Opening Talk

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:11:00

Good evening, and I'd like to welcome you all to IMS.

My name is Guy Armstrong, and I want to introduce the other people who will be on the teaching team this week. Just to my left is Carol Wilson. Carol lives here in Barre, so she's been here for the snowstorms and knows what you all have been through if you're local. And to her left is Rodney Smith. Rodney lives in Seattle and he knows what the rain is like—he's had some weather experience too.

I'll just say that it's really a pleasure for us to be here. We're old friends going back about thirty years together. We worked on staff here in the late seventies; that's where we first knew each other. So it's a lot of fun. This is the one time a year when we get together and get to reconnect, so we're happy to be here.

On my right is Maddie Klein, and we're also really pleased to have Maddie with us. Maddie is the Executive Director of Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, which is a very thriving and busy urban center in Cambridge, just outside of Boston. Maddie's come off a full work week and is joining us here for a little over half of our retreat. She's currently in teacher training in a program that's jointly run between IMS—with Joseph, Carol, and myself—and Spirit Rock with Jack Kornfield. So she's going through about a four-year program to become a retreat teacher. She's very well practiced, has done quite a bit of teaching already, and she'll be assisting us during this week together. We're really happy to have her support.

I flew in yesterday from California, and I love to get a window seat when I'm on these long flights because you watch the whole country sort of unfold outside the window. It's amazing to think back on what the first settlers had to go through in order to cross this continent—traveling by train, and when that ran out, getting in wagon carts. If you know California, you probably know the Donner Party, where they broke down in the snows and ended up eating the people who had not made it in order to survive. Compared to those journeys, cross-country flights are kind of a lark. You do the whole thing in five and a half hours now, and nobody gets eaten along the way.

But still, we adjust our expectations to modern travel conditions. Because I tend to fly a lot in teaching, I accumulate miles, and then they occasionally give you these things called free upgrade certificates—which, it turns out, you never get to use because somebody else has gotten in ahead of you with more miles or whatever. Yesterday I'd applied for a free upgrade from economy to first class. I had a bunch of certificates expiring March thirty-first, so I thought I would try to use them. I went through check-in and found out there was only one seat available and eighteen people ahead of me. So I wasn't able to use it, and I was stuck in economy.

I got on the plane and immediately started talking with the guy sitting on the aisle in my row, complaining about how I can never get to use these free upgrades they give us. I imagine a lot of other people are in that situation. I was starting to get into a little bit of complaining mind. And he just said, "You know, I don't mind this economy section. I've got enough leg room, it's not such a long flight, and it's not too bad."

All of a sudden, my complaining mind just went poof. That's really true—it's not so bad here. It was just a kind of indicator of how somebody who's in an accepting or contented place can shift our minds. That accepting or contented viewpoint is in all of us, but sometimes it just needs a little reminder, as this fellow reminded me yesterday.

So I settled in and really enjoyed the flight across. We crossed the Sierra, snowy, and I looked down into Yosemite as we flew through. The center of the country was quite cloudy, and then we burst into the open over the Great Lakes. Coming over Massachusetts, we flew right over the Quabbin Reservoir, which is a big source of drinking water for the eastern part of the state. It's due west of here—if you go out at sunset and look toward the setting sun, you're looking in the direction of the Quabbin.

It's a big reservoir, and flying above it, I could see that there was still a lot of ice on the surface, this kind of bluey-white color filling it up. Then all around the outside, near the land, was darker brown, and you could see that the ice was starting to melt. Across the rest of Massachusetts, little ponds and lakes showed the same thing. In fact, if you look at our little ponds around here, you'll also see that combination of ice and melt. I started to realize that this is really the first sign of spring coming to Massachusetts. So it's just a great pleasure to be here with springtime starting to unfold in this climate.

It reminded me that this metaphor of the frozen part and the melted part is an old metaphor for our minds. There are places in our minds that are stuck and frozen up, solidified or congealed, where things don't flow so easily. And then there are other parts—and this expands over the course of springtime—where the ice has receded. Then the currents in the lake or pond flow quite naturally, and the water can come in at one end and flow out at the other.

And that spring is really the period where that ice gets converted into flowing water, where the stuck places open up and it returns to its natural state, you might say, of change or flow.

This has taught me that it's actually a very good metaphor for the work we do on retreat—that we encounter both the flowing parts of ourselves. You'll experience, I think, great periods of peace and, I hope, contentment during this time. But we also experience these pockets where the mind just gets stuck. We go into some area of our being that is contracted, tight, frozen, congealed, where we don't flow so easily.

We can get stuck in a number of different ways in our lives—our busy, complicated lives that are always a mix of pleasant things happening to us and difficult things happening. Sometimes we start to notice that we get stuck in habitual states of mind or habitual ways of feeling. We may notice that very often in our

life there's a feeling of dissatisfaction, or maybe loneliness, or worry and anxiety, or some kind of longing that just seems to be very present for us, a frequent companion.

Sometimes we get frozen in the way we think about ourselves. We hold a certain image of ourselves—maybe we're a happy person, maybe we think of ourselves as an unhappy person. Either way, it's a kind of frozenness that doesn't let us really flow with the changing conditions of life.

I've talked to some people about the teachings in this tradition. The meditation we'll be sharing with you comes out of the Buddhist tradition, where there's a lot of emphasis on looking at the qualities of happiness and unhappiness in our lives. The Buddha talked a great deal about this feature of unhappiness as a common experience that all people share. And sometimes the person will say, "I'm not unhappy." I'll ask, "Well, aren't there any things in your life that are difficult?" "Oh, no, not really. I'm really a happy person." I usually don't go much further unless I'm in a teaching role with them, because it tends to be a difficult conversation from there. But people who have the notion that they are happy people tend to gloss over or deny or turn away from the difficult times in life. And if we have the idea that we're not a happy person, then we miss a lot of moments where there may actually be quite a bit of peace, contentment, or joy in our lives.

In a way, I think one of the ways we get frozen, one of the ways the mind gets stuck, is that we just see what we expect to see.

There was this funny experiment, you may have heard of it, conducted by John Kabat-Zinn. John founded the institute at UMass Hospital in Worcester called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, an application of meditation principles in a non-sectarian way that has really helped a lot of people deal especially with physical pain. As part of the training, he does this experiment where he invites people to watch a video of a basketball game. He says, "Pay really close attention to what's going on on the court." So people sit down in front of the video, noticing five players on each side, the ball getting passed back and forth very quickly. They're following it in a lot of detail, quite engaged.

At the end of the video, he asks them, "Did you notice anything unusual?" About half the people say yes, and half say no. When he asks what they saw that was unusual, the people who said yes report, "Well, about halfway through the video, somebody came out on the court dressed in a gorilla suit, stood in the middle of the court, beat their fists against their chest, and then walked off." And the people who didn't notice anything say, "What? That couldn't have happened. I was watching the whole video. I never saw any gorilla." Then he plays the video again and stops it when it gets to the gorilla, and people realize there was a gorilla on the court that they didn't even see.

Our minds work like that too. If we aren't expecting to see something, it's easy to overlook it. As the thaw starts to come in our hearts and minds, we may not notice the areas that are melting unless we're thinking to look, thinking to see that those are there.

Sometimes our mind gets frozen in a stance toward life. Over many experiences, many incidents, we develop a belief about the world—that the world isn't really capable of satisfying us, that it's intrinsically frustrating, that it doesn't work very well, that the political systems are broken and it's impossible to find happiness. This stance we've adopted reveals itself in our interactions. Maybe they have a built-in sense of irritation or an expectation of disappointment. We've gotten frozen in an attitude, a belief, a view about the world.

So often, as we begin to experience our lives with some care and attention, we find these stuck places generated out of old habits of mind—ties to the past that keep us from being really fresh and alive in each new moment.

As a way to contrast our stuck state, I like to think about children. If you hang out with a child for a while, you can see that they move through so many different moods and emotions so easily. Their minds just flow from happiness and friendship and excitement right into frustration and irritation and pain and sobbing. The child is transparent to all of that. It moves in and moves right through. The whole range is there for them to feel. Children have this way of going with the flow.

I got an email this morning from a friend who said that some trip they'd been planning for a while, they'd recently decided not to take. They said, "I got the feeling that circumstances were changing and I'm going with the flow of the new situation. I'm not going to take that trip"—it was a few months abroad, checking out some monasteries in England.

I think that my time for now will be spent in lay life here.

Life is always changing, sort of under our feet. And the question always is, can we go with its flow? Can we open ourselves up to the new way that life is presenting itself in this moment? Or is one of these stuck attitudes blocking our ability to be with it the way it changes?

Sometimes after a beautiful day like today—and maybe it will continue, I don't know, I haven't looked at a weather report—but sometimes when the rain comes back, because it will come back, there can be a resistance to it. "Oh, it shouldn't be raining. The sunshine really should continue." Just like on our cushion, when we've had some peace for a while and then some movement of mind comes back, some stormy conditions, we think that shouldn't be happening. But one Thai teacher put it this way: Do you think the clouds are wrong? Do you think that the storms are wrong when they come? Or can we have a mind that's really fluid enough to move from one to the other and not resist, not be stuck in wanting it one way or another?

In Zen, they have a saying that a wooden Buddha can't go through fire and an iron Buddha can't cross water. So is there within us the Buddha that can go through both fire and water? That can be wood when it needs to be wood and can be iron when it needs to be iron? We have that capability.

One of the things that people most often report after an extended period of meditation is a greater feeling

of spaciousness in their life. Someone finished a retreat and was scheduled to visit right afterwards with her family. She had a somewhat challenging relationship with her mother from a long, long time. And she reported back after being at home for the better part of a week: "My relationship with my mother was much easier this time. She did the same things that she's done before in our relationship, but this time it just didn't bother me so much. I had so much more space around my relationship with her." And then her mother could feel that too and softened a little bit in her relationship.

So one of the great things about meditation is that we start to find more space in life—more space in our mind, more space in our heart, more space of ease and relaxation. In a way, this finding of space has a deep meaning in these teachings because our basic situation really is very spacious. When you think about it, we have all this physical space. There are things arising at our sense doors, but they're all surrounded by a deep silence if we start to listen. And as we move into the retreat and move into that habit of silence, that way of being of silence, we start to let that spaciousness hold everything that's happening in us. That spaciousness has a way of allowing all the different changes to come through and move through us, to flow in our experience. And it's really that quality of space touching the frozen parts that does the work of melting or unsticking them.

Now, this space is not just a physical space. It's really the space of paying attention. We could say the space of awareness. It's really the meeting of awareness with the places that have gotten stuck that starts to open them up.

When I was first meditating, the place where I was stuck that came a lot in my meditation practice was an experience of being afraid. I would experience it on the cushion. I'd sometimes experience it off the cushion. One time I was doing a meditation retreat in England in the summertime—very beautiful, soft summer evening. The light was kind of golden, the garden I was in was very lovely with flowers, a flowering tree, a lot of birds chirping. I was doing standing meditation out there and I noticed, "Oh, there's fear in the mind." I felt into it—yeah, there's definitely fear in the mind. I was starting to relate to it, feel it in my body, feel it in the mind. Then I opened my eyes and I just looked out on the gardens and the green grass and the soft light, the flowering tree, the birds, and I thought, "Wow, pretty scary world, isn't it?" And just having the ability to be aware of the fear and be aware of the space in the garden, the beauty in the garden—the meeting of those two just started to calm that fear, started to soothe it and release it.

So in our meditation practice, when we come upon these places that seem stuck or frozen—an old emotional pattern, an old way of looking at things—we want to let awareness start to relate to it. Our first inclination may be, "Oh, move away quickly. I didn't come to England to be afraid." But in fact, that's what's true in this moment. So rather than trying to move away from the stuck place, we need to move into it. Because the moving away is what keeps it stuck. The moving into with this awareness is where it can open up and start to melt.

As we pay attention to these places, we find that we can learn about them. And this is one of the most

exciting discoveries in all of meditation: we can learn about the way our minds and hearts work. As we start to understand them, these stuck places don't feel like they shut us down. We feel that we have the ability to hold them, know them. When we understand them, we're not controlled by them. It's really this understanding that brings the kind of space that lets us feel a new freedom in relation to them.

I wanted to mention this word freedom tonight because it's in the course title. I don't know if you noticed it. Some people just sign up for a retreat based on the dates that are available and don't care what the course is about or the teachers or anything.

But this course happens to be titled Freedom Here and Now. We called it this because we enjoy talking about this topic, and the three of us in our conversations noticed that we've been speaking about freedom more and more lately. So we thought we'd call it Freedom Here and Now, hoping that might appeal to more people than just "Insight Meditation," which we'll also be teaching this retreat. We wanted to put a special emphasis on the quality of freedom.

In fact, the numbers for the retreat went down this year. So next year, I think we'll call it Bondage or something like that.

The other curious thing we noticed in the registration numbers is that usually at our retreats there are more women than men, and at this retreat there are more men than women. So maybe something about the language had something to do with that too. I don't know. I'm curious. This is the first time we tried it. We probably won't try it again.

During the week, we want to talk about how freedom grows. One of the main places freedom grows is when we open up to these difficult areas in the mind or in the body. We give them a degree of attention that we often haven't before. We become interested. We want to learn about them. And through learning about them, they open up.

Then there's one more really important ingredient in this mixture. There's awareness, there's interest, there's understanding. And the final ingredient that's really important is a quality of friendliness. When we can bring friendliness into our looking—not a cold, scientific, detached observation, as if we've got a microscope and we're going to pin this insect to white paper—but rather a warm, living connection with what we observe, because all these experiences are part of life, part of our human life. Then that friendliness starts to make itself felt in our relationship to them.

You know how if you're consistently friendly to somebody, they can't hold a grudge against you. They can't wish you badly. They want you to be well. They want you to do well. When we're consistently friendly to these stuck places in our hearts and minds, they also get friendly back. They kind of want us to do well. And they're not felt as enemies or obstructions any longer.

Sometimes when we encounter these difficult places, it may feel like an obstacle. "I came here to get peaceful. I came here to get happy. I didn't come here to feel anxious or worried." But actually, these

seeming obstacles are more like opportunities. Each of us has a certain amount of space in our hearts and minds today, a certain balance that lets us live with our personalities, live with our partners or friends or family, live with our work. But all of us can find greater space in all those relationships—greater space, greater love, greater compassion, greater wisdom. The place we find it from is this opening with friendliness to the places that are stuck in us.

One of the hidden secrets of meditation is that there's not much more we need to do to find that space than to be willing to learn from what's difficult. Just paying attention with that friendly interest in what's difficult is what unfolds it all for us, melts those stuck spaces, turns them into flowing water, turns them into love and compassion and contentment and peace.

When we think of it in this way, we might assume we came here just to get to the peace, but in fact, the way to that peace often is through what looks like an obstacle. These are the very places where the growth happens, where the mind can expand, where the love can unfold more. So the practice becomes this alternation of feeling space and then perhaps encountering something that's not so spacious, that's stuck, and then finding space there, letting this space unfold us. As the space unfolds us, there's a feeling in our lives of greater and greater freedom.

Until, it is said, there are no more obstacles—no more apparent obstacles—but the mind can open effortlessly into every experience that comes. That degree of freedom is possible. The doorway to it is being willing just to feel in our bodies, in our minds, in our hearts, these areas where it feels sticky.

As the instructions go on in the retreat, we'll spend some time collecting the mind. We'll begin with attention to simple bodily experience like breathing, expand it to more of the bodily experience, then start to relate directly with these states of mind and the capacity of thought which often generates them. As we bring more understanding into each of these areas, the whole of our momentary experience starts to open up and be included in the meditation. Although in the beginning we'll focus on the body, ultimately that's to collect our attention so we can understand how we're relating to all of our experience—where the stuck places are, and whether we can bring this soft and interested attention to those, looking at that balance of mind that lets us just be with what is in this flowing and open kind of way.

So, a few tools of the retreat to support this investigation, this exploration. We'll have instructions every morning at the sitting after breakfast that will guide and extend the ways we'll pay attention. I'd encourage everybody to please come to that sitting. At the end of it, we'll have some time for question and answer, so if there's anything in the instructions that isn't clear or any part of your experience you'd like to ask about, there will be time for that every day.

Then the days will unfold in silence, and you can see from the schedule that it's basically an alternation of sitting meditation and walking meditation. In both, we want to bring the same quality of interested, alert, caring attention—just through different postures. As the retreat progresses, we'll expand that to all the other activities in the day.

You will be meeting with us in interviews so that we can talk more personally with you about your experience here. Some may be in groups, but everyone will have at least a couple of one-to-one meetings during the week with one of us. And then every evening there will be a talk, similar to the one tonight, on different aspects of the meditation practice and the kinds of understandings that go with it. Sometimes on the schedule it just says "talk," and some people who are new come in thinking, "Oh, you mean I'm going to get to talk to people then?" Unfortunately, no. We continue to monopolize the conversation—we get to talk more then. So there will be a talk every evening. And then at the last sitting of the day, we'll have a quiet sitting with a little bit of chanting that we'll share together, sometimes a nice way to round off the day and get ready for bed.

I'm really happy to see in this group some old familiar faces. I'd love to welcome people back to IMS. And for those of you I haven't met before, I'm also really happy to see new faces, and I look forward to getting to know you over our week together. This is a journey for us as much as it is for you. There's a wonderful sense of community and connection that grows as we share this quiet together, and I look forward to going on that journey with you. It's a wonderful experience from our side as much as it is from yours. So thank you all for coming. It wouldn't be the same without you.

How many people here have never done an intensive Vipassana meditation retreat? Great, welcome. How many of you have done thirty-five? Some of you may have. Of those who haven't done an intensive Vipassana retreat, is there anyone who hasn't been familiar with this form of meditation at all? Okay, great, welcome.

In terms of what we're doing here together, which Guy explained so well—that we're here really as part of the meditation, the particular structure of sitting, walking, bringing our friendly, non-judgmental attention to whatever's arising in our mind and body through the days—this is somehow not as easy as it might seem, but it is incredibly freeing and revealing. That's the meditation in essence. That's what we're doing, and we've set up the conditions here to really support that particular aspect of the path.

But as we begin tonight, I just want to emphasize that the meditation is a part—as Guy said, it comes from the Buddhist tradition—it's a part of the whole path of opening our hearts and minds to things as they are, of learning to live from a place of understanding and connectedness rather than from neediness, resistance, and fear. But it's a whole path. It's not just about meditation.

We want to start by emphasizing this because once we move into the week, what we're doing here is the meditation. But it starts with how we understand ourselves, how we understand life. That understanding gives rise to how we think about things, to our motivation, to our intentions, to how we speak and act. How we speak, how we act, how we think in our life, how we live our lives, how we meet each moment—this expands into how we live our entire lives.

And so in going into the retreat, it's really extremely helpful as we move into the silence to move into this commitment that hopefully you're each making with yourself: to really be here for this week, to really bring this willingness to meet yourself moment by moment. It's only for yourself. No one is there every moment checking—are you paying attention now? Are you meeting yourself with kindness? Are you beating yourself up? It's up to each of us.

As we enter into this really quite unique space in this crazy world... I know other people who don't do these retreats think this is the crazy space—coming into silence, not talking, sitting and walking like zombies. They think this is really the wacko place on earth. But after you've been to some retreats and had this sense of togetherness, what we call sangha, group togetherness, and the sense of the non-harming space that we create together, the sense of support that arises through practicing like this in silence, the sense of safety—knowing we're not going to be taking things from each other, accosting each other physically or verbally—there's really this support. And the space Guy mentioned, of silence and silent kindness, friendliness, allows each one of us to feel safe enough to open so deeply into ourselves, to just let whatever's arising—beautiful, scary, boring as hell (and that'll be a lot of it)—to come up.

That's really a beautiful space. And from this space, the rest of the world can seem pretty crazy.

I think a lot of what keeps me going in my practice, and what so inspires me in sharing this path with others, is that each of us can then bring back into the world what Guy described with that woman going back to her family, to her mother—a sense of a more harmonious, kinder, more connected way to be. And just by manifesting that, it starts to ripple out.

In terms of beginning the retreat, we like to do what is a bit of a ritual, but it's deeper than ritual—it's really turning our attention inward and acknowledging for each one of us the motivation that brought you here, the intention, the commitment that brought you here. So that we don't just say, "Well, this is the next thing I'm doing on my list. Nine days at IMS, check it off. Breathing in and out, noting, noting, lifting. Okay, that's it, on to the next thing." With the same mindset, the same kind of "doing, what am I getting" mindset. Let's put that down. Let's start by really connecting, each of us, with: Why did I really come here? What is the deep motivation in my heart? Taking a moment, just silently, to acknowledge that for ourselves.

I see it as sort of like entering a doorway where I'll just put down my normal habits of mind. I mean, you don't really put them down, but at least we give the sense that we'll look at them rather than being driven by them. And that we're opening up our way of being, our hearts, our minds, to another possibility.

The way we frame that in the Buddhist tradition is by taking what we call the three refuges: the refuge in Buddha, in Dharma, and in Sangha. I'll say what they are, but I see them all as symbols of the potential for awakening to a greater peace, freedom, and compassion—in ourselves and in the world.

So when we take refuge in the Buddha, the symbol of the Buddha there is just that—a symbol. Buddha was a human being. He's gone, long gone. But he's a symbol of our human capacity to open our hearts and

minds, to live from a place of awakened freedom, a place of awakened compassion. We don't just have to go through our lives like robots. The Buddha was a human being; we're human beings. It's the potential for each one of us to experience moments—and longer and longer moments—of freedom, here and now.

Taking refuge in the Buddha is like reminding ourselves, when we come to one of those places of stuckness Guy mentioned, not to just say, "Oh yeah, this is how it's always been and this is how it's always going to be. It's hopeless." Take refuge in my capacity to awaken. That's all—just a little shift of intentionality.

Refuge in the Dharma. Dharma means the truth, just how things are, the laws of nature. It also means the Buddhist teachings. But again, it's like taking refuge in, trusting in, the power of the truth of this moment. For me, taking refuge in the Dharma is like surrendering into the reality of this moment. That's not a giving up. It's a giving up of fighting and pretending things are different than they are. It's a way of waking up in the moment. When we stop fighting—oh, just as this is—I can wake up in this moment. I can trust this is how it is in this moment. Taking refuge in the Dharma. Again, it's a shift from our wanting things different, our fighting. It's like this. So we wake up in this moment with full collected presence. That's the difference.

And the Sangha, in the classic sense in the Buddhist tradition, would be the community of awakened beings. I heard someone describe it recently as the awakened mind stream. And I think that's something we all share at different moments. Any one of us could be manifesting the awakened mind stream. So in the sense of the Sangha, the community of us here practicing together, we take refuge not in our personalities or each other's personalities—please—but we take refuge in the fact that together we're cultivating and manifesting the awakened mind stream. And that's a way that, as I said earlier, we support each other. We feel that support from each other when we're practicing.

Just on a very mundane level, the fact that we're here as a group will many a time be the main thing that keeps you from running out of the hall when you don't like what happened. Many a sitting I've had over many, many years where, if there weren't other people there, I would have been gone. But I kept on sitting and everything changed. And I was so glad I didn't just get up and leave because I was having an unpleasant moment. We're tired, someone else is doing the walking—oh yeah, I can do that too. It's the space of silence, the space of support. It's really a beautiful thing that can grow in the silence.

So we take refuge, and we like to do it as a call and response chant in the Pali language, which is what the first Buddhist texts were written in, just because we like it. And I'll lead that in a moment.

The second aspect of beginning the retreat is that we agree—and we'll do this in English—that we agree together to be here in a way of speech and body action that is non-harming.

Again, that's that space of safety, giving one another what the Buddha called the gift of fearlessness.

This isn't just about making conditions nice for meditation. This sense of agreeing to live while we're here

by these five rules of training—they're not lifetime vows. They're rules of training, a way of pointing us back to the deep motivation that drives our speech and action. They really are rules of training, not externally imposed laws that you follow blindly without thinking. The point is to have us wake up to why we're doing and saying what we're doing and saying, and perhaps to exercise restraint before we do and say something harmful—not only so as not to hurt others, but not to hurt ourselves.

It's deeply based in the fact that real happiness and freedom is accessible when we are moved by motivations of kindness, of compassion, of non-harming. If we're lost in vindictiveness, in cruelty, in violence, there's no way we're going to be at peace. And so it's for our own well-being and ease as well as for others.

The five training rules or precepts are pretty straightforward. The first is that we agree to take the training rule not to harm or kill living beings. It's only March—a lot easier than the middle of May, as you know, when there are black flies and mosquitoes, and then it's really something to look at our minds and hearts. But here, it's still all beings, not just each other. We undertake not to hurt or harm living beings.

The second is not to take what is not freely offered or freely given. Obviously not stealing, but it's also a way of cultivating a sense of inner contentment. You go for breakfast and you want scrambled eggs and there's oatmeal. You're obviously not going to go into the kitchen and cook yourself up an omelet—hopefully—although there have been times when a staff person came down at three in the morning to find a whole yogi egg-cooking scene going on. That would be taking what is not freely given. But anyway, it's much more about that sense of contentment. I don't get the first-class seat; I'm sitting here in economy. That's fine. I wanted eggs, there's oatmeal. Hey, there's food to eat. I can be grateful for that.

The third—in daily life, because these five precepts in Buddhist countries are the way people practice in everyday life—the third precept is not to harm oneself or others with one's sexual activity. It's basically straightforward: not getting involved in affairs with someone who's in another relationship, or if you're in another relationship, or anything abusive involving power dynamics. On retreat, we take the precept to maintain celibacy, not to be involved in any sexual activity, and that's much more about going into the fourth precept, which is right speech. But here we have noble silence, which is really just to keep our energy with ourselves for this time.

The fourth is we undertake the training rule not to lie, not to use harsh or abusive speech, and not to get involved in divisive speech or idle chit-chat. In daily life, just check out how much of our speech is idle chit-chat. It's a lot. So this actually is a huge one. But we make it easier for you here with noble silence. It's actually much easier than trying to monitor every word. Though I would like to say, in terms of lying and abusive speech, just check out how you talk to yourself. You can work on softening the abusive speech there.

In terms of the noble silence—of course, in your work meditation, if you need to talk to the cook or the housekeeper, that's fine. In the group interviews, of course. But all other times, just really staying with

ourselves. We don't need to talk. And it's not about engaging in trying to catch somebody's eye contact. We don't go around afraid to see each other. We're just letting each person have their space. And that's a real gift, as you'll find—it gives each of us our space.

The fifth is we agree not to take drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind and cause carelessness while we're here. This does not include any medications you're taking—please continue taking any medications. We're talking about recreational drugs and intoxicants, which is kind of a no-brainer in terms of coming here to cultivate clarity. But that's the agreement we make.

So to begin the retreat really is a way of consciously entering into this space of safety, of bringing this kind, contemplative attitude of interest and inquiry to our experience.

We like to begin the retreat by taking the three refuges and the five precepts. This is a traditional way of consciously entering into this protected space of practice.

For the refuges, we do them in a call and response format, repeating each one three times, which is the classical formulation. I'll chant these in Pali. And then we take the precepts, which I'll offer in English.

The first line we chant together is an homage to the Buddha—this is very traditional, something you always chant before anything else. Then come the refuges themselves: *Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*—I go to the Buddha for refuge. *Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*—I go to the Dhamma for refuge. *Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*—I go to the Sangha for refuge.

If you're not comfortable chanting, that's perfectly fine. We're not trying to impose anything on you. You can simply sit and listen, allowing yourself to internally move into the retreat space.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Dutiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Dutiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Dutiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Tatiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Tatiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Tatiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

And now the five precepts:

I undertake the training rule to refrain from harming living beings.

I undertake the training rule not to take what is not given.

I undertake the training rule to refrain from sexual activity.

I undertake the training rule not to use false or harsh speech.

I undertake the training rule not to use drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind.

So we could consider that we've entered into this sacred space together for these nine days.

We're just going to do a really short sitting together. If you'd like to stand or stretch for a moment, that's totally fine.

Carol mentioned something very important to the meditation, and that is the sense of safety. Each of us can really relax—and has to relax—if we are asked to open ourselves to our own observation. There's no other way to do this without feeling safe. So with taking the precepts and settling down with one another and having a general way of ethical conduct between us, we can relax and not feel so defensive.

Most of us will be self-observing and not spending as much time other-observing. There's a way that this gives us freedom to not feel so socially conscious or self-conscious, and that too can help us relax. It's just one of the reasons that noble silence is so important during the retreat—we're not trying to interact in the same way we do socially. We're just trying to be with ourselves in the company of others, and to bring a sense of quiet observation to ourselves throughout the day.

The meditation can really be summed up in three words, and we will spend the rest of the week elaborating on those three words. When you get confused or troubled, when you feel perhaps a little at odds about what to do, remember these three words and just apply them, and you'll be right on course. It's self-correcting.

These three words are: relax, observe, and allow.

The meditation really isn't asking much from us, is it? It's not about performance. It's not about doing something tight or tense that requires a great deal of strenuous activity. It's really just the opposite. It's about unloading. It's about releasing. It's about just seeing. And the word "relax" is at the heart of the meditation practice.

Right now, I would ask each of us to take a posture that allows maximum alertness, and yet at the same time brings forth that intoned sense of relaxation. The back should be straight. If you're on a chair, I would suggest moving your back away from the back of the chair so that you're swinging free of it. Your hands can be in your lap or folded in any comfortable way you like. Your legs, if you're in a chair, should be parallel to one another.

Just take a sigh. Allow yourself to really feel physically here. It's one thing for your body to be here; it's another for your mind to move and allow for you to mentally be here as well. Acknowledging that the body is here begins to align the mind with the body. The crosshairs of the meditation—the mind aligned with the body, that place where they meet—is really what we're looking for.

Softening the mind. It's not a pressured task, so there's no need to feel ambitious or goal-oriented. Just softening the mind, releasing the tensions of the day so that we're not carrying a conversation we had

earlier into this moment. Nor are we trying to plan what we're going to do after this evening. It's really about living at that crosshair, at that point where mind and body meet.

Observe.

We will notice, when we're not looking ahead of ourselves or regretting or reminiscing about something that has occurred, there's a quiet and expansive observation that begins to notice physical sensations, because we are basing our attention in the body. It notices areas of tension, which can therefore be released and relaxed—the neck, the shoulders, the eyes, the jaw, the belly. Just notice those areas. Invite your mind into the body.

Suddenly we become very still. That sense of knowing what's arising, knowing the breath is occurring—that is the definition of meditation. If we're thinking and not being present with that knowing of what's arising, then we are quite likely lost in thought.

When that happens, relax. Don't try to run right back to the breath. Let the breath find you from that sense of relaxed response. Just relaxing.

And you'll find that the breath comes back to you. You don't have to go searching for it. This is especially important in those moments when we have lost our attention and then regain our footing—to dissipate any attitude that might have accompanied that loss of attention. Not to badger ourselves or judge ourselves. That's not what we're looking for. Rather, just release all of the verbal commentary and come back to that sense of relaxation, allowing the breath to find us.

Where we feel the breath most often—we can feel it in the belly area or the chest, sometimes at the nose tip. Wherever we feel it predominantly, sometimes it's the whole sense of the body breathing, feeling the breath as it expands our chest and our abdominal area. Knowing that breathing is occurring and allowing. Just being present without demands, without judgment.

So we will sit for just a few minutes. Staying present. Knowing the breath is arising. You can feel the energy quieting down now as we begin to move into silence together.

Meditation isn't, of course, just about sitting on our pillows and following our breath. That sense of being collected and knowing what the body is doing extends throughout the course of the day—staying in the body, knowing when the shower is being taken, the motions, the feelings of the hands and the body as they do the tasks of the day. Just staying very much embodied. Knowing that you're there, not letting the mind rush off and move in a different direction. Keeping that crosshairs, keeping that X and Y axis at the crossing point—the mind in the body.

Tomorrow there will be a 5:15 bell. For those of you who have traveled, you have a choice this early morning whether to stay in bed because you're tired and need some additional sleep. But I will be up here at 5:45 for that first sitting. For those who would like to join, please come. And for those who need

additional rest, you're welcome to stay. Breakfast will be at 6:30, and again, if you want to miss that meal, you're welcome. But I would suggest getting up sometime in that morning so as not to miss that first sitting after breakfast, which will be the time when we offer instruction and some additional guidance for the meditation.

So have a good evening. The bell is less than eight hours away, so you might want to go right to bed. We are in noble silence now, so please leave the meditation hall quietly. Collectively begin to slow down. We don't have to move at the speed of our normal pace. We have nothing to do here but follow the bells and get to the places in plenty of time.

I look forward to seeing you tomorrow. Have a good night's sleep.

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