Starting A Long Retreat

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 54:57

So I hope you had a pleasant day today. In terms of an ordinary start of retreat, was this a little more pleasant? You got a few extra things to do—talking to each other, getting to know some people, picking apples. I think we're going to be eating apples now for the rest of the three months. So you did a great job.

But it is a special time starting a retreat like this, whether you're here for six weeks or three months. It's a big undertaking. And tonight I want to talk about this approach of starting a long retreat, because it's like nothing else in our lives and nothing else in the world. I think we all believe that it's one of the greatest things a human being can do.

There are many cultures throughout history who have revered this in that spirit. When you practice in Thailand or Burma or other parts of Asia, you practice in a culture where this has long been understood as one of the greatest undertakings that a person can make. And meditators who undertake it are really respected more highly than government officials or well-paid generals or politicians.

It's very unusual to be practicing in a culture where a meditator is kind of at the pinnacle of status because, as you know, it's not like that in our culture—rather the opposite. Our culture doesn't really have any frame of reference for what we're doing. So if you look from the outside with sort of modern Western eyes, this looks pretty strange. And the only thing I could really compare it to to get any respect in this culture is like an extreme sport. You're doing one of the most extreme things you could possibly do.

A few years ago, I went to Burma and ordained for about six weeks and practiced with a very wonderful meditation master named Paok Sayadaw. The conditions were difficult. I lost about, on average, about half a pound a day while I was there, eating just one meal, not a lot of protein, rainy season. And so I came back after six weeks and met some people that I've known for a lot of years.

One of the people that I spent some time with—he's a friend, not a close friend, but he is a friend—is an ex-Navy SEAL. And for those of you who aren't from this country, the Navy SEALs are a very elite part of a fighting force. They're the kind of guys who get dropped off in submarines in James Bond style operations and climb up on the shore and then do battle in foreign lands. They're trained to do that kind of work. So their training is very intense, physically demanding. Sometimes people die in the training.

So I came back having lost a lot of weight. My head was still pretty shaved. I looked pretty bedraggled, to tell you the truth. And the monastery didn't impress him. Buddhism didn't impress him. Meditation didn't particularly impress him. But what he was really impressed by was that I sat still for eight hours a day. Because he knew that was not an easy thing to do. And it's not an easy thing to do, as you all well know.

So there's this combination of extreme effort that's required in doing this practice fully with a wholehearted commitment. But you also know the incredible benefits that come out of it. I don't know any other path to get to this range of benefits so directly and have them be developed so strongly and so reliably.

We heard a number of them this morning as you were stating your intentions: the development of peace, of compassion and love, of wisdom, of coming toward the end of suffering, of healing, of equanimity, of spaciousness, of inner strength and balance. The benefits when you stop to think about it are really unmatched, but the effort is also kind of unmatched. We are fortunate enough to know that it's worth it. A lot of people don't, but I want to appreciate again the challenge that you're all undertaking and also the possibilities, which are really tremendous here.

So I want to talk about—given this very unique and fruitful situation, and I know it's going to be fruitful and a wonderful experience for everyone, because that's just been our experience through so many of these—I want to talk about how to approach it both in very practical terms, what to do with the body, in heart terms, what to do with attitude and our motivation in it, and also just some information, conceptually some things about undertaking a long retreat. Those are the three areas I want to talk about this evening.

And I want to start by touching on two things that Carol mentioned last night: inspiration and aspiration. The first one, inspiration, is a very important element of why we're here. So I was curious what the dictionary had to say about it. And when I looked it up, I found, as many of you know, that it's from the Latin word *spirare*, which means to breathe. And this word, *spire*, is also the root of the word spirit. So inspiration and spiritual are linked in their root meanings, and it's linked to the breath.

And you'll find this connection between breath and spirit in a number of cultures. It's in English, Western culture, of course. In the Hawaiian language, the word *aloha* means the breath of life. And it also means love or affection. It has a lot of broad meaning. So when someone in Hawaii says aloha to you, they may be saying hello as a greeting or goodbye as a greeting, but they're also saying love, affection, and life in that word.

In Pali, the language of the ancient suttas, we find this connection beautifully illustrated. The famous sutta about breathing is called the Anapanasati Sutta, the discourse on the mindfulness of in-and-out breathing. Here, breath is *pana*. Of course, it's central in our meditation practice.

In Sanskrit, which forms the basis of much Hindu thought, that word becomes *prana*, again meaning the breath of life. So breath and life are closely associated across traditions.

And now here's the deeper meaning: inspiration is defined as being filled with an exalting influence. You can feel how the breath of life and all that life means fills us. That's what it is to become inspired—to be full of the breath of life.

Carol touched on this last night, and I wanted to bring it forward again. Often these moments of inspiration are central to our dharma life, to our path. So I invite you to reflect: what have been some of the inspiring moments in your spiritual life?

They may have been things that happened before you knew about practice. They may have come through practice itself. They may have been the very things that started you on this path. Could have been a book, an experience when you were younger—children have many deeply inspiring experiences. Could have been meeting a teacher, someone whose being inspired you. Could have been an experience in your own meditation or hearing about a friend's experience.

As you think about those experiences that perhaps form the foundation of your understanding of spirituality and your own potential, what comes to mind? Would anybody be willing to share one of those moments of inspiration?

"At the conclusion of a metta retreat—actually it was a New Year's retreat I did here—the person sitting next to me and I exchanged blessing cords. Speaking for myself, I was so full of love at that moment. I was crying from happiness, perhaps a little sadness, I don't know, but so full of love. We tied them on each other, so I tied it on her with the utmost love and affection, and she did the same for me. I still wear it, but that moment was so explicitly clear."

Beautiful. So at the end of a metta retreat, tying a red blessing cord around each other's wrist with a real spirit of care and openness of heart and loving-kindness. Moments like that can move us, stay with us, and show us a human possibility—a possibility that's real within our own hearts.

Another offered: "I think it was my first ten-day retreat here, and I was really struggling with a lot of inner suffering, my mind going over and over things. Then I was walking and touched a railing, and there was this immediate presence in touching something physical. All that mental construction just evaporated, and there was this sense of freedom."

So beautiful—carrying around a history of suffering, then coming into the present moment, touching a railing, feeling the freedom in the here and now, and having that whole cloud of mental construction simply evaporate, opening into freedom.

I'm sure all of you have your moments, near or far in time, that in some ways inspire your whole path. I'll share one from my own history. I was in my early twenties, out in a forest in East Texas where I was living at the time. It was late afternoon, the sun was setting, and I was surrounded by these tall pine trees. The light coming through the pines was so beautiful—the green of the pines and the streaky sunlight coming through them. I just said to myself—I don't even know where this came from because I'm not particularly theistic—but the thought arose: "God is love." There was this ecstatic and exalted feeling of touching something truly divine.

In some ways that moment has always provided inspiration for me on the path—that there's the

possibility of feeling that degree of love so directly. I wanted to live with openness to that, availability to that.

When our heart responds to these moments of inspiration, they form what we want from spiritual life, or what Carol called our aspiration. This morning, many of you shared your aspiration for this retreat, which were all lovely and beautiful to hear. I could relate to all of them.

I'd also invite you to think about your aspiration over the long term. I hope you consider your spiritual practice a lifelong endeavor. For me, I consider it extending beyond one lifetime, possibly to many lifetimes.

So when you think on that bigger scale, where do you want to go? Where do you want your practice to take you? And I'm not going to ask you to share this because this can get quite personal. But to think on a really big scale, what's possible for you? What would you really like to realize through your dharma practice?

And just to mention that the Buddha's aspiration when he started his journey was for the complete end of suffering. He was convinced that there had to be a way. And he didn't care what it took to find it, but that's what he dedicated his journey to—finding that complete end of suffering.

Aspiration is an important thing. I work out in a gym near my home in California, and there was a guy who used to work there who was one year a competitor in the Mr. America contest. This was back before it became Mr. Universe and Arnold won it—things kind of changed after it got into the movie world. But back in the days of Mr. America and that level of competition.

So this guy who worked at our gym was a Mr. America competitor, and they had a photo of him in the window in his Mr. America outfit. You know, they wear the skimpy bathing suit, they oil their body, and they strike one of these poses where all the muscles stand out in great relief. And he was very impressive.

I had been working with him—he was giving me some pointers on a couple of the exercises, and I happened to put my hand on his shoulder. It felt like touching a brick wall. He was so solid. There was no soft give there. Very solid. His name was Lance.

One day I was in the gym, and these two teenagers were working out together. They were spotting each other on the machines and helping each other with the heavy weights, and I was eavesdropping on their conversation. One of them said, "Did you see Lance in here the other day? He pressed 515 pounds"—which is, for me, an inconceivable amount of weight. At my level, it's considered really good if you can press your own weight, which for me would be about 160, and I'm not quite there.

So Lance pressed 515 pounds that these young guys had witnessed. These were teenagers. They were not highly developed in their physiques yet. But the way that they talked about their hero, Lance, really indicated to me they were basing an aspiration on that. Something about Lance had inspired them of what

was a possibility, and because of that their motivation was somewhere up here, whereas my motivation was somewhere down here.

So it's a different kind of inspiration maybe than we're interested in here, but for them Lance was really inspiring and he changed where they aimed their workouts. They had a different idea of what was possible.

So I encourage us all to think high in our aspiration. There's no downside, as long as it doesn't come with expectation in a certain amount of time. But as we aspire to something like the compassion, the clarity, the wisdom of the Buddha or the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh or whoever is a great being for you—that can only uplift us and move us down that avenue. It's a beautiful thing.

And also with aspiration, a few people mentioned it this morning. I just wanted to draw it out. Whether we consciously include it or not, it's always helpful to remember that as we develop our own hearts and minds, as we develop our practice, we touch and benefit many, many other beings through our example, through our kindness, through just our way of being in the world. So we can take that into account. We never know how far those ripples will go.

And so we say—it may be a little inflated, but we like to say—we practice for the benefit of all beings, because we may inspire friends who then might take up practice, open their hearts, touch many other beings, and we never know how far it goes. So we'd like to remember that our practice is never just for ourselves, but it's always for the benefit of many, many—we could say countless, we could say all other beings, all sentient beings.

So from this beautiful aspiration, the inspiration that it came from, and a great deal of faith—everyone here has got a lot, a lot of faith. To put yourself in this situation for six weeks or three months, there's a lot of trust, a lot of faith—beautiful quality.

We come here and we leave behind our normal life. We leave behind our friends and our family, comforts of our home, our choice in food, our cars, choice in music or movies or books or television, all the kind of pleasures of our daily life to come into this very spartan environment. The word for this classically in the tradition is renunciation—we let go of all those kind of pleasant things of our daily life in order to come into a situation which is not so gratifying on that level.

And this is not an easy thing to do.

Of course, we're reenacting what the Buddha did when he left his very comfortable home life - his palaces, his family, the wealth of his household at age twenty-nine - and embarked on six arduous years of spiritual practice. We're reenacting that journey in our own way.

This quality of renunciation, an important step in any spiritual life, is in our tradition one of the ten paramis. The paramis are the qualities that, when fully developed, lead to complete freedom and

awakening. They include loving kindness, equanimity, patience, determination, and effort. One of them is this factor of renunciation - the willingness to let go of our usual comforts.

But it's not an easy thing to do. In the Buddha's discourses, he sometimes spoke of the sorrows of the renunciate life. You may feel those in the early days of retreat - missing what you left behind at home: comforts, friends, family, food, chocolate, all those things. You may experience that longing as a form of grief. This is part of the adjustment to this life, the sorrows of the renunciate life. The Buddha said that in the end, these sorrows are overcome by the joys of this way of being. I'll speak more about that shortly. But first, let me acknowledge that there is genuine difficulty in making this shift. The transition is usually felt quite keenly in the first several days, when the contrast is most apparent.

Sometimes this word "renunciation" doesn't sound appealing in our culture. It suggests something unpleasant, like a hair shirt being forced upon us. Other terms that capture this quality include simplicity, voluntary simplicity, letting go, relinquishment. It's said that the proximate cause for this letting go is spiritual urgency - there's something we really want to understand, and that urgency allows us to release our attachments. So it's important to stay in touch with the urgency of why you're here. It all has a purpose.

This is from Thoreau, from Walden: "I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach me and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

In a way, you could say we're here in order to learn how to live. Sometimes all the vocabulary of meditation doesn't make that connection apparent, but that is really what we're all doing here - learning how to live wisely and with love.

The world contains both beauty and pain. A big part of the spiritual life is opening to both dimensions of what life holds. We'll find this reflected in our retreat experience as well. Much of it is about opening to the joy and love that's available, and also to the dukkha, the difficulty that is an essential element of life. As we open our hearts, we feel the beauty and love more directly. We also feel the pain more sensitively. But it's through our capacity to open, to feel both dimensions, to continue opening and holding them, that we grow and learn. This is an integral part of our journey.

It's such a remarkable choice, coming into this renunciate situation. I feel we're very fortunate today as lay practitioners. We have this opportunity. In many cultures, even in Buddhist societies, one is either a nun or monk choosing the renunciate life, or one is a householder with family, responsibilities, and work. To taste the beauties of the renunciate life, one traditionally had to abandon daily life completely.

But our situation is different. We can live a full daily life, a rich engaged life, and also come into a situation like this to experience what it's like to live as a true renunciate. On shorter retreats - a week, ten days, even two weeks - we get a taste of this. But as you settle in for six weeks or three months, you get to

really explore this terrain. In the first week, you sort of settle in. Then - this has been my understanding - you're really living here. As you truly inhabit this place, you're adjusting to this new style of life that is like a monastery, a temporary monastery. And then you get to experience that opening to the beauty and difficulty that has always been integral to deep spiritual life across traditions and cultures.

It's such an interesting choice. The riches of this life are often covered over by the busyness of our daily existence. I think it was T.S. Eliot who described life in the twentieth century - normal, busy daily life - as "distracted from distraction by distractions." We don't even notice we've become distracted because the distractions have carried us away again.

In this life, there's only the essential activity to occupy us: sitting and walking and breathing and eating and sleeping and working and taking care of the body. From that simplicity, richness opens up.

I don't know if you all tuned into this, but two weeks ago in California, there was a very lovely event—the ordination of a bhikkhuni, a word for a Buddhist nun, a fully ordained nun, in the Theravadan tradition. That's the Southeast Asian tradition of Buddhism that our practice comes out of, and it took place in California. It was the first bhikkhuni ordination in our Theravadan tradition to happen in North America. There have been many legalistic complications and obstacles that prevented it from happening, but the first one took place two weeks ago and four women were ordained. That means they took the 254 precepts of a fully ordained Theravadan nun. So it's quite a step forward, I think, for the Dhamma in the West.

Our good friend Sylvia Boorstein was there. Sylvia teaches at Spirit Rock, an old student here, friend of all of ours. She wrote about it for the Huffington Post, so when you get home you can look up Sylvia's article. It was a beautiful description of the event. Afterwards, when we were at a couple of days of meetings together at Spirit Rock, Sylvia was just reflecting on that experience and she said, "You know, I could have been a nun." She isn't—she has a family with a husband and four children and lots of grandchildren, very involved in an active daily life. But that call to a kind of quiet contemplative life was really speaking to her as it has spoken to all of us.

So there's often, as you move, as you make this transition from busy daily life—active, rich, engaged—into this simple way of life, there are often a lot of different feelings, especially when you're looking at six weeks or three months ahead. I just want to name some of those to let everyone know that these are included and just part of the normal process, a part of our practice at this point.

A common one is exhaustion. Often people come in from their busy lives and think, "I just need to sleep for two days, then I'll be ready to go." There can be some nervousness—I read that on one of the interview sheets—or some fear, such a long time, maybe haven't been in retreat for such a long time before. Some inspiration as you reflect on the possibilities and a sense of excitement. Often there can be self-doubt: "Am I going to be up to this? Am I going to be able to do it?" And based on our experience with many, many people, the answer generally is absolutely. Can be some loneliness and also some confidence: "Yeah, I can do this. I've done days and days. I've done weeks. I can do this."

So all those feelings may be at play and may alternate during the early days of the retreat. We just take those into account. Notice that they're present. Don't resist. Don't hang on. And part of the heart's opening.

Then in terms of living in this renunciate way, I'd say, especially having practiced as a monk in Asia where conditions are a little tougher than this, the essential spirit of that life is to take what's given. We have lost control of our outer situation. We have surrendered in being here. We have thrown ourselves on the mercy of strangers. In some cases, you may know the staff and you may know they're really lovely strangers, but in many ways, we're at the mercy of the cooks and managers and teachers and housekeepers and so on. And we've surrendered in a big way.

So in this spirit, we take what's offered to us. We take the food that's served. It may not be our first choice. We may have many good ideas on how the cooks could improve it—we generally refrain from expressing those. We accept the room that we're given. We might like one with more sunshine or a better view of the forest, but we accept where we have been offered to stay. We notice that the clothing that we have with us is what we'll be working with and living with for the time that we're here. When we're a monk or a nun, we accept the medicine that's offered by the monastery.

So we work with these conditions, whether they're to our liking or not. Most of the places that I practiced in Asia as a monk, we received just one meal a day.

Usually it was at breakfast. And I have to tell you, if you haven't had a red fish curry at eight o'clock in the morning, you really haven't lived. So it's a little easier here.

In Zen, they have a saying: "The mouth of a renunciate should be like a furnace that can burn the finest sandalwood or dried cow dung with equal ease." So I don't think you'll be served dried cow dung, but just in case—with equal ease.

The Spirit Rock cooks have a sign on the bulletin board there that says, "When we prepare a delicious meal, that's our practice. When we prepare an undelicious meal, that's your practice."

Along with the renunciation of our control, we also give up communication. We settle in here and, in the spirit of noble silence, make a commitment not to communicate with our friends and family back home unless there's an emergency. We make a commitment not to communicate with one another, with other yogis who are on the retreat. So we give up conversations. We give up different forms of contact.

We recommend that even through the process of snail mail, you keep your letters to what's really necessary and urgent. No need to check the mailbox every day. No need to send outgoing letters every day to people. They'll know if they don't hear from you that you're doing fine.

This also includes all these new forms of communication that are multiplying at such a rate in our culture today: cell phones, text messages, instant messages, email, Facebook, Twitter. You may be used to following two dozen friends' activities through social media. All those things stop when we come here.

It's so interesting because five years ago, we didn't have to say much about this. Cell phones didn't work so well here, and there weren't smartphones. So people couldn't really check their email. Now you bring in a smartphone or a tablet or some netbooks, you could be running your own internet business from the annex for all we know. But we recommend that you don't. We ask that you not.

Really, for the sake of your own practice, we recommend that you give up all those forms of outside communication. It's not necessary to check your email or text messages or IMs or Facebook and Twitter while you're here. And if there's a continuing temptation to do that, Marilyn is really happy to receive your smartphone or tablet or netbook or whatever it is and keep it under lock and key for the time.

This is what's going to make the kind of space and simplicity that lets those beautiful qualities of heart and mind unfold. It's the lack of complication that allows this flowering. So I really encourage you to be very careful and follow this kind of guideline.

It's getting harder and harder to unplug from this always-connected world. Nielsen, the company that used to rate who was watching what TV programs—they're still a media rating company, but they've extended it beyond television—just released a report that says American teenagers on average send over one hundred text messages a day, send or receive. The actual number was 3,146 a month. So those images you have of teenagers wandering through the malls with their thumbs never stopping? That seems to be fairly accurate—over one hundred a day.

One of our teachers works with a lot of young people and commented that this year, unlike any other year, it was harder for that group to unplug from all these different forms of connecting. She said the young people on this retreat seemed more afraid of the silence and solitude than in any other year. When they unplugged, they reported feeling a lot of fear of the emptiness.

So this is a great place, as Thoreau said, to get back to the essential facts of life. What is it to just face life in its bare and simple form?

What we often find is we have a lot of identity—self-identity—based on this frequency of contact. It's sort of like: Is somebody talking to me now? Is somebody being aware of me? Is somebody messaging me? Because every time that happens, we get affirmed in someone's eyes. We get validated and appreciated, at least recognized that we exist. So we've started to construct our identity, a different kind of identity, on the frequency of these contacts. It's a new kind of phenomenon.

I think based on this, we need to do an update of Descartes' famous posit of cogito ergo sum: "I phone, therefore I am." This is the new rendering.

We're in a place where we're not looking to build up the self. We're looking to decrease the formation of self. So letting go of all those connections will help with that.

We also really request in the spirit of this renunciation that you not communicate with one another. This

is so central for keeping an even keel in our community. As you know, when you drop into the silence and you start to open up, you get really sensitive. A little bit of contact from someone else, especially when it's not expected, can be very disturbing. You know, maybe somebody just wants to say, "I love you, I really think you're cool." Even that can set a lot of thoughts off.

But what's more problematic is—let's take it from the other side. Let's say you found someone's behavior annoying. God forbid it should ever happen during these three months. But just occasionally, sometimes one yogi doesn't 100% like what another is doing. And they feel the need to let the other person know where they are falling down. So they'll write them a note expressing this level of irritation. It's always signed "Metta." But if you're the receiver of a critical note in this silence and with this sensitivity, it's like a bomb has gone off in the middle of your body. And people are thrown into tumult by that for days, literally days, because we hear about it and we track its effects. It's one of the most difficult things that people can deal with on a retreat like this.

So please be kind to one another. Please don't send notes to one another. If there's something that someone else is doing that you feel is inappropriate, maybe annoying you, maybe annoying other people, please tell one of us and leave it to us to work it out with that person. We'll try to smooth the situation out in the way that seems most appropriate, and you don't need to try to work it out on your own. So if there's one request that I would make, that would be it. If you're having a problem with someone else, please let us know. Carol's really good at that. Joking. She is, but I don't want them all to go to her.

I wanted in this spirit to say a little bit about the fact that there are lots of different ways to communicate. You can write a note. You can touch someone. You can make gestures, kind of pantomime around somebody. All those are different ways of communicating, of connecting with someone here that can feel intrusive if you're on the receiving end. It feels like somebody's coming into your space or making an inappropriate communication with you. So please refrain from all those different ways of communicating.

Sometimes in seeking to communicate, we might look to make eye contact as a way of starting a communication, initiating a communication. So again, I would refrain from using eye contact as a way to start communicating with somebody, hoping to catch someone's eye and maybe a spark will fly and then you'll be married by the end of the retreat or whatever. But if we were to say don't make eye contact with anybody, then it would feel really—to me—too frozen, too rigid. So it's not like that.

I think looking at people's faces in the middle of the retreat can be very heart-opening. You know, I've learned a lot and opened to a lot of compassion and affection through just noticing the expressions on other people's faces while I'm sitting a retreat. And then if somebody happens to open their eyes and you make eye contact, it's not a problem. So it's not that we always have to go around eyes downcast and I can't ever look at another person's face, but just be sensitive that eye contact sometimes can be a little electric. Some people may prefer not to have any and maybe want to keep their eyes down. But if your eyes are up and someone else's eyes are up and they cross, not a big deal. Don't worry about it. But also

don't use it as a kind of way to say, "Now we really have something going together." Just simple. Keep it simple.

So just remember that the purpose of living so simply as we're doing here is so that the mind's activity gets laid bare. We're not really so concerned with the things that the mind is fastening onto—whether it's the food or the bed or the noise or the teacher's instructions that day or the dharma talk didn't work for us or those kinds of things. It's more that those are the outer places where our movements of mind land and sometimes fixate, but we're more interested in the movement that's landed rather than where it's landed.

So movements of liking and disliking and greed and aversion—that's what we want to understand, not the external circumstance so much. So the simplicity here kind of lays bare those workings of the mind. It's like as we're here over these six weeks, most of the leaves will come off these trees. And then you can really see how the limbs are filling the space that the leaves are currently covering.

The leaves obscure the structure of the tree. When the leaves fall, that structure becomes really clear. So when we take away the busyness of life, then the bare movements of mind stand out like those limbs in fall. And that's what we're here to learn about because that's where the freedom comes.

This is from T.S. Eliot: "Quick now, here, now, always, a condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well." It's this complete simplicity that allows the wisdom and the love to grow. And these are the deep sources of happiness that come through in an experience like this.

That's why the Buddha said in the Dhammapada of renunciation: "If by renouncing a lesser happiness, one attains to a happiness which is greater, then the wise pursue that happiness which is greater." And that's what you're doing here—by letting go of the lesser happiness of our daily lives and all the pleasures and comforts of it, you're all pursuing a happiness which is greater, deeper, more reliable and lasting. So this is why, for me, it's so inspiring to see all of you here and wanting to do this work, wanting to undertake this.

Let me share a few more things before I finish. I want to talk a little bit about what really matters during your time here. You're going to hear from us lots of Dharma talks—most nights of the retreat there will be some Dharma talk. You'll hear lots of instructions. At times they'll sound really complicated and you'll probably go crazy trying to figure out which one you should be doing at any given point in time.

I just want to say that all the techniques are really secondary. They're refinements that are very helpful. They're good, skillful means. But the two primary things for me are the silence—and I don't mean the external silence, but I mean the silence that you feel as you stop and listen—the silence and your presence within it. If you carry on and return to those two elements, your retreat will unfold. That's our baseline. So even though the instructions may get complicated, the techniques may get complicated, just keep coming back to that: the silence and the presence.

Silence has so much to teach us. This is from Walt Whitman: "There is that in me. I do not know what it is, but I know it is in me." That's sort of what we hear when we touch into the silence. There's something there. I can't say what it is, but there's something there. And that's what we want to let unfold in us.

Another beautiful quote that I love on silence is from W.S. Merwin. Merwin is in his eighties now and lives on Maui. I got to meet him once—he was doing a book signing on Maui and autographed a book. He's a very lovely, gentle presence. It turns out he practiced Zen Buddhism for many years with Aitken Roshi, who lived on Hawaii and taught for many years. A line from one of his poems is: "Now all my teachers are dead except silence." All my teachers are dead except silence. So this continues to teach us, continues to inform us.

And the quality of presence, awakeness—it leads to the more specific forms of mindfulness and awareness that we'll be talking about. Just that sense of being awake and present in this moment. This we can trust in, this we can always come back to. It's very, very simple. Really what we're learning is to live well, to live wisely. And there's an art to this. It's not really a science, it's an art.

When I first started meditation practice, I was very focused on the technical aspects of meditation and the technical descriptions of the progress of the Buddhist path—things like the possibility of enlightenment, the stages of concentration referred to as jhanas, stream entry, arahantship, and so forth.

Those teachings really called to me. And I didn't realize that during those long retreat experiences here, what I was really learning was how to live artfully, skillfully, wisely, compassionately, and lovingly.

Over the years, as I've taken the practice back into daily life and applied it, grown in the Dharma and grown in my daily life, it's become really clear to me that I learned all those things here. In silent retreat, I learned how to listen. I learned how to open to what was difficult. I learned how to have compassion for myself, acceptance, and loving kindness. I learned to wait before I spoke. I learned to know whether my mind was in a loving place or an angry place before I acted. Then all those flowers have bloomed over years of carrying these teachings back into daily life.

This is from Alan Watts: "The art of living is neither careless drifting on the one hand, nor fearful clinging to the past on the other. It consists in being sensitive to each moment, in regarding it as utterly new and unique, in having the mind open and wholly receptive."

Does that remind you of meditation? That's a lovely description of meditation. That's what we're learning to do here—how to find that place in the mind and then how to meet each new moment from that kind of place. We discover it here because it's easier to discover it in the simplicity. We get grounded in it, we get steeped in it, so that when we take it back home, it becomes our baseline. That is what, more and more over time, we live from. And that's the place that allows all these beautiful qualities to flower.

I'll close with a quotation from Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the great translators and teachers of our time: "Liberation is the inevitable fruit of the path and is bound to blossom forth when there is steady and

persistent practice. The only requirements for reaching the final goal are two: to start and to continue. If these requirements are met, there is no doubt that the goal will be attained. This is the Dhamma, the undeviating law."

At the end of our talks each night, we like to allow just a minute or so of quiet time together, just to let the words settle before we stand up and leave. So let's just take a moment, a minute, to sit together in silence.

The only requirements for reaching the final goal are two: to start and to continue.

Thank you for your attention. We have now about forty-five minutes for walking, and then we'll have the last period of the day with chanting. Skye will lead the chanting at 9:15, so I hope you will have the energy and come back for that. The sit will be a little shorter today just to entice you to come—not the whole forty-five minutes.

Thank you for listening.

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