Introductory Remarks at Mettā Retreat with Sharon and Sylvia

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 52:06

Welcome to this retreat. My name is Sylvia, and this is Sharon, and this is Carol, and this is Myoshin. It's a great honor and pleasure for all of us to be here. Thank you very much for coming.

It's a very great pleasure—the biggest probably for any of us—to be able to teach. So it's a wonderful gift that we all give each other by coming here to practice together.

It would be wonderful for me to know for how many people this is their first time here. Welcome. And for how many people their tenth or more. Welcome. And everybody else in between.

I realized as I came in that because I couldn't be here last year for this course, it's been two years since I was here in February. Some of us were here together at that time. And I realized two things: I realized how happy I was to be here, and how it really seems like yesterday that I was here. I'm quite sure that both of those have significant meaning.

As I listened to the instructions, which were really wonderful and very complete and certainly showed a lot of thought about all the kinds of questions that could come up in people's minds—they're really very well thought through—I thought perhaps for people who haven't been here before, it really seems like you've come far away from home, because we have quite a particular way in which we live and practice together. So I thought it was important also to say that my sense of what we've all done is that we've actually come home. We've begun to come home.

I just arrived, as all of you did today, and when I set out from California this morning, I had been looking forward very much, as I'm sure you all have, to coming here to this time to practice. I felt excited in the way that I feel about coming home to a place that's been so special to me, where I've done so much of my practice and spent so much time.

Of course, we start out with trusting that we can be at home to our truest self wherever we are. We don't need to be in this certain place. But it's very wonderful to be in this certain place.

I wondered about how all of us would teach tonight because we hadn't planned who would make welcoming remarks and who would give the instructions, since we'll all take turns through the week. But I thought to myself, what if when I arrive, everyone says, "Why don't you make the opening remarks, Sylvia?" So I thought, I hope something really interesting happens on this plane so I can tell a story that will be a Dharma story, something I can teach about what we are doing here in terms of our practice.

Then I wouldn't have to say something as vague or as broad as coming home to ourselves. What could happen on this flight that I could teach about? The truth of the natural mind at ease, manifesting itself with kindness and compassion for all beings. So may a story happen.

That's called intention practice, by the way, where you begin a sit or a walk and you say, "May it happen that I have the clearest understanding of whatever." So I said to myself, may it happen that there's a story.

You may know that the weather on the West Coast has been very tremendous for the last several days, and so there was some question about whether planes would fly. But in fact, my plane took off exactly on time in a torrential rain. It wasn't a difficult takeoff. It took off through this torrential rain and very shortly was above the clouds, bumped a little bit, and then smoothed out.

So I thought, well, I guess I could teach about that—that we all come from lives that are tremendously busy and complicated, and we come to a place here where it's less complicated and less busy. We have the opportunity, the habits and style of living, and the techniques of practice that allow the heart to come to a place of some steadiness and some increased malleability, some spaciousness of vision. Just as I at 35,000 feet could look out and see a very large terrain.

I could tell the metaphor of coming through the confusion and the clouds and coming to feel quite relaxed with a broad view of how things are, with a clear mind.

But then I thought, well, that's not much of a story. And in fact, I flew across the whole country and nothing much happened. I was all right; just nothing much happened. I did some embroidery. I listened to some tapes and did some embroidery.

Not long before we were landing, one of the flight attendants sat down next to me for a little bit of time and said, "I've been looking at your embroidery." We had a little talk about embroidery. She said she used to do that kind of handwork, but her job was very busy, so we talked about her job as a flight attendant. Then I said, "Are you based in San Francisco?" She said, "Yes, I am." And I said, "Oh, do you know so-and-so?"

who's a flight attendant on this particular airline, who sits quite regularly with me at Spirit Rock. And she lit up and said, "Oh, yes, of course I know her. We've known each other for thirty years. We've been flying together." And I heard that she had gotten married, and I said, "Yes, she did." We both shared some great happiness, mudita, about the good fortune in her life—that we both knew this person who had met someone really wonderful and was happy.

We said to each other, you know, you don't have to talk very long to anybody to realize the lines of connection. There are not that many degrees of separation. All of a sudden, the person goes from being someone you don't know at all to being someone who knows someone you know. And if we're awake, we realize that we're all connected, that we all know each other, and that we can share happiness together about someone else's good fortune.

So we talked about that a little bit. We had this little dharma discussion without calling it that.

Then the pilot announced that we were about to start landing. He said, "Anybody who needs to get up now"—which is a euphemism for use the restroom before we need to fasten seatbelts—"do it now." So I said I needed to get up. She looked toward the back of the plane and said, "Oh, there's a very long line back there. Come with me. I'll escort you through first class." You can't normally go up front, you see.

If I retell this as a dharma story, it's the most mundane of stories. I flew across the country on an uneventful flight and I got to use a restroom when I needed it. That's the whole story.

But the metta story is this: when the mind is relaxed and clear, it recognizes that we are genuinely all connected to each other. And then we care for each other with kindness and compassion, and we take special care. If the whole world realized this, the whole world would be changed.

This is what we are here to do this week. We are here to discover our capacity to recognize that all beings are our kin. We may not know their names, may not even know what they work at or who they married, so that we can't rejoice or feel compassion for particular events in their lives. But we can touch that level of intimacy—recognizing that we are all human beings sharing a life of feelings and challenges—and we can all really take care of each other.

In the ten minutes that remained, strapped back into my seat, I read some of the mail I'd brought along. I had a letter from a student who said, "I've just seen Titanic." Everybody saw Titanic. I haven't yet, but she said, "At first I subjected it to a tremendous"—I wasn't sure exactly what that meant—"and when I did that, I didn't think it was so special." But she said it stayed in her mind for many days afterward.

She realized what stayed with her was thinking about the different ways people related to each other in the film during a time of catastrophe, a time of imminent death—the ways in which people either took care of each other or didn't, were able to be at ease with the moment or in terrible suffering with it. She said, "I guess what I came away thinking about is: I don't know how I would be when the chips are down."

That was really the end of the letter.

We don't any of us know, of course, how we'll be when the chips are down. But there are two ways to think about that. One is to realize there's a whole continuum of ways to be—from a particular person engaged fully in a particular life, to a person fully aware of interconnectedness with all beings and in the service of all beings. We are always living both of those lives, moving back and forth in a way that's wholesome, I hope, and balanced. And we are facing ourselves more and more, as we do this practice, in the direction of being aware of that connection with all beings—remembering our story, touching more and more into the great pleasure and happiness of interconnectedness. That's what we are practicing as we do metta. All of our practice is really on behalf of all beings.

And then the other piece: the chips are always down. We don't really need to wait for catastrophe. I trust

that we will not, any of us, wait for the catastrophes of life to discover the parameters of our heart. Every moment of our life becomes a practice session for discovering that we can really be ourselves, awake in our life, remembering our life, and knowing that our life—as everyone else's—is in the service of all beings everywhere.

So my great hope for all of us is that our practice together this week should be in that spirit. My great gratitude again—all of us are tremendously grateful to you for having come to practice. Everybody shares with me the wish that everyone's practice be greatly fulfilling and gratifying.

Where do you tend to go mentally, physically for refuge? What do you turn to? Do you turn to physical stimulation? Do you pick up the phone? Do you call a friend? Do you go to the movies? Do you eat some chocolate? I know chocolate ranks very high—we were having this discussion today about how good chocolate is for you. I'm not saying any of these things are bad. I'm simply inviting you to look and see where you go for refuge. Do we find that we go to fantasy in the mind, or do we withdraw into some kind of fear or negativity, some kind of mental or emotional movement of separation, of protection, a moving out of the present moment? Just not to judge, but to notice—as Sylvia said, when the chips are down in a little way, where do we go for refuge? Because what we do when the chips are down in a little way is going to be indicative of what we're going to do habitually when the chips are really down and they're not going to come back up again.

So taking the refuges invites us to examine what's really our refuge. The Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha—the Buddha meaning not the Buddha as a historical person, but as a representative of the fact that as a human being, the potential of each of us is to awaken fully to the peace, the happiness, the ease that is our true nature. Right now, in this moment, that's your potential. You don't have to be different from how you are. If you really believe that, begin to have confidence in that—that's what taking refuge is. A re-commitment to that truth, a re-honoring in your heart: yes, my potential is to awaken, and I'll take refuge in that. Taking refuge in the Buddha.

Taking refuge in the Dharma is also another way of honoring our commitment to take refuge in truth. Dharma can mean the specific teachings of the Buddha, the path, and for some people the specific teachings are very helpful to turn to, to bring some inspiration, to trust. But dharma also means the truth of how things are, the laws of nature, what is actually really true. What am I really? And that is only discovered when we are willing to take refuge fully and completely in this present moment, no matter what's happening. When we can honor the fact that our freedom of heart and mind is accessible, recognizable, when we can open to and take refuge in this moment—that's where we discover love and compassion for ourselves and our connectedness to all beings.

It's a hard practice. There are a lot of moments we don't really want to take refuge in. It's hard to believe that this is really where the truth lies. And so the formal taking refuge in the Dharma, refuge in the truth, saying that is a way of really bringing up that confidence, that motivation of reminding ourselves what's

really important.

Taking refuge in the Sangha. Sangha means community, as most of you know. Originally its meaning was the community of awakened beings. It doesn't have to be someone we know, but just to know that such beings are on the planet is a very powerful reinforcement—for me—of the fact that I can trust that I'm also a human being. It takes me back to the first refuge, and that as a human being I have the potential to awaken as well, in any moment. Which takes me back to the second, taking refuge in the Dharma. They all cycle around.

But also taking refuge in community is taking refuge in the community of all of us who have come here with this sincere and profound intention to awaken our hearts more deeply to our interconnectedness, to live more fully from the metta, the loving-kindness and the compassion that arises naturally when we recognize our true nature. So the fact that all of us are here with this intention—in some form, in your own words—this intention to awaken, to nurture the love that we are, is an enormously powerful support for each of us and really for all the world.

And there will be times when the other people drive you crazy, of course. But there will also be times when we're just so grateful—when we're having a hard time and we're so grateful for all the other people who are going through this with us, when someone else's strength turns out to be our strength. We really see how connected we are on that level. And that's a way of taking refuge in the Sangha, refuge in the community.

For me, when I'm on retreat—and even when I'm not, but definitely when I'm on retreat—I begin every day by taking the refuges, and sometimes every sitting. And sometimes when I'm having a hard time, I take them in the middle of a sitting or in the middle of a walking, because it's a way of consciously reaffirming my commitment and reestablishing my confidence in the possibility of this—for me and for all beings.

So in a moment we will take the refuges together, if it feels appropriate to you. It's not about becoming a Buddhist, but about really reaffirming why you're here, to yourself, and letting yourself feel the depths of the truth of that. It's not an idle rote thing that we say. It's also about creating a sacred space.

We have come here from our daily lives. We're not different—it's the same mind, the same heart. The things that come up here are the same things that come up in our daily life. But what we're doing, both with the way we've set up the environment here, taking the refuges, and also with the precepts of non-harming behavior—what we're doing is creating a sacred space. A space where we are reminded, over and over, of what's really true and what's really important.

It's a little sad to me that we need to consciously create a sacred space out of our society and out of our life to be reminded. But that's how it is. It helps. After a while, we take that reminder with us in our hearts. But it's a lot easier when we have a space that continually helps us remember.

So another way of creating this sacred space, this sense of safety, and also a way that we work together as a community, is to make a commitment for the time that we're here to non-harming speech and action—to really give care to how and why we do and say what we do and say, so that the intention for our speech and action comes from a real commitment to non-harming. Not out of some blind obedience to outer authority, because that's an intention born more of fear. I'm talking about non-harming behavior that comes from the inner intention of love and respect for ourselves and for all life. That's really the manifestation of an awakened heart.

So by having an agreement to abide by five very basic aspects of non-harming speech and action, we're reinforcing that inner sense of connectedness to one another.

And pay attention. It's not that if you break one of these precepts, it's horrible and we throw you out of here on your ear. It's not a matter of once you've taken these precepts, that's it—you have to abide by them or you're failed, you're doomed. Because they're so subtle when you look at them that we all have ways we're stepping over the boundaries, often. The point is, in this retreat, just pay attention.

So if you find you're wanting to harm somebody, or an animal, or you find that you want to take something that's not freely given, or in fact you did take something that wasn't freely given—don't just sit and hate yourself. That doesn't help. But pay attention. How and why did you do it? And what's the effect on yourself and on others afterwards?

If you really pay attention, you might start to see that when we do something that harms another, physically or verbally, it's also harming ourselves. I've never been able to do something harmful that I didn't really suffer from, if I was awake and paying attention to my experience. It's back to what Sylvia was saying: we can't separate. You can't even say that's your pain or my pain, because it's so mingled. It's just pain caused by carelessness, really.

So we ask everyone to agree to pay attention to and live by these five training rules, they're called, for the opening and awakening of each of our hearts, as well as for creating an atmosphere of fearlessness. Fearlessness meaning we each know we have nothing to fear from one another.

Isn't that a wonderful way to live? It's so rare in our culture. No one here is going to hurt you. No one's going to steal anything from you. No one's going to speak harshly. It helps that we're in silence—it really helps. But that gift of fearlessness is a wonderful gift, and it allows us to let the process of the meditation happen. We're here on a metta retreat this first week, developing loving-kindness. Well, if you've done it before, you know.

If you haven't, you might be surprised to find out that loving kindness isn't the only thing that's going to arise in your heart and mind. I guarantee—that's the one thing I can guarantee—something else will come up at least once that won't be so pretty. And the space of fearlessness is what allows us to open to this. Opening to the difficulty with loving kindness *is* the loving kindness practice.

So the five training rules are precepts. The first one is not to kill or harm any living being—not just people. It includes insects. But you're lucky it's February. You're not going to be too taxed on that one. Come back in May with the black flies and try it. Then it's really a precept.

Not to harm any living being. And here, we're pretty safe. We won't do that. But just watch when your mind wants to harm someone or yourself. Remember, you're included as a living being. Just watch and pay attention and see what happens, how it feels when wanting to harm comes up.

The second is not to take what is not freely given, not to steal. Again, in the big ways, of course, we're not going to do that. But look at the little things—when you just really want some food that's not offered. You know, you go through all these mental machinations figuring out how you can get it, how no one will know, all of this stuff. Stop a minute and notice what's going on in your heart and mind. Do you feel good? Do you feel connected to other beings? Are you manifesting loving kindness? Or are you really suffering? And is getting that cheese going to be what alleviates the suffering? Or is letting go of the desire and just being again in the sense of non-harming, not taking what's not given? Explore that.

The third, in lay life—in other words, in your daily life—is not to harm ourselves or others with our sexual activity. Not to intrude on another relationship, committing adultery. Not to be in abusive relationships, not to use sex for power trips or whatever. It's a big one. In terms of the retreat, we agree to not engage in any sexual activity. This is really similar to being in silence, so that we're using our energy for cultivating concentration, loving kindness, and investigation rather than just moving the energy off in other directions. So for the purpose of the retreat, we take a precept of remaining celibate.

The fourth training rule is not to use harsh and abusive speech, not to lie, and not to gossip or be involved in frivolous speech—all of which is subsumed under noble silence. And this is really one of the treasures of these retreats, to be able to spend a week or two and a half weeks in silence.

Is there anyone here who's never done a retreat before? A few people. If you've never done one before, sometimes the idea in advance of staying silent for so long can be a little daunting. And there are times when it's difficult. Admittedly, there are times when you're longing to talk. Again, as with all of these training rules, rather than getting upset about it or blaming yourself or blaming the rule, look and see what's really going on in me right now that needs to go and talk. What is it that I'm either wanting to communicate or wanting to get away from?

But most people find after a couple of days that the silence is a tremendous gift. It's really wonderful because there are times when you don't want to have to be nice to anybody. You don't have to smile. You don't want to have to be involved in social amenities. You just want to be with what's going on. And here you have the freedom to do that. You don't have to worry that you're insulting someone if you sit down next to them and don't acknowledge them. Please don't. Really let the silence be a support for your practice. It's a tremendous support.

And there's plenty of harsh and abusive speech that might go on inside your own mind.

So you can just notice that.

The silence also includes not reading and not writing. These activities can be very helpful, of course, but for the most part, the real insight and the real cultivation of metta comes from being fully and totally with our own experience. Even reading Dharma material can be a way of moving out of our experience. Or you can end up trying to make your experience match what you've read, or what we say, for that matter. Don't. Really trust what your experience is as it unfolds in the moment. It will unfold slightly differently for each person. Trust that. Honor your experience. So please don't read or write.

The fifth training rule is not to take drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind and the heart, which is rather obvious since we're here to cultivate open-heartedness and clarity.

So we'd like to formally begin the retreat. I'll say the refuges and the precepts and ask you, if that feels comfortable, to repeat them after me. We'll do it in English. If you don't want to say it out loud, it's fine to just do it inside. We do the refuges three times—maybe one of the three times you'll be here for it. That's how I think of why we do it three times traditionally. The precepts we say just once. And again, really let yourself feel these in your heart. Don't let it just be rote.

I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dhamma. I take refuge in the Sangha.

For the second time, I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dhamma. I take refuge in the Sangha.

For the third time, I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dhamma. I take refuge in the Sangha.

I undertake the precept not to harm living beings. I undertake the precept not to steal. I undertake the precept to remain celibate for this retreat. I undertake the precept not to lie or use harsh or abusive speech. I undertake the precept not to use drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind.

By the way, that last one does not include any particular medications you're needing to take for physical or mental conditions. We're talking recreational.

So thank you. That is the formal beginning. We have now entered the noble silence and the beginning of the retreat.

We'll have a short sitting together. If you would like to stretch a little or stand up for a minute, please go ahead.

Tonight we're not going to begin the metta or loving-kindness instruction, but just have a short sitting of following the breath, letting ourselves arrive here. Bringing in a little calmness, a little centeredness. If you find you get up earlier tomorrow or stay up later tonight and want to sit, quietly stay with your breath. Let your mind come to a little bit of centeredness, of presence.

Let yourself sit as comfortably as you can, but also in a way that's erect—finding that balance between being upright yet also relaxed, not tense. The posture will really reflect the quality of the mind. Keep your back straight, whether you're on a chair, a bench, or a cushion. Place your hands any way that's comfortable.

Most people find it easy to meditate with the eyes gently closed—not tight, not squeezing, just relaxed and closed. But if you're used to sitting with the eyes open and unfocused, that's also fine.

So if you want, just let your eyes gently close. Take a couple of quiet but slow, deep breaths and let yourself feel the breathing. Nothing special—just breathe in, and on the out-breath, let yourself, your body, relax. Come to a sense of presence in the physical body as you sit here. You might feel a sense of your posture, maybe your sit bones on the cushion, your knees, perhaps the erectness of your spine. Notice how your shoulders are resting, your hands.

Come to a gentle sense of presence in your physical body, a sense of sitting here—relaxed but awake. Within the field of your physical experience of sitting, begin to notice the feelings in your body as the breath comes in and goes out.

Nothing special, no big deal. Just feeling as this breath comes in, as this breath goes out. Feeling as this breath comes in, as this breath goes out.

You might feel it in the nose. You might feel the rising and falling of the abdomen or the chest. Wherever you feel it is fine. But let all your attention softly rest in this in-breath and this out-breath. The sensations arising.

And don't worry when your mind wanders off. But as soon as you notice you're thinking about something, just let it be and come back to feel the sensations of this next breath. Just gently and easily, but with commitment.

Don't try to create anything special. Simply feeling this in-breath, this out-breath. Meeting each breath freshly. Starting over with each new breath—nothing to hold on to, nothing to look forward to, resting at ease in this one breath.

During the whole retreat, always feel free to come back and rest in the breath as a way to gather your energies or simply bring in some relaxation if you find things getting tough. And we'll talk more about that as the week goes on.

So tonight, please, if you can, take rest.

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