Day One Instructions For the Three Month Retreat

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 40:07

Good morning, everyone. Nice to see that most of you have found your way back to the hall. I hope you got some sleep last night. You know, the first day or so of a retreat can kind of go by in a blur of sleepiness and wondering where's the food, when can I take a shower, what are these instructions for my yogi job? So don't worry if it feels like there's a bit of fogginess around the whole enterprise this morning. It's normal.

We'll begin with some simple instructions for sitting. We will be unfolding the instructions over about the first two weeks of the retreat, so they'll be changing every day. That's why it's really helpful to come to the morning sitting, because this is the time when we'll be giving new instructions each morning.

I want to lay a general framework for what we're about. You all know well this quality of mindfulness, which is really the heart of waking up. We want to have that quality of mindfulness available to us throughout the day—not just during the formal sitting periods, not just during the formal walking, but to have it be a continuous thread of presence throughout the day. That is really the challenge for us all as practitioners: how can we stay connected to the present moment?

The formal sittings and walkings will have very clear instructions for that. As time goes by, we'll fill in how to bring that into all the other activities of the day as well. But you can begin working with that throughout the day today as you move between silence and talk, between activity and stillness. You begin to work with just filling in with the continuity of mindfulness.

In the sitting meditations, I want to start with a very basic fact: that we are already aware. We are conscious beings, we are sentient beings. So take in now what's occurring within your field of consciousness, because this is the field for our meditation.

If your eyes are open, you're experiencing seeing. When we live with eyes open sixteen or eighteen hours a day, we sort of forget that the eyes are another sense and that contact is happening a lot of the time. In meditation we want to know at times, "Oh, what's predominant now is seeing." So we can use seeing as simply another sense door.

There are the sensations in the body as you're sitting, and with some stillness, the sensations are often strong or quite apparent. There's hearing—you're hearing the sound perhaps of the fans, the sound of my voice, the sound of one another. Thoughts will be coming and going: my words, your words. And there will be a mood or emotional tone that's present for all of us right now. You've probably had a lot of different

moods and emotions in traveling here, in arriving yesterday. So maybe just tuning in: what's that mood and emotion right now?

This is the range of our senses as we sit. There may be some smell, there may be some taste, but these are the primary senses that we'll be working with in the sitting posture. So just first having the attention very broad and aware of everything that you're experiencing in this moment: sight, sound, sensation, thoughts, mood, letting that all be just as it is. This is the field of human experience. This is the field of meditation.

Now you can let your eyes gently close. If you're used to a practice where you meditate with your eyes open, that's fine. Mostly in Vipassana, we sit with our eyes closed. So if that's comfortable for you, it's recommended. Let the eyes be gentle. As you close them, there's not a hard gaze, there's not staring. They're just softly closed and relaxed. Maybe slightly downcast gives a little more sense of relaxation.

Then connect with the sense of your body in the sitting posture. Let your posture be such that the back is fairly straight. You might feel that a balloon is stretching your head up toward the ceiling, and that will lengthen your spine. But at the same time, you want to have a real feeling of relaxation. So don't strain. As one teacher said, don't sit like your spine is a steel rod. Let it be soft and flexible and upright.

Take a quick look through the body posture to see if there are any areas that you can consciously relax. The forehead can be unknotted. The eyes can be soft. The jaw can be loose. The shoulders can drop.

And the belly can be soft. The hands don't have to clench tightly. Let them relax too.

Notice how it feels to sit in this upright and relaxed body—relaxed as far as possible. We can't relax everything at once, but as far as possible, we're relaxed, upright, and alert.

As you know, mindfulness is not about thinking. It's really about discovering a new dimension that we have—this non-conceptual awareness that knows what's happening in the present moment. So right now, know the body posture, know the body in sitting. Have a sense that you can just rest within the body. You can let the mind drop into the body and allow its stability to hold the wandering mind.

As you rest your attention within the body, eventually you'll notice the sensations of breathing. Begin to feel how the breath is impacting the body. Every time you breathe in, certain sensations are known in the body. Every time you breathe out, a different set of sensations takes place. Let your interest be just with feeling those sensations as the breath comes and goes in the body.

It's not so much that we want to observe the breath from the eyes or from the head, but we want to integrate the awareness throughout the body so that we feel the breath where it's happening. Some of you may find that you feel the breath more clearly in one part of the body—it could be in the belly, the chest, or the nose—and your attention naturally goes there. That's fine. For others, it may be that the breath is just felt throughout the whole body every time it enters, every time it leaves. That's fine too.

In whatever way the breath is felt most clearly for you, let that be the focus for your attention, whether

that's small or wide. If you ever find that bringing attention to the breath creates some sense of strain or trying too hard not to miss a breath, then just return to the sense of awareness filling the body posture. Knowing when you sit that you're sitting—that's enough.

Sometimes you'll notice that you've lost touch with the present and your attention has been involved in a train of thought for some time. That's natural. It happens a lot. Don't worry about it. When you notice that, you're already back in the present moment. So acknowledge the thinking, appreciate the return to the present, and then remember just to notice again: sitting and breathing.

Today is something of a transition day, a settling-in day. It's time to take care of any unfinished business that you may not have been able to wrap up yesterday, time for formal practice, time for informal practice, time for a little communication. We're going to be together a long time—three months for some of you, six weeks for all of us. It's really helpful just to have a little base of getting to know a bit about each other before we go into the extended period of silence. So we'll do a little bit of that today as well.

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