhaps a couple before you start your meditation. This is what we call Buddhānussati, Dhammānussati, Sanghānussati—reflection on the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. Whichever resonates with you, you can use them as you go. It's not only at the beginning of the retreat.

Another thing we do along with these three refuges is to take the five precepts. The five precepts form a container that keeps us safe here. I'm sure you're all familiar with the five precepts. In English, the first one is abstaining from killing. I don't expect you are going to be killing insects and birds here. But actually, when we look at those five precepts, the way they are framed is in a way of abstaining. And I'm sure here you have heard so many don'ts. Don't do this. Don't do that. Now you have a list of do's.

Here, abstaining from killing means to preserve life, to protect life. It's actually active. It's not only abstaining, but also you have to protect the physical environment, the mental environment, the spiritual environment. For me, I always stretch things even further. I say, okay, don't kill even your time. You know, after coming here and meditating for one week and you're not going anywhere, you might think, "No, why did I come here?" And then you start killing time.

So, yeah, when is it going to end? And the rest of the time is just walking here, taking photographs. You're just killing time until part one is finished and you go home. So I extend that precept to actually stretch its meaning—not to kill time, not to waste time. Use your time productively here. Of course, don't kill any insects or animals, but I really remind you to preserve and protect all living beings.

Then the second one is not to take what's not given. Again, I don't expect that you'll take things from here—there's not a lot, actually. This is a meditation center. But one positive side of this wonderful precept is to be generous, to be contented. It's a wonderful quality of the heart and mind to be contented with whatever is available in this facility.

I know we don't have a television. Some people actually, when they came to Bhavana Society where I practiced in a monastery, they asked, "Do you have a television?" I said, "No, no, this is a monastery." So, I mean, you're going to miss your television, your commercials at home, maybe your ice cream and all those things. Be contented with whatever is available here. That will help you very much to progress on your path as it unfolds. If you lack contentment, then it will be very difficult for you. That means contentment with the food, your walking path, your cushion.

Actually, I tell you, when I practiced in '99, I wasn't contented with my meditation cushion. I kept looking for the best meditation cushion. And guess what? I didn't find one. Because it was pain. I went through a lot of pain, actually, because I'd spent one year traveling in South America. I mean, I used to sit, but not for one week constantly. So I kept looking for the best cushion that would do the trick to overcome pain. I used to see people sitting without a cushion and wonder, how can they do that? I wished I could get a custom-made one, you know, with fluffies and all this, thinking then I could overcome pain. This can be a form of discontentment. Actually, I went back and forth between the chair and various cushions. I don't know whether the teachers noticed, but what I remember was the highest one. Really, my head stuck out because I was sitting on something like a throne.

So be contented with your cushion. Deal with your pain. Don't make yourself suffer throughout the whole retreat looking for the best cushion. Be contented.

Then the third one is abstaining from all sexual activities. Of course, in a positive way it means to control your mind and calm your senses—not to misuse your sexual energy. Yes, all the senses actually: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and thinking. We shouldn't agitate them. We should practice in a way that helps to make them calm and peaceful. That's how we can progress on this path of meditation.

The fourth one is abstaining from telling lies. Again, I don't expect that you tell lies since you are even maintaining noble silence. But something comes up, like when you have an interview with a teacher. I'm not saying you lie, but there's a little bit of an extension of what you see, a stretching. "Yes, I'm a sotāpanna, you know." Well, wait. There's a tendency to stretch our practice, to impress—I don't know—but there's that tendency, that excitement when you're talking about your practice with the teacher. Try to remember this precept: not to tell lies, not even fibs, not white lies.

So this is a very difficult practice because it comes up unconsciously. We just exaggerate our experience. "Oh, you know, I attained the fourth jhāna in this sitting." But you were sleeping the whole time! There's a difference between deep meditation, jhāna, and sleeping. So before you tell the teacher that you're in the fourth jhāna, you might want to check whether you heard the bell ringing or not.

These things come up. The good thing is that we've been there ourselves. We know how we have reported to teachers, and we know how we have stretched the boundaries. Don't take it as telling outright lies, really, but it's a little bit of stretching.

Then the fifth precept is abstaining from taking intoxicants and drugs that lead to heedlessness. So there's a condition there. Of course, I don't expect that you came with a martini here, or a beer, or some kind of joint just to catalyze the process of meditation. I don't expect that. I don't think you even resort to mouthwash—I've heard that people resort to mouthwash! That's not what I expected here, but the positive side of this precept is to stay sober and be mindful all the time, to be diligent.

We are going to remind you of this. One thing we will remind you of is continuity of practice, so that you don't stay forgetful and heedless.

Of course, if you are taking prescription drugs and some medication, you should not discontinue. This precept is really talking about intoxicants that lead to heedlessness. For medical reasons, you can absolutely continue to take your prescription medicine.

So now we are going to take these precepts in the Pāli language. This is your Pāli 101! I'm sure we are all familiar with them already. Just to save time, let us do all the Namo Tassa together, and then I'll do call and response when it comes to the refuges—like Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi—I'll do the whole sentence and then you repeat, alright?

[The group chants the three refuges and five precepts in Pāli]

So now we have taken the three refuges and the five precepts. Now we have started.

I wish you the very best. Reflect on these things during your practice. You can always recall or reflect on your Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. Or you can reflect on your sīla. You can say, "Okay, the last five days I haven't killed anything. I'm not stoned." You can reflect, and before you begin your meditation, if you do this for even the first two minutes, it's amazing how you can free your mind.

Reflect on your generosity—the precept of abstaining from taking what's not given. Just think about the positive side: "Oh, I'm very generous." You can practice generosity here on the cushion. Apart from giving some food in my alms bowl, there's also a lot of generosity that you're doing here.

You have generosity in letting go of your difficult mind states. That's another form of generosity—to be generous enough to let go of your greed, hatred, and delusion. That's it. You can reflect on that.

Thank you very much for your practice. I have a lot of mudita for you, appreciative joy, to see you really practice in the long term in this way. I'm looking forward to interacting with you in a silent mode.

Thank you very much for your practice.

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