Opening Talk of Vipassanā Retreat

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:21

We'd like to join our welcome to that of John and the staff, to those of you who've come tonight. I'll just introduce us each. My name is Carol Wilson. Sitting next to me is Sharon Salzberg, Kamala Masters, and Ryoshin Kelly. Together we'll be sharing these next nine days, this journey we're taking together.

It really is for us a privilege to be sitting here at the beginning of this period of retreat together—for most of you, at the beginning; for some of you, the continuation. I was thinking today about what an amazing thing it is that so many of you are willing to take this time to leave your daily life, to leave your families, your friends, your loved ones, your jobs, your televisions, your pizzas, whatever it is that you think makes you happy, and come here. In this culture, such inner journeying is not always completely respected and supported. And so to think that there are so many of us willing to spend this time together is really very inspiring to me, and humbling also.

Hopefully, you're coming here from a powerful commitment not to run away from everything you hate, because you'll find out soon enough that all of that came with you. But coming here really to take a journey of discovery and rediscovery, to come back home again to your truest self, your deepest self.

It never ceases to amaze me how this relatively simple practice of giving kind, loving attention to our experience—just our moment-to-moment experience, our thoughts, our emotions, our breath, our body, just being present for whatever arises—what a profound effect this has on how we understand ourselves and how we understand life. It can really change how we live with ourselves, and thus when we return from a retreat back into our daily life, can really have a profound effect on how we live with others. By taking this conscious time to step out of the daily routine, we're committing a conscious act that will allow us to live with ourselves and with society in much greater harmony.

Because we are living a little more closely aligned with what is really true about ourselves, what is really true about the world. Instead of existing in this state where I always feel like I'm trying to fit a square peg into a round hole somehow in daily life and wondering why it doesn't work—it's because we're not really seeing ourselves as we are, we're not really meeting the world as it is. We're always wishing it was a little bit different or thinking that we're a little bit different.

This practice opens us to just being who we are, as we are, without a lot of elaboration or embellishment. To let ourselves be with ourselves as we are—not with resignation and disgust, but with real kindness, acceptance, and compassion, with a real love for the truth of who we are.

Today when I was thinking about speaking tonight, I remembered a book that I had read a couple of years

ago about hermits in different cultures, in different historical traditions. I really enjoyed reading it because of being so deeply enmeshed in the retreat culture, and seeing how through all cultures where there is recorded history, there is some strain of a hermit culture embedded within it, more or less respected.

What we're doing here in our way—whether you're here for a little over two weeks, whether you're here for nine days, whether you're here for a year, whatever it is—we are, in this culture, partaking of that life of the hermit. A deliberate, conscious withdrawal from all the entanglements and enjoyments of society, a deliberate withdrawal into solitude. I know this isn't total solitude, but a silence, an internal solitude, a simplicity of lifestyle, a real giving up of your own control of your meals, your schedule, your sleeping quarters—not just to avoid things, but to really set the conditions for deep inner discovery.

Using the conditions of the solitude, the silence, the simplicity, not just for a breather—it's not like a vacation in Bali. You might wish in a couple of days you were on vacation in Bali, but that'll pass. This is a way to really strengthen our understanding so that we can then re-emerge back into society from a deeper, more whole place.

One of the modern Western cultural examples of a hermit type, who's quite well known, is Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk. In reading about him, he really wanted to be much more of a hermit than he was mostly allowed to be by his order. He was writing and very famous and always having to live with others and travel around. But he really studied in himself the power and effects of solitude and the deep reasons for it.

One of the things he says about it is: "Withdrawal from other people can be a special form of love for them. It should never be a rejection of humans or society, but this withdrawal may well be a quiet and humble refusal to accept the myths and fictions with which our social life cannot help but be full, especially today. To despair of the illusions and facades which humans build around themselves is certainly not to despair of humanity. On the contrary, it's a sign of love for humanity. For when we love someone, we refuse to tolerate what destroys and maims their personality."

I really resonate with that. Our society—we all know it's crazy. All societies in their own way are crazy. And our deliberate choice to withdraw is really in order to love ourselves and to love other humans more deeply and more fully, by seeing what's really true rather than just being in the thrall of our habitual attitudes, of the habitual intensity of this society that we live in, of the cultivation of greed, of the cultivation of fear, of the need to protect.

To withdraw to a safe place, which Sharon will talk about more, allows us to open much more deeply to what is true. And then to emerge really in a different space.

So often people who don't understand why you're coming on retreat never really understand why one is coming on retreat. And it's pretty impossible to explain it in a way that they get it. Even a lot of people who

come on retreats have a little place where they're wondering if they're just being self-indulgent and denying our common humanity. Although deep in us, we know it's not the case, because we come out different.

One of my favorite stories from this whole book is about one of the desert fathers in Egypt in the days of the early Christians. These men were really serious hermits out there in the desert, really serious. One of the most famous of them was called St. Antony of Egypt, and he was born into a very wealthy Christian family.

But at some point in his young adulthood, hearing the teachings of Jesus where he said, "Sell all you have and give to the poor," Antony took this literally, much to his parents' dismay, and sold everything he had and took off for the desert.

And he lived alone way out in some cave way down the Nile somewhere for twenty years without seeing a human face. Every six months, friends of his would come and bring food and the supplies that he needed, but he wouldn't see them. And sometimes they would hear these heart-rending horrible screams and yelling and all kinds of commotion going on behind the barrier in his cave.

Finally, after twenty years, they couldn't stand it anymore. His friends broke down the door. And it says here they expected to release a wasted and emaciated maniac. That's what they were expecting. Instead, Antony emerged healthy, sane, balanced, and full of kindness and ability to help people. And for the rest of his life, he alternated between periods of solitude and really going and giving support and advice and help to people who were in trouble.

I love that. And somewhere in the middle of this retreat, you might remember that period of the shrieks and groans. That's part of it too. As you know, having done retreats before, it's a real rollercoaster ride.

We need the seclusion. We need the support. We need the solitude and inner silence to give ourselves the space to let whatever we haven't been really comfortable with come up into the light. And the power of the mindfulness or the metta gives us the calmness of mind and the courage of heart to let it be—to really see it with a calm heart, with clear eyes, and to recognize that whatever it is we've been holding away or driven by, we don't have to be so driven by. We don't have to be so scared of. We can actually meet it with courage and kindness. And this gives us a real strength of heart and compassion for humanity that will inform the way we are with people once we leave our hermit's cave here.

Thich Nhat Hanh often says that we think we're leaving society when we come on retreat, but we find out that really society comes with us because we are society. There's no way that we are really isolating ourselves. What we find in our exploration of our own heart and mind and thoughts is our commonality with all humans. And once we realize that and meet our own stuff with compassion rather than disgust, with kindness rather than hating ourselves for not being perfect, then we find that we don't have to only be in retreat to feel this commonality, this courage and kindness in the face of our own stuff, in the face of

other people's.

I want to close with something from Pema Chödrön. People often say, "Meditation is all very well, but what does it have to do with my life?" What it has to do with your life is that perhaps through the simple practice of paying attention, giving loving kindness to your speech and your actions and the movements of your mind, you begin to realize that you're always standing in the middle of a sacred circle. And that's your whole life. It's not this room that's the sacred circle. IMS is not the sacred circle. Wherever you go for the rest of your life, you're always in the middle of the universe. And the sacred circle is always around you. Everyone who walks up to you has entered the sacred space. And it's not an accident.

So thank you for coming here into your sacred space.

Between the pizza and the television and the trip to Bali and the shrieks in the grounds, I wondered when I opened my eyes how many of you would still be here. That was great. It's great to leave it all behind.

So I'd also like to welcome you. And we'll formally begin the retreat, as is traditional, by undertaking what are known as the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts.

First, this is a quotation from a Tibetan text which says: "Beneath the pauper's house there are inexhaustible treasures, but the pauper never realizes this, and the treasures never say, 'I am here.' Likewise, the treasure of our original nature, which is naturally pure, is trapped in ordinary mind, and beings suffer in poverty."

This is something Carol just alluded to—this sense of our having an original nature that is pure. And so, as she said, we come together to an experience like this as an act of discovery and reconnection to something that is already there. Though it may be hidden from us, it is something that once we connect to, can support us tremendously through all the different kinds of experiences we have.

The wonderful thing about a retreat, also as Carol was saying, is its mirror-like reflection of real life with the ups and the downs and the changes and so many different kinds of experiences. It's not really a vacation from stuff, but it's a tremendous opportunity to radically transform our relationship to what arises in our experience—our bodies, our minds—and to connect to the world in a very different way.

So this inner treasure, this original nature, is reflected in what is called in Buddhism the Three Jewels.

That is the object of our taking refuge. We take refuge as an act of aligning our vision to what is possible, expanding our sense of what is possible, and linking our own potential to these external expressions of awakening, of freedom, of compassion.

The first of the refuges is that of the Buddha himself. The Buddha, in this tradition of teaching, has always been described as being a human being—a human being who had some very profound questions about

the nature of life. He more or less asked: What does it mean to be a human being? To be born into this human body, to be helpless as an infant, so vulnerable, subject to conditions? To grow up, to grow old whether we like that or not, to die whether we like that or not?

And what does it mean to have a human mind which can careen from one feeling to another, one view to another, so that we might wake up in the morning full of doubt and then by mid-afternoon be full of faith? We're happy and sad and angry and joyful—constant movement, fluctuation. Without it being subject to our whim or wish or dictum. How successful is it to wake up and say, "Okay, I've suffered enough. I will never be afraid again. I will never fall asleep in meditation again." Things don't seem to work that way.

And yet the Buddha asked: Is there a quality of happiness that we can experience as human beings that will not break, that will not shatter as the conditions of the body and the mind change outside of our control? What is that peace or that happiness that isn't so fragile, that isn't so dependent? And how do we experience it? This was his driving quest.

What the Buddha discovered in terms of an answer or a resolution to those questions, he discovered through the power of his own awareness. And so can we. This is the capacity of the human mind—to learn, to understand, to grow, to be free.

When we take refuge in the Buddha, it's really not just an act of paying respect to a historical figure of 2,500 years ago. It's very much a reflection of what we ourselves are capable of as human beings. It's like a reminder. And taking refuge in the Buddha doesn't really have anything to do with adopting a set of beliefs or a dogma or calling oneself a Buddhist.

One of my early teachers, a man named Munindra, was quite wonderful with one-liners. One of his great comments to me, which changed a lot of things for me, was when he said, "The Buddha's enlightenment solved the Buddha's problem. Now you solve yours." It was this fantastic moment because it actually felt like maybe it was the first time in my life somebody was looking at me with that kind of conviction: You can solve your problem. You can solve the problems that led you to want to come to India to begin with, to learn how to meditate.

So we take refuge in the Buddha really as a reminder of that fact. We can solve our problem. Our question may not be exactly the same as the Buddha's, but it's something like that. And through the power of our own awareness, we too can come to some resolution, some answer.

The second of the three jewels is the Dharma. Dharma is sometimes translated as the Buddhist teaching, the path. In more depth it means the nature of things, the laws of nature, the truth of things, things as they are. Another meaning it has is that which supports us, that which sustains us.

To take refuge in the Dharma is to align ourselves with the truth of things so that we can come close to what our actual experience is, face to face. It's the extraordinary opportunity of this kind of supportive environment—that's all we need to do. We don't have to pretend anything to ourselves or to somebody

else. We use the truth of each moment's experience, whatever it is, to come closer to more fundamental underlying truths, because that's where it's found.

There's a saying in the Chinese tradition: If you want to understand the nature of water, look at the waves. So we look at the waves of all our different kinds of experiences, and there will be many different kinds, because each one of them speaks a certain truth. This is taking refuge in the Dharma—being willing just to be with the truth of change, things as they are, and see what we might discover.

It also means that it's an unfolding process. We don't have to force it. We don't have to make it happen faster. We can bring ourselves close to the truth of each moment's experience and let the rest unfold. Let the laws of nature take care of the rest.

The third of the refuges is the Sangha, which means the community. A very classical meaning of that word is the community of monks and nuns who, in the Buddhist tradition, have preserved the teaching of the Buddha through all of these centuries so that what we get to practice here now in Barre, Massachusetts, bears a direct resemblance to what the Buddha actually taught. It contains the essential teaching of his discovery of a path. And so it's a way of paying respect to that sense of tradition.

Sangha also means those beings who have made a commitment to discovery, to understanding, to finding a different quality altogether of happiness in their lives than the ordinary, conventional, and breakable happiness that we normally depend on—those beings who have taken a risk, who've had the courage to try to see more deeply, and who have discovered the truth.

And so we take refuge in the Sangha because again it means something about ourselves and what we're capable of. I know that I've always found that very inspiring when I take refuge in the Sangha, in this sense of Sangha. I feel almost like I'm joining into a stream of beings, of men and women who since the beginning of time have been daring enough to want to find a greater degree of happiness and have put forth the effort and have made that kind of discovery. So I feel encouraged and inspired by their example because I feel like I've become a part of that in my own efforts.

And Sangha also has a meaning of community very much in the sense of we who have gathered here together have created a community, we've created a world together. And we support one another. It's like an act of solidarity. Sometimes it's easier to do together. This kind of practice, even though we are very much practicing solitude and aloneness, it's in the midst of a great amount of group support.

So these are the three refuges that mark the formal beginning of the retreat. It's aligning ourselves with this vision and expanding our sense of what is possible.

And then we take what are known as the five precepts, which are the guidelines that lay the foundation for the community so that it can be a community based on kindness and self-respect, respect for others, real care, and simplicity. We undertake these precepts for the time that we are here together to define the fabric of our togetherness, the nature of being here in a way that is based on compassion.

The first of the precepts is the precept we undertake not to kill any living being, which includes small beings like bugs and insects, to see if we can use this time as a time where we are not creating that kind of sense of self and other, but are rather developing a reverence for all of life.

We undertake a precept to refrain from stealing, which means not to take that which has not been offered, that which has not been given. In a deeper meaning, it means having a certain spirit of contentment or ease with what we are offered.

We undertake a precept to refrain from sexual activity, which in normal life, outside of retreat life, is to refrain from sexual misconduct—meaning not to use our sexual energy in a way that creates harm or suffering for ourselves or for others. Here that's extended to mean no sexual activity but rather to use all of our energy in this kind of exploration.

We undertake a precept to refrain from lying, which here again is extended to a precept of maintaining silence. There are times when you'll be meeting in groups with us or individually with us where we are speaking, or there might be times when you need to speak to the staff for some reason. But in terms of conversation amongst yourselves, and that includes excessive notes and things like that, we really ask you to try to use this time to make a friend of silence.

I was saying at the beginning of the last retreat, because I had a friend sit that retreat—the metta retreat that we just finished today—and she had never done anything remotely like this before. This was very strange for her. She came the night before because she came from California and that was how her flights went, so I saw her the night before the retreat started. Every time the word silence came up, her eyes got really, really big. It was clear that it was very alarming, the thought. It also became clear that people in her life, like people at work, were astonished at the thought that she wouldn't speak for a week and somewhat contemptuous of the possibility.

I just saw her today when the retreat ended, and she said how much she was going to miss the silence, how much she was going to miss the quiet. The very thing she was most apprehensive about turned out, as is so common, to be just about the most beautiful part of the retreat.

In so many ways it's such a relief not to be so concerned with presenting ourselves to other people, making a certain kind of impression, being somebody in the eyes of others, but really to let go of that, to come back to our own experience, to turn our attention back to ourselves in a way that honors our own experience, that learns to trust it—not in reference to what someone else thinks of it. It's a beautiful thing to really come back to ourselves and to make a friend of silence.

And then we take the last of the precepts: to refrain from taking intoxicants that cloud the mind or cause heedlessness. That means no recreational drugs, no alcohol, but using the power of the mind in its natural state to be able to make this kind of exploration, this kind of journey.

So it's a stepping away from the force of habit, coming into a community that is based on care. Both the

refuges and the precepts are about becoming more aware and more compassionate, understanding our minds, our intentions, our limitations in a clearer and kinder light, all of the time.

It's so unusual to be able to come into this kind of situation. It's really pretty amazing when you think about it. Many of you know that this Valentine's Day will mark our 25th anniversary of when we first moved into this building. I got up here tonight and I thought, how many people have come through here in 25 years? And how many people have served here on staff? What an amazing thing that so many people will have wanted to join in this incredible adventure. And so here we are.

I want to read this quotation from the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu. He told this story:

"There was a person so displeased by the sight of their own shadow and so displeased with their own footsteps that they determined to get rid of both. The method they hit upon was to run away from them. So they got up and ran. But every time they put their foot down, there was another step, while the shadow kept up with them without the slightest difficulty. They attributed their failure to the fact that they were not running fast enough, so they ran faster and faster without stopping, till they finally dropped dead. They failed to realize that if they merely stepped into the shade, the shadow would vanish. If they sat down and stayed still, there would be no more footsteps."

So we come together here in that kind of courageous choice to be still rather than running away. We have the opportunity to establish a relationship with what is rather than living with some kind of distortion.

It's really an incredible thing. It's also a process that we undertake hopefully with a good sense of humor and a fair ease of heart—not to be heavy-hearted about it, but very much in that sense of discovery, of seeing what will unfold without a lot of expectations, without a lot of impatience.

I'm going to repeat the refuges and precepts in English, and you can repeat them silently to yourself. The refuges are traditionally done three times, and the precepts once. You can repeat them to yourself in a way that is meaningful for you, recognizing the spirit with which we undertake these.

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

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

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

I undertake the precept to refrain from killing any living being.

I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which has not been offered.
I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual activity.
I undertake the precept to refrain from lying.
I undertake the precept to refrain from taking intoxicants.

We'll meditate together now for just a little while. You can sit comfortably with your back erect without being strained or overarched. You can close your eyes, unless you're accustomed to meditating with your eyes open, or unless you're very sleepy—in which case it's a good idea to open your eyes.

You can begin just by listening to sound. You can listen to the sound of my voice, other sounds in the room, internal sounds. This helps create a sense of the relaxed, natural aspect of mindfulness, of awareness. You don't have to try to seize control of the sound, trying to make it last longer or cut it off or judge it. Just meet it in the moment with your awareness in a very relaxed and natural way.

Feel your body sitting with that same relaxed and natural awareness, whatever sensations you experience. And feel your breath, wherever you experience it most distinctly—the in and out movement of air at the nostrils, or the rising and falling movement of the chest or the abdomen. Let your attention rest in the sensations that you experience without trying to control them or change them. One breath at a time. That same relaxed and open awareness. Letting the breath be however it is. Letting it change.

If you find that your attention has wandered, don't worry about it. As soon as you realize you've gone to the past, you've gone to the future, you've gone to judgment, you've gone to wherever—see if in that moment of recognition you can gently let go, shepherd your attention back, come back in touch with the feeling of the breath. If you have to do that again and again and again, that's fine. Wherever the attention wanders to or however long it's been, you can always let go and begin again.

It's really like the essence of the practice. In that moment, with compassion for yourself, with forgiveness, without judgment, without rancor, see if you can let go and shepherd your attention back to feel the breath.

If by any chance you're not sleeping, this hall is always open for your practice. If you are tired, please take some rest.

The wake-up bell tomorrow morning is at 6:15, with breakfast at 6:45. We'll meet here together at 8:30 in the morning again, and I'll go much more deeply into the instructions.

Thank you.

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