Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:34

Good morning everyone.

I hope you're starting to settle in and feeling well rested this morning. It does take a few days to settle into a retreat, and when you add jet lag into it, things get complicated—even remembering where your room is, figuring out when you can take a shower, or how to do your work meditation. These details tend to occupy the first couple of days, so it's good we're easing in gently to the rhythm.

Today will be our first full day of silence and a full schedule of sittings and walkings. I'll fill in more details about that later.

In this morning sit, as Brian mentioned, each morning we will provide new meditation instructions. This will be very helpful so that as we go along, you'll receive a complete set of instructions that we're suggesting you follow. It would be nice if we could just begin and say, "All right, from this moment on we want you to be mindful of everything that happens in a clear and choiceless manner. End of instructions." That's where we're going, but we find that it really helps if we unfold stage-by-stage instructions for all the different facets of your experience. So that's what we'll be doing over these ten days to two weeks—going through all the different pieces that make up a moment of experience for us as meditators.

This morning we'll continue with the instructions that Brian offered yesterday. As he said, we'll be working with an anchor for the first few days of the retreat. The reason we do that is to stabilize the attention. It's so easy, as you all know in meditation, for the attention to go other places than the present moment—basically into thoughts, fantasies, images, memories, anticipations, and so on. By choosing one area to come back to again and again, we start to build up a mindful relationship to that experience. And because we have a chosen focus, it's clear when we're not there, when we're not with it. So choosing a focus for these days really helps us see clearly: am I in the present and with my anchor, or am I not? This will help bring the attention back more regularly to the present moment, and that's why we begin this way.

As Brian said, you might be comfortable with the breath as an anchor. Many, many meditators are. Some are not. In my experience, the people who are not so comfortable with the breath are those for whom it becomes an area for striving—where the worry increases that we'll miss a single breath. And so there's an over-efforting, a striving, a getting a little too tight around being with each and every inhale and exhale. If you're with the breath and you find that tension is just increasing in your body and in your mind, that's a sign the breath may not be the right choice for you, or you need to be more relaxed in your relationship to it. So you can check on that and play with that.

If the breath doesn't work, another reason could be that there's some past history of difficulty in breathing. For instance, people who had asthma in childhood or who've had an injury in the area of the chest might have a complicated relationship to the breath where it brings up anxiety to focus on it. So in that case, again, choosing a simpler object that's more neutral might be more suitable. And that's why we offer also the body, the body posture in sitting, or sounds as alternatives.

I'll go through each of these three anchors in the instructions this morning, and you can see what feels most helpful for you. With all of them, the important thing is to begin from a place of relaxation. We start from a place of just settling into the present moment the way it is. And from that relaxed attitude, then we meet our present moment experience, however it shows up.

So let's begin with the meditation.

In your sitting posture, check that you can feel this quality of relaxation. As you're sitting, let the body be upright. Let the back be reasonably straight, but not like there's an iron rod up your spine. Feel that you're upright and sitting with some dignity that brings in a sense of alertness and energy, but also that you can feel within the posture a sense of some relaxation or as much ease as possible. You could say that the posture reflects this balance of alertness and relaxation that we also want to find in the mind. The meditative mind should have this combination of a degree of firmness and a base of relaxation.

As you tune into your sitting posture, just begin by settling your attention within the body. Let go of any obvious areas of holding. Let the forehead be unwrinkled, unfrowning. Soften the eyes. The jaw can be unclenched. The shoulders dropped, and the belly soft. The hands can rest in a relaxed way in the lap or on your thighs.

In this way, you can feel the awareness pervading the whole body. Anywhere you direct your attention within the frame of the body, the awareness is there—from the top of the head, through the torso, to the hips.

legs and feet. Awareness is present throughout the body.

In some places it will reveal sensations—sensations of pulsing or tingling, warmth or coolness, tightness or softness. In other areas, no sensations may be apparent. That's fine too. We get the sense of the awareness pervading the whole body, and you can rest with that.

In this way, you can practice with the whole body or the sitting posture as an anchor. From that base, let the attention become wider and open to all the sounds that are arising. Could be the sounds of one another, sound of my voice, sounds of the building, sounds from outside.

Notice how a sound can arise in any part of the room or outside in any direction, and it's heard without any effort on your part. This effortless quality in hearing leads us into an attitude of receptivity—just like you're listening to a concert, or in nature, listening to the sound of the wind in the leaves. So just in resting

and being open, sounds are known spontaneously, effortlessly. Sound can become a second kind of anchor for some people.

Then returning the attention to be with the body, to be felt in the body, through the body. Allow the experience in the body to be felt just the way it is, not needing to change or correct anything. There may be a mix of pleasant sensation, unpleasant sensation—just allowing that all to be the way it is, all held in awareness, known through awareness.

As you settle your attention into the experience of the body here and now, you'll begin to feel the changing sensations that come from breathing. Every time there's an in-breath, new sensations are arising and passing in the body. Every time there's an out-breath, different sensations are appearing.

As you maintain your awareness of the whole body, start to tune in to these changing sensations of breath. What happens on an in-breath in the body? What happens on an out-breath? How far throughout the body can you feel the in-breath happening? How far throughout the body can you feel the out-breath?

So not trying to change the breath or control the breath, make it long or short, shallow or deep. Let the breath just come and go naturally, but feel it, feel it in the body. This is the third option for an anchor—maintaining a receptive attitude, receiving the breath the way you would receive sounds at a concert. Allow the breath to find its natural rhythm, based in ease and relaxation.

Then just maintaining this continuity of mindfulness of breathing, resting the attention in the body, feeling each in-breath and feeling each out-breath.

From time to time your attention will move away from connection with the body or breath, and you'll be drawn into some string of thinking or imagery. Then after some time you'll notice that you've been away from the connection with the breath and body. So don't judge that excursion. We all will take these thought excursions.

But when you notice that thoughts or images have been taking the attention, just acknowledge that: "Oh, thinking" or "image." Appreciate that spontaneous return to the present, and then again, rest in the body, feeling the breathing—each in-breath, each out-breath.

These will be the instructions for your sitting meditations throughout the day today, continuing to explore the anchor, finding the one that feels most suitable for you. The real gauge is what helps you stay in the present moment the best, whether that's the whole body posture, sounds, or the breath.

The instructions I gave this morning were really around feeling the breath through the whole body, which I think is a really nice way to practice because it brings in the sense of relaxation and receptivity. But many of you may have an established breath practice where you're experiencing the breath at the nose, in the belly, or at the chest, and maybe that's clearer for you.

If that feels more comfortable for you as a way to practice with mindfulness of breathing, please follow

that. This whole body breath is one option, but also the nostrils, the chest, or the belly are also fine. Whatever you're comfortable with and works for you—all of those are fine.

This is the morning where we're doing the renunciation of cell phones for those who wish. It is something that we really encourage, and this is helpful on a number of levels.

I think we all know that screens have become profoundly problematic in our culture today. It's easy to become addicted. Children are spending so much time with their screens that one writer referred to it as "nature deficit disorder" for kids these days—they simply don't want to go outside anymore.

The giving up of cell phones for a period like six weeks or three months is part of acknowledging this over-reliance, particularly our connection to the internet where anonymity leads to wrong speech. There's false speech, angry speech, and divisive speech—all of which the Buddha spoke of very clearly as things to avoid. The anonymity of online spaces gives leeway for these unwholesome expressions.

So in renouncing our cell phones, we're stepping away from that, at least temporarily. Every so often I see an article on the homepage of news sites: "In a bold experiment, young person gives up their phone and all social media for a month." Well, you all are doing so much more than that. I think each of you should be a front-page story in the New York Times. I deeply appreciate your commitment in the way Annie spoke about last night.

As an additional step, we often refer to this as renunciation—a word that carries perhaps negative connotations in modern society. But a better way, an easier way to think of it, is simplification. Our whole approach to retreat is simplifying our daily life so we can give our full attention to being in the present moment. Anything that leads away from that as a regular part of our day, we try not to engage in.

That's why we suggest not reading, not writing, and definitely not connecting to the internet, texts, and so forth. Some people have received very disturbing texts in the middle of retreat that have completely disrupted their experience. By turning your phone over to the office and letting them be in charge of it, you'll be truly protected and safe. We really encourage this, though it's not mandatory.

The reason we're doing this as a ceremony—rather than simply asking you to take your phone to Rebecca, who would give you an envelope, write your name, and put it away in a safe for six weeks or three months—is that ceremony is one of the things that bonds a community. That's what rituals are for: bonding in spiritual communities.

What happens as you see people turning in their cell phones is that you appreciate their commitment. They make their commitment visible. It's like when somebody shows up for a group sitting—they're making their commitment visible, and it really supports the rest of us. It's the visibility of the renunciation that we emphasize in making this a public ritual or ceremony. This is one of those things that binds communities together.

To add a ritual element, we'll include some Pali chanting. As people come up to drop their cell phones in, all of us—not just teachers, but all of you—will join in the chanting. We'll chant the three refuges, just the first version: "Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi," and then repeat those same three lines again and again. They're in the first paragraph of your chant sheet under "Refuges and Precepts," but you'll pick it up quickly.

Those of you who have your cell phones already in an envelope and prepared to give them up, please line up at the back, forming a line that leads to the front. We have a basket here where you can drop your phone. We will bow to you and ring a bell each time a phone is renounced, accompanying that with the chant.

If you meant to bring your cell phone but left it in your room, or if you just feel at this moment like you'd like to participate, there are more packets with envelopes just outside this door in the walking room. Or if you need to go to your room to get your cell phone, you're welcome to do that during the ceremony.

If you've already dropped your cell phone off but would like to be part of the ceremony, please come up and bow, or express your participation however feels appropriate to you.

Now we begin together with our chanting of the triple refuge: *Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.*

Please begin to come forward now.

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

[The chant continues as participants process forward to place their phones in the basket, each repetition accompanying their steps toward this symbolic act of letting go]

Thank you all for your expression of this commitment to simplicity. May it be the cause for your deepening in wisdom and loving-kindness.

A few announcements before we leave this morning. There will be a walking period coming up. In the walking meditation, please continue for this period to follow the simple instructions Brian gave yesterday. Stay grounded in your body. You can focus on the feeling of moving through the whole body, or on the movement of the legs and feet.

At the end of the ten o'clock sit, Annie will give more detailed instructions in walking meditation. If you already have a well-established walking practice, you don't need to come to that sit. But if you'd like a refresher, if you feel like your walking would benefit from a little tune-up, please come to the ten o'clock sitting this morning.

At 11:30, Brian will lead a session on good posture. Again, this is optional, but as you start into a long period of retreat, it's good to get your body in proper alignment from the beginning. Without it, stress on

the back, neck, knees can build up over time. This session is highly recommended. Brian has extensive experience and will give many helpful tips on how to sit properly and comfortably. He'll conclude before lunch.

At 6:15 today, we have the affinity group sit for the LGBTQIA+ community. This will be in room M204, right at the top of the main staircase. Just go to the top of the stairs, turn right, and you'll find it. There's also a note on the board reminding you.

Someone asked whether you have to wait for an emergency to contact retreat support—that is, May or Karin—by going to the office and picking up the red phone. Not necessarily. If you find yourself in a place in your practice where you could use a little contact, a little support to help you through a difficult patch, but it's not an emergency, you can simply leave a note on the board for retreat support. If you forget the name "retreat support," you can address it to the retreat manager, and Rebecca will pass it on to one of them. They will get back in touch with you by note and find a time to meet. They are available for support in situations that aren't emergencies as well.

The last thing to mention is that we will begin the scheduled practice meetings tomorrow morning. Those notices will go up on the board later this afternoon, probably by tea time. Please check the board later today. We'll see half the group tomorrow and the other half the next day—half the group on Friday, the other half on Saturday. So if your name doesn't appear today, don't worry. We haven't forgotten you.

This time now is a walking period until the ten o'clock sit. May you have a beneficial day of mindfulness practice.

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