Retreat Opening

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 49:24

Good evening everybody.

As you know, tonight will be the formal opening of the retreat where we'll talk about and take together the refuges and precepts.

But first, I would like to introduce the sixth member of our teaching team who arrived today, Alex Haley, sitting under the tree over there in the corner—kind of our pseudo Bodhi tree. Alex Haley is in the Spirit Rock IMS teacher training and he's here to assist us, offer sign-up interviews, and various other things. You'll be really happy to have him. He comes from Minnesota. Thank you for coming, Alex. He'll be here for the first three weeks, and then Aaron Treat will come for the next three weeks.

When we start retreat, we always take three refuges and five precepts at the minimum. So I'll explain what are the three refuges, and Carol will explain about five precepts. And then we will take all of this in Pali language. I think all of you have a paper. If you don't have a paper, raise your hand—there are some papers on the table outside that you can get.

Before we take them, let me explain what are the three refuges. The refuges are the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. In countries like Burma, I heard that monks and nuns and lay people take almost one year practicing this. It's a meditation in itself, though here we use it just to start the retreat officially. But it's really meditation itself—you can spend a year just reflecting on these three refuges. Here it's just going to be used as a start, and you can use them in your practice.

So we start with the Buddha. Buddha is a Pali word which literally means "awakened one." That's what it means. And the Buddha, as you all know, is a historical figure who lived in India and attained enlightenment. Somebody asked him whether he's a god, and he said, "No, I'm just awake."

The good thing about the Buddha is he never monopolized his qualities of enlightenment. He said in one discourse, in the Majjhima Nikaya, that you can also become a Buddha. You can overcome greed, hatred, and delusion. In other words, you can enjoy the qualities of the Buddha. It's possible. You can become a Buddha yourself, and you also have the potential to become a Buddha.

When we take refuge in the Buddha, there are two levels. One is the ultimate level. At this level, we actually recognize the historical Buddha and also we recognize the potential that we can also be awake. Another level is to really think of the retreat environment here and how you can apply this. The qualities of the Buddha are many, but we can perhaps summarize them as purity, compassion, and wisdom. In a retreat setting, we can actually cultivate and practice these qualities of the Buddha. We can purify our

mind. We can be deeply compassionate. We can be profoundly wise. We can actually cultivate these qualities of the Buddha.

Then the Dhamma. Dhamma is another Pali word which is very common even in Hinduism. It means natural laws. Literally it means "to support." It comes from *dara* or *dham*—the Pali word meaning "to uphold." So Dhamma is what upholds us. It upholds us here in the practice. In other words, it really supports us so that we don't enter into tormenting mind states like difficult emotions. If we practice the Dhamma, we are not affected so much by these emotions, and if they come, we can deal with them using the Dhamma. When we go to refuge in the Dhamma in the ultimate sense, it means the four stages of enlightenment. And then, in final enlightenment, of course, Nibbana.

That's what we aspire for.

In a retreat setting, we can talk about the practice of Dharma itself: the practice of morality, ethical conduct, the practice of concentration, the practice of wisdom. The entire practice that we are going to undertake here is Dharma itself. So it's accessible. In a retreat setting, all the teachings you're going to receive are accessible to you.

Traditionally, six qualities are given to describe the Dharma. It is calling one to come and see directly. It is visible, timeless, immediate. All these qualities of the Dharma are valuable. When you practice Dharma, you can see for yourself, right here. Directly visible—that's one quality of the Dharma. Leading onwards—it leads to awakening, it leads to peace, it leads to happiness. That's where it's inclined. So we can take refuge in that.

Sangha, the third refuge, literally means community. In our monastic tradition, we live in a sangha in a monastery—the ordained sangha. But in this situation of taking refuge, it means the Arya Sangha, the noble sangha, those who have attained enlightenment. They may be ordained or not ordained, but we uphold them. They serve as role models for us. They have done the work, and now it's us doing this work. We want also to be part of them.

In a retreat setting here, on another level, we can take the qualities of Sangha. In our monastery, these qualities are unity, harmony, and support. We support each other. We come from different countries in our monastery, and here also we come from different countries, so we need to support each other. We are united under one umbrella, and what is that umbrella? We are all aspiring to attain awakening. That's what brings us all together here, irrespective of culture or country. We have the same aspiration: to be free from suffering and to cultivate happiness. We are in one club, in other words.

In order to maintain that unity, we need to support each other and be harmonious in terms of what we have to do here—perhaps keeping silence. If you don't observe silence, you are going to disrupt others. Then we are not supporting each other because of our behavior. So it's very important to remember these qualities: unity, support, and harmony. These qualities are accessible during the retreat here.

And on the ultimate level, of course, remember that when you go to the refuge today, Sangha is actually upholding the noble Sangha, the Sāvakasangha—those who have heard the Dhamma. Another name is Arya Sangha, meaning the noble Sangha. Those are our role models.

Then you're going to ask: where are they? Are they in Paris or New York? They are there. The only thing is they don't make it to the newspaper. That's the unfortunate part, but they are there. Even the Buddha said that wherever there is the Noble Eightfold Path, there will always be people who are awakened, people who have actually realized the path.

This question comes up: "Bhante, have you ever seen an enlightened being?" Well, they are there, but they don't advertise themselves. We can rest assured that when this path is existing, there are people who are practicing, and they have realized it.

So these are the three refuges that we are going to take in Pali language.

One of the many things that I love about the Buddha's path, about this path that we're all on together, is that in my personal limited understanding, all the different aspects of the path that he taught—each of them singly, and then all of them together—are for the purpose of purifying our heart, our mind. They are for seeing through and transcending the habits, as Bhante mentioned, of greed, of hatred, and of confusion.

And so when we begin by taking the refuges, the appreciation and contemplation of each refuge is a practice in itself, which in itself brings a kind of purity, a concentration, a focusing of the heart and mind. I've seen nuns in Burma whose main practice is the contemplation of the qualities of the Buddha. While it's not a practice that particularly speaks to me personally, seeing the effects of it in the brightness of their minds and hearts, the focus of their minds and hearts, is really beautiful. You can see it's a practice that is onward leading, that's purifying the heart and mind from greed, from confusion, from self-centeredness.

Working with the precepts, with ethics, with conscious conduct in a similar way is one aspect of the path. When I first started practicing, of course every meditation retreat was founded on taking the five non-harming precepts as an integral part. It was respected, but it was always kind of like, "If you do the precepts, then your practice can proceed better, more calmly"—which is true. But I feel it didn't give enough respect or power of understanding that just working with these five guidelines, these training guidelines of non-harming behavior, is in itself a very deep practice of purifying the heart and mind, of cultivating wisdom, of seeing through the suffering that arises here in our heart and mind when we're driven by, consumed by greed, by hatred, by confusion.

To see that the suffering which manifests through our actions begins from the seed of confusion in our heart—this is profound. And when we are really taking on as a practice giving awareness to our actions, using as a guideline these five training precepts for restraining ourselves from actual behavior of body and speech that is harming, it's not just an external guideline that we mindlessly adhere to. It's a reminder

to bring awareness, this kind awareness, this quality of discerning interest, into seeing what's going on in our mind and heart when we have the impulse to act or speak in a harming way.

So when we restrain, that's great—that's a movement of wholesomeness, a movement of non-harming. And noticing why, how it feels when we act out of harm, how it feels when we act out of non-harm, what the effect is both ways—this is a discernment of steady awareness that, in working with these precepts, is really cultivating quite deeply. It's leading us into a deeper purity of heart, a purity of mind.

I ran across a lovely sutta from the Buddha about the eight streams of merit, streams of the wholesome, nutriments of happiness. The first three are going for refuge in the Buddha, in the Dhamma, in the Sangha—that they bring happiness to our hearts, to our minds. And then the other five streams of merit are what he calls the five great gifts. And that happens to be abstaining via the five precepts.

This is what the Buddha says about the five great gifts: "Here, a noble disciple, having abandoned the destruction of life"—so we recognize this is the first training guideline, to refrain from harming living beings—"abstains or refrains from the destruction of life. By so refraining, she or he gives freedom from fear, freedom from hostility, and freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. And she or he, in return, enjoys immeasurable freedom from fear, from hostility, and from oppression or affliction. This is the first great gift, the fourth stream of merit that leads to one's welfare and happiness."

I just think that's so beautiful. By refraining from harming living beings, one is giving this great gift to measureless beings, and is also in the same way receiving this gift of freedom from fear, hostility, and oppression.

And similarly with the other four training guidelines, the other four precepts. He uses the exact same language: a noble disciple abstains or refrains from taking what is not given—the second precept; refrains from harming oneself or others with one's sexual energies—the third; refrains, abstains from harsh, false, and abusive speech—the fourth; abstains, refrains from liquor and intoxicants, which are the basis for heedlessness.

I know you are all familiar with these five training guidelines, but to really think of taking them on in this context—that each of them is a very powerful and quite profound area of exploration in our lives. They're not simple, as I'm sure you know. Just take the first one, refraining from harming living beings. Easier said than done, even with our full, wholehearted intention.

So taking these on, we explore with awareness what's going on in our mind and heart if we harm—what was happening, what's the effect for others, for ourselves. When we don't, when we refrain, can we even tune into the possibility of offering this gift to limitless beings of freedom from fear, from hostility, from oppression? That may not be immediately accessible to our minds.

I know many of us tend to focus more on all the times we've thought about doing something, breaking the precepts, rather than actually noticing all the moments of restraint. Or just even tuning in to ask: How can

my not stepping on this ant be a gift to limitless beings?

But we don't know. We don't know.

What's the effect on the world of a being—a very famous being like the Dalai Lama? Someone who we quote all the time because he's famous, but he's so amazing in terms of his refusing to take on hostility, to act in ways that are harming, even when he himself and so many of his people are themselves suffering under great cruelty and oppression.

There is one quotation I read from him. As usual, people were saying, "How can you continue to not give in to anger when the government of China has so oppressed your people, your country, killed and imprisoned so many, destroyed nunneries and monasteries?" And this is one of—you know, pick one of ten million examples of what the Dalai Lama says. This one: "Maybe they have taken my country, but need I let them have my heart, my mind as well?"

The effect someone like that has on the world—just reading things he says—we don't know the effect that our commitment to acting from harmlessness, to the best of our ability, might have. And our commitment to keep bringing in awareness to our motivations when we act from harmlessness and when we act from harm. Don't stop paying attention. Keep exploring, see what's going on, learning to understand with this eye of wisdom, this heart of compassion. Understand when the seeds of suffering arise in our hearts and we act from delusion. Don't turn away. Pay attention and see.

This is part—half—of our journey here. To really meet with wisdom and compassion the seeds of suffering in our mind and heart and see how they form, how they act, to see how with the eye of wisdom they lose their power. That's why it's hard. We're going to hit all kinds of stuff here.

But the other half of our journey is seeing the seeds of compassion and the seeds of wisdom that also arise here in our mind, in our heart. And seeing how they flower—how it's really almost like magic. How clear seeing in wisdom, when it sees a suffering aspect, it doesn't feed it. So that which doesn't make sense, leads to non-clinging. When wisdom and discernment sees the wholesome, it naturally feeds it. It grows. It's like magic, but it's actually lawful. We don't have to do it with an act of will.

So following, taking on these five precepts as training guidelines—as the Buddha says—then it follows naturally that we are free from remorse. It's not from an act of will. It's the law of nature. Freedom from remorse leads to calmness, leads to happiness, leads to concentration, all the way up to awakening, as Bhante said. So this isn't just something we do so we can have better concentration. It's actually a very profound aspect of our path.

So just to remind you what these five training guidelines are. Again, the first is—and this is what we'll be chanting together in Pali, and I know it's on the sheets in English—the first one is to refrain from harming living beings. Again, this is all intention.

The second one: we take the training guideline to refrain from taking what is not given. Obviously stealing, but you can see how what's cultivated in each of these is a wholesome, beautiful quality of mind. In this case, contentment. Inner contentment. What we have is enough. Not needing to feed greed.

Ajahn Sumedho, who's a wonderful teacher, a monk in the Thai forest tradition, said one time—I heard him say—that contentment and gratitude are very supportive conditions for enlightenment. So get contented. Don't take what's not given, and don't even want it, and then you'll be happy.

Anyway, not taking what is not freely offered. And exploring: what does that mean? Hmm, that shampoo in the shower—I know that's not the one that they offer here. It looks nice, let me just check it out. Now probably no one cares if you use that shampoo in the shower. But it's not that. It's checking out what's going on in your own mind and heart. Are you using it and hoping nobody comes, putting it back and drying it off so no one can tell? What's going on in your mind when you're doing that? What are you cultivating?

A lot more suffering than the lousy shampoo is worth. Don't even wash your hair, forget it. But notice what's going on in the mind. So taking the precept not to take what's not freely offered.

There's a great story of Guy's from when he was on staff here. We were on staff together many years ago, but it was his story. It concerns both taking what's not given and the fourth precept, which is not using false speech.

One evening during probably the three-month retreat, he went back into the kitchen, into the big walk-in refrigerator, and opened it up. This was a long time ago—probably most of you here weren't even alive, so it's definitely not any of you. He opened the fridge, and there's a yogi in there with his hands in the date box. Being the gentleman that he is, Guy said, "Can I help you?" And the yogi said, "I'm looking for the maintenance office." So that's two precepts in one. We'll try to go the other way, right? But anyway, not taking what's not freely offered.

The third precept in our lay life is not harming ourselves or others with our sexual energy, which is quite complex, as we all know. On retreat here, we take the fifth precept, which really, if you were taking eight precepts, becomes the third precept—which is celibacy for the period of the retreat. In lay life, the lay five precepts, it's not celibacy. But for the period of the retreat here together, we take the precept to be celibate, just not to act on any sexual energy. Which isn't saying there's anything wrong with it. I actually see it as part of noble silence in a way—really keeping our energy with ourselves and for our practice.

And the fourth training guideline: not to use false speech, not to lie, not to use harsh, abusive speech. I know you talked a lot today about noble silence, which makes that all easier. Working with wise speech is a tough one in our lives. It's just so easy—in the mind, out the mouth. Or in my case, out the mouth before it actually came into the mind in any conscious way. But it's a big one to work with. Here, mostly noble silence helps. Or you might watch some of the things you say to yourself and see if they're harsh or

abusive. Just a hint.

But there will be a few times you'll need to talk—sometimes in the work meditation, if you need to check with the cooks or the housekeepers, if you have some questions, if you need to talk to the manager about something, in the interviews. Not to go nuts about it, but just tuning in and seeing why we're saying what we're saying.

There's a guideline of the Buddha, a very simple one about wholesome speech: A statement with five factors is well spoken, blameless, and unfaulted by the wise. Which five? It is spoken at the proper time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken gently—in other words, not harshly. What is said is beneficial to the best of one's knowledge. And it is spoken with a mind of goodwill.

So this, of course, is the best of all scenarios. But it's just something to bear in mind. Not that you're going to have time to stop and check everything before you talk, but later, sometimes, if you say something to the cooks or the managers or in an interview and you walk away feeling just kind of a little funny—that's how I feel when I know I've shot off my big mouth. I go away and I just feel kind of... off. And it's different from putting oneself down, but it's the sense that comes of having acted in a way that isn't quite wholesome. You just feel a little off.

And it's then really interesting to just explore and see: ah, that was said, and it really was completely unnecessary. It wasn't bad, but it was completely useless. In terms of beneficial, not so much. That could be all it was.

You don't judge yourself when we transgress or go against one of the precepts. It's not like then we hate ourselves. Oh, okay, bring in the awareness, see what happens. We can tell what's the effect of going against one of the guidelines, what's the effect of refraining. This is where the discerning mind of wisdom comes in, and we naturally begin to incline more to the wholesome. It's not that you get out the whip.

It becomes a movement of love and faith. It's just so much more happy to refrain from harm than it is to act in a harming way. This understanding becomes more and more integrated into who we are.

The fifth precept addresses refraining from alcohol, from intoxicants that are the cause for heedlessness. This one is quite clear. The one thing we want to say to everybody is that if you're on any kind of steady medication for any reason, please stay with it. The Buddha is talking here about recreational intoxicants and drugs that cloud the mind. But anything you need—if you're on pain medication or any kind of medication—please continue taking it. The precept does not refer to that at all.

So these are the five precepts: a great source of investigation, of happiness, and of wisdom.

[The group then recited the traditional taking of the precepts together, chanting the preliminary homage, the three refuges, and the five precepts in Pali.]

Strive on with diligence. Now, since we have some time remaining, I would like to give you some tips for meditation retreat. I want to share something with you because I've attended many retreats and I've had many people saying different things. I want to remind you how to be successful in a retreat.

You have to remember one word: space. Not spacing out—spacing out is another thing entirely. You don't want to space out during the retreat. You want to remember the word "space." Give yourself enough space.

This is an acronym I've come up with that really helps to put things together. The "S" stands for slowing down. If you want to be successful on a retreat, slow down. When we come to meditate, you need to slow down. In other parts of life—in the business world, in daily life—you can go faster. The faster, the better there. Here, the slower, the better.

I remember when I came here in 1999. Carl was a teacher and Guy was a teacher. I was really racing, but there were some yogis who were walking so slowly. I thought, "How am I going to walk like these yogis?" It was amazing. They were role models, just really walking slowly. I learned from them, and I experienced it in my own practice—whenever I slowed down, I could see things clearly.

You see that fan? It has slowed down. You can count the blades. You can see the cobweb. But if it's running very fast, you can't see.

So if you cannot really slow down your body, how are you going to slow down your mind? It's impossible, because the mind runs faster than the body. If you cannot control your body, how are you going to have a handle on your mind?

So this is a good reminder. These are just tips, actually. Slow down—that's the first one. S stands for slowing down. You observe yourself. I cannot emphasize this enough: the more I slow down, the more I see things in the body-mind process. Of course, you have to be careful—when you're going to the bathroom, you need to find out what speed helps you to be more mindful. There are certain areas where you have to adjust the speed.

Now another thing: S also stands for silence. People have talked about this already, so you know what silence means. Most teachers have mentioned it, and it supports your practice.

P stands for patience—Joseph talked about that—and perseverance. Perseverance means applying wise effort. Patience with the unfolding of your practice, with the way your practice unfolds. Try to be patient, even when you have done so many retreats. Every retreat is different. Maybe the last one was an easy one and this one is difficult. Or perhaps it's the other way around. But if you want to set yourself up for frustration, equate retreats. "Oh, I did a ten-day retreat with Goenka and now I'm here—it should be easy." No, it's different. Every time is different. So be patient with the unfolding of your practice.

A in SPACE stands for attention—another fancy word for mindfulness. Pay attention to everything. Don't

leave out anything, whether you are eating, in the bathroom, or dressing. This is our practice as monastics. When we are dressing, putting on these robes, we have to reflect on them as we are turning them, as we are tying them. So it becomes part of meditation. When you are dressing, when you wake up, when you are drinking—attention to everything.

I remember when I was practicing with Sayadaw U Janaka. I used to go there thinking that I was going to report about my walking and sitting. As soon as I entered the interview room: "How's your daily practice? How about brushing your teeth?" I said, "Oh, what's this actually?" This is Sayadaw. I think Rebecca has also practiced with Sayadaw U Janaka—he is amazing. Daily practice is very important. Attention to everything, excluding nothing. That will accelerate your practice.

A also stands for attitude—proper attitude towards the practice. Not pushing things, not indulging in them, not ignoring them. Somebody will talk more about developing proper attitude.

C—here C involves a lot of things. I learned this C when I was practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita here many years ago, in 2003 I think, at the Forest Refuge. The teacher said to me, "Oh, Bhante Buddharakkhita, you are protector of the Buddha—now you should protect the C's." Then he told me about the C's.

C stands for continuity.

Continuity of your practice means one mindful moment after the other. Not one hour mindful, and then one hour where you just lose it and you're in another space somewhere. You become a space cadet. You don't want to become a space cadet. You want really to link one mindful moment after the other so that they become stronger.

Actually, that's why even these clothes are stronger—because it's one thread after the other. You can do like this, you cannot make a hole. But if it's just one thread, let's say if there's a hole here and you start with one thread and it's not supported by the other threads, then it's so weak, then it can break through. Remember, how you gain concentration easily is through constant mindfulness. It's continuity of your practice that's going to help you a lot.

C also stands for concentration—stay focused. It's also contentment. We've talked about contentment. Be contented with your practice, because you'll see people who are really going into their practice very fast, very wonderful yogis. In the first two days they're just concentrated, and you are really struggling a lot. Be contented with your practice. Don't compare it with others. Just be contented with what's arising in your experience, with what we have to offer here, the retreats and all that we have to offer. Concentration, contentment. Concurrence is so philosophical—we'll talk about that during dharma talks. So we stay with those three C's: continuity, concentration, contentment.

E stands for expectation-free. Yes, I mean it. When I did my retreat here, whenever I went for an interview with Joseph, I would come down and there was already a signpost on this path: "There's nothing to expect." For me, that was an amazing reminder. Because I really, I mean, I came from far away. I expected

something here, you know. From the airplane, I came from South America, and before that I was in Africa. I was expecting something. And then after one week, something was not coming. What's wrong with me, actually?

Expectation is actually very good before you come for the retreat. You have to get somebody who's going to water your plants, look after your dog and all that. It's no problem. Before coming here, no problem. But when you come here on a cushion, it gets in the way. "Okay, I'm going to sit here. Oh, yeah, last time I was in Burma, I got into jhanas and all that. Yeah, now I'm here." Then you expect in one sit to get jhanas. First one, second, third, fourth, enlightenment—expecting all these things. It might get in the way, actually. There's a saying that if you want to have a bad sit, have a good one the first morning. I'm not saying that you shouldn't have a good one in the morning. But if you have a good one in the morning, and then the next subsequent sits, I'm telling you, it's really difficult, especially if you're somebody who's an expectation freak. You're in trouble. So, expectation-free.

Another E: actually enjoy your practice. E stands for enjoy. Yes, not attachment to your practice, but really enjoy it. In fact, the Buddha said that those people who are enlightened, they continue to meditate. And somebody asked, "Why?" It's for abiding in peace and happiness. It's a vacation, in a kind of way. You came here, you're on a retreat, you retreat from difficult situations. And then settle back in your practice. And that's what the Buddha talked about—joy, actually. Joy is part of the practice. In Buddhist teaching, joy is one of the conditions, one of the factors of enlightenment. When joy arises, you feel happy. And in fact, it's the precursor to concentration.

When I teach myself in Uganda and other venues where I teach alone, I tell people: breathe in happiness, breathe out happiness. Breathe in peace, breathe out peace. I tell people when they're breathing to connect with something that they aspire to—happiness, joy.

So I think that's a culmination of our practice—to have happiness, peace, enlightenment, awakening, joy. I would say joy, but in order to fulfill it, we must learn to enjoy. Not through attachments, but actually through cultivating joy so that you can proceed on your practice. Because sometimes when we have difficult mind states, sometimes we can't settle our mind and body.

But if you really relax and just send metta, loving-kindness—"may I be well, may I be happy"—and all that, then you can actually cultivate these states of mind.

So remember SPACE:

*S** — Slow down, silence.

*P** — Patience, perseverance.

*A** — Attention, proper attitude.

*C** — Continuity, concentration. You can also add contentment.

*E** — Expectation-free. Or simply: enjoy your practice.

I hope that helps. At least that's what I use as a template when I go for retreat.

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