Renunciation

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 52:51

I'd like to talk tonight on the quality of renunciation.

When we look at the form, the outer form of our life here in retreat, one of the most obvious and striking features is the extreme simplicity of what we do day by day. We really pare our life down to the simplest human activities of sitting and breathing, of walking and paying attention, and of eating. We let go of so many of the mundane daily activities that may end up being distractions from our central aim in life. We let go of many entertainments and diversions. This is a really important and very supportive aspect of what we do, this simplifying of life on retreat. It's also one of the most arduous things about being here.

So I want to acknowledge the courage and the commitment that you all are showing in undertaking this kind of simplicity for three weeks or for six weeks. It's really a great testament to your dedication.

Renunciation is a frequent theme in the Buddhist tradition, and the Buddha was the first archetype of this quality. When he was young and still living in the palace, you may know the story, he had three palaces, one for every season of the year. He had whole groups of minstrels to serenade him—in his own words, none of whom were male. The gardeners were trained to pick off dead flowers before he could see them so that he wouldn't have to look at anything ugly and decaying.

Somehow in his youth, he happened upon what are called the heavenly messengers: seeing a person who was ill, a person who was old, and a corpse. Then he saw the fourth messenger, which was one who had gone forth from the home life into homelessness, a renunciate. At that point the Bodhisattva understood that he too was subject to illness, to aging, to death. He said he saw the potential suffering inherent in human life subject to these forces, and that was really what inspired his departing from home.

So he left home at age 29, leaving behind a young wife and a young son whom he knew would be well taken care of because his family was royal, was wealthy. He described it himself in this way: "While still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, I shaved off my hair and beard, though my mother and father wished otherwise and grieved with tearful faces. And I put on the yellow robe and went forth from the home life into homelessness."

The Bodhisattva gave up all personal comfort in order to find an end to suffering, to find freedom. There's a very moving image of the Bodhisattva at one stage in his practice, which lasted for six years altogether—the image of the emaciated Buddha. You've probably seen this image in Buddhist iconography and art. It shows him extremely thin with sunken cheeks. He's very gaunt because he's gone without eating for some time. The theory being in India at that time that if one starved the body, the soul would

become liberated. So the Bodhisattva undertook these extremely austere practices.

Again, in his own words, he says of that stage in his practice, "My vertebrae stood out on my spine like beads on a cord. My ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn. When I touched my belly skin, I could feel my backbone. And when I touched my back skin, I could feel my belly."

This degree of renunciation, fortunately, isn't necessary for us. That's one of the things the Buddha found in teaching the middle path. We don't have to go that far. But I love this image because it really stands for the difficulties that we are all willing to face coming upon an extended retreat like this one. The courage and the determination that are required.

One of my first encounters with renunciates came in 1979. I was working on staff at Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts. I'd been on staff for about a year and a half, and we had a visit from an old Asian monk, an old Burmese monk named Mahasi Sayadaw, who was about 80 at that time. You may know that Mahasi Sayadaw was really more or less the creator of the style of Vipassana meditation that we do here and that we normally teach. The paying attention to the different sense doors, being with changing objects, and using the mental noting are all techniques that he imparted to thousands of practitioners. He has left as his legacy hundreds of meditation centers throughout Burma and Thailand and Sri Lanka that carry on this particular practice which he called the Satipatthana technique of Vipassana.

So he was really one of the greatest meditation masters of the century, and when he came to IMS we were really excited because he was in a way the father of our teachers' teachers. He was very senior and revered.

I was on staff and so we got to go down to the Boston airport to meet him when he came. He arrived with four other monks. They like to travel in force. We got to the gate and we were waiting for him to come off the plane, and everybody else got off the plane and there was no Mahasi Sayadaw. You don't really overlook old men in orange robes and shaved heads in the Boston airport. So we were pretty sure we hadn't missed him. We started wondering, did his flight get canceled out of Thailand? Did they miss the connection or what happened?

We waited, and pretty shortly, out from the door of the gate came walking very slowly, very mindfully, sort of lifting, moving, placing—Mahasi Sayadaw as the first one, and then the four other monks who were all junior to him in single file behind him. Just bringing that meditative consciousness right into the middle of the Boston airport.

And each of them carried in front of his chest a fan. The fan is a teaching device in Asian countries, in Buddhist countries, where the monk will often hold a fan up in front of his face while delivering a dharma talk so that the people may not even know who's speaking. It's a technique designed to emphasize egolessness so that the star quality doesn't get perpetuated and sustained.

So they were all carrying these fans. And when we looked closely, there was English embroidery on each fan that said, "Mahasi Sayadaw, World Tour 1979." Below, the same thing was written in Burmese. So they all came forward with their fans, and then we took them back to the center where they led a two-week retreat.

At that time I was somewhat young in my practice and had been mostly influenced by Western teachers. I found their teaching style a little dry because it wasn't full of Rumi poems or Sufi stories or recounting embarrassing incidents that had happened to them in second grade. I thought the flavor of the teachings was a little dry at times.

Now I have much more appreciation for what they did, because basically what those men did was repeat the words of the Buddha that were not mere words to them. They were words that they had proved for themselves through decades of practice and investigation and meditation. So looking back, I really appreciate the power of what they offered.

At the time, there was a little controversy about their visit. They were all celibate, and many of them had been celibate since very early on, had never known sexuality at all. I remember one of the monks said one day in the meditation hall, in response to a question, "Well, yes, because sex is gross, base, and disgusting."

You can imagine that touched off a little bit of controversy, which was only resolved a few days later when one of the women on staff figured out what had gone wrong. She said, "Oh right, the translator actually missed it. What he actually said was sex is basic and grossing and worth discussing." Then we all felt a little better about it all.

But one of the things that I felt really strongly in those five monks, even from early on in my contact with them, was tremendous power in their presence. There was a great sense of purity about them, almost an innocence, as though they had never lost some of their childlike wonder and purity of heart.

When I reflected on it at that time, about twenty years ago, I really felt that it had come from their renunciation. They had lived lives that were so simple, so uncluttered, so clean and pure that their beings had just flowered in this really lovely way—a way that was almost untouched by a lot of the effects of the world.

In their relation to us, they were really unshakable. It's a quality I've come to appreciate about Asian teachers. Some Asian teachers will talk on for an hour, hour and a half, two hours, because they're not afraid of offending anybody, they're not afraid of boring people, and they're not afraid of being disliked. There was this great unshakability that they all had. I believe that unshakability also comes from renunciation.

As we abide in this retreat setting and find our stability and contentment in a life of such great simplicity, we drop a lot of our attachment to the supports we may have thought were needed in our life outside. We find that actually consciousness can stand on its own, does stand on its own, unsupported, without

foundation, without attachment. And it's very freeing. For me, it's been one of the great freeing experiences of the retreat life.

The Buddha talked about renunciation as one of the ten paramis. The paramis are qualities that he himself developed, it's said, over many lifetimes, once he made the vow to become a Buddha. He said the way he went about it was to develop these ten qualities, which are the paramis. They're qualities that we'll be speaking about a lot over the course of the retreat—qualities like generosity, virtue, metta, equanimity, truthfulness, determination, patience, wisdom, and renunciation as one of the ten.

They're qualities that when we cultivate them provide the force that actually liberates the mind. The mind really doesn't get liberated accidentally, but it gets liberated when we have accumulated enough wholesome force in the mind to free it. The Buddha said it's by the cultivation of the paramis that we generate that power, that force.

The paramis are intentions. They're mental factors that accompany action. Because of that, they're qualities that we can develop in daily life as well as in retreat. That's why for me as a layperson they're a really beautiful and inspiring list—because the practice of the paramis can go on throughout our life. It is not just a retreat practice.

In describing renunciation more fully as a parami, it's said in the tradition that the proximate cause for renunciation is a sense of spiritual urgency. It is that deep questioning and wanting to understand that leads us to renounce, that leads us to be in retreat, that leads us to give up some of the comforts. It's really at the core of a lot of the Buddhist tradition.

The Buddha was fond of saying to the practitioners, "There are these roots of trees, there are these empty huts—practice with diligence before it's too late." This comes in again and again in the suttas.

I wanted to share with you a little bit about this man who was a teacher in the Tibetan tradition. His name is Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He was one of the most respected Tibetan teachers of our time. In practice terms, he was on a par with the great heads of the school, such as the Karmapa and Dudjom Rinpoche, and in practice terms, even the Dalai Lama.

I'd like to read a letter that he wrote to his parents. This was written when he was thirteen years old:

"My dearest parents, you gave me birth with all the freedoms and advantages of human life and you have cared for me with love from my infancy till now."

Since you introduced me to an authentic teacher, it is thanks to your kindness that I have encountered the path of liberation. After hearing, thinking about, and meditating on the life of my perfect teacher, I have resolved to slip quietly away from all this life's concerns and roam through empty, uninhabited valleys.

Father and mother, stay in your handsome, lofty house. I, your young son, long instead for empty caves. Thank you for the fine, soft clothes you gave me, yet I don't need them. I would rather dress in plain white

felt. I've cast aside this luxury and wealth with no regrets. A handbook of profound advice is all I wish to collect.

I leave this garden full of splendid flowers and head for the wilderness of overhanging cliffs alone. I need no attendants who just fuel anger and attachment. Birds and wild animals are the only company I long for. Although for now your son will hide away in mountain glens, your smiling faces will be with me always. Nor shall I forget your loving care. And if I reach the citadel of experience and realization, I shall repay your kindness. Of that you can be sure.

That was written when he was 13. When he was 15, he entered a cave and spent the next seven years in retreat, three years not speaking to anyone. When he left that cave, he went to a hut out in the wilderness. I have a photograph of the view—this is the site. I'll put this up on the bulletin board so you can see it later. You can see how this kind of retreat would help to develop a spacious mind. Just the sky and the mountains, the view from his retreat hut. He spent four more years in that retreat hut. In all, he spent 22 years in retreat. He became one of the softest, most gentle, and most loving teachers in the tradition that I know of. John had the good fortune to meet with him many times in Nepal during his life.

Now in our retreat situation, it's not a seven-year stint in a cave, thank goodness, but we give up a lot. We give up our partners, our friends, our children. We give up speaking. We give up our choice of food. We give up books and music and movies and television. We give up our roles in the world. When we come here, in our day-by-day actions, we're no longer mothers and fathers and wives and husbands and friends. We just come into the simplicity of our direct experience. It's a big giving up of this identity that we carry.

We give up our choice of food, although with meals like lunch today, I don't think that's much of a sacrifice. We say that the Buddha taught the middle path, but at Spirit Rock we've developed what we call the upper middle path. Welcome to practice in Marin County. Renunciate life takes on a different flavor with radiant heating and air conditioning. We have a very well-appointed cave to practice in. But there's still a lot of renunciation.

One of the beautiful spirits in the renunciate life, one of the great expressions of it, is this sense of taking and accepting what's given. I was a monk in Thailand for about a year, and that flavor pervades the whole of the monk's life. When you go out for your morning alms round, begging for food, you just take whatever anybody wants to put into your bowl. Sometimes it's things that you really like and look forward to. Sometimes it's things like three-year-old goose eggs that you wouldn't normally choose to eat if you had a choice. You simply take and eat what's offered. That's part of the practice.

A lot of my practice was at forest monasteries where the people around, the villagers, were quite poor. What they had to offer was not the finest. Sometimes the monastery would supplement it with their own food, and I think that was intentionally a little bit on the Spartan side because they didn't want people staying at that wat, at that monastery, unless they really wanted to be there to practice. That's what we figured out later. We thought, why is the food so bad here? Well, they're trying to put off people who

might just be coming looking for a cushy place to hang out.

So it was one of the things we needed to live with. At the forest monasteries I stayed at, I only received one meal a day, served around eight o'clock in the morning. I could save a few things from that meal and eat until noon, but after noon there was no more eating for monks in those countries. Then there would be no food until eight o'clock the following morning. What you received at eight o'clock the next morning on an empty stomach sometimes wasn't that exciting. If you've never eaten red fish curry at eight in the morning on an empty stomach, you really haven't lived.

So it was a good practice. In Zen, they have a saying that the mouth of a renunciate should be like a furnace that can burn the finest sandalwood or dried cow dung with equal ease. Now, I don't think you'll be served the latter here, so don't worry about that. But developing this spirit of accepting what is given is a beautiful way to approach retreat life. Sometimes the food from the kitchen will be absolutely what you would have ordered in a restaurant—better than most. Sometimes it may not be exactly to your liking, but the spirit really is to accept what's offered in that spirit of simplicity.

I have to say, I got so hungry at night while living in these monasteries that I was reduced to a point of shamelessness I'd never experienced before. Do you know sweetened condensed milk? Those little tins of sweetened condensed milk? They were permitted to be added to tea after noon, but I never imagined I would find myself eating it spoon by spoon. Yet I did, because I was so hungry. It's part of the lifestyle.

Our accommodations weren't great either when we were monks. I would live for months at a time in these little huts up on stilts, about six feet by ten feet—just wide enough to sleep in, with space for my sitting cushion in the other part of the hut. But periodically we would be invaded by the creatures of the forest. Sometimes there would be attacks of ants that would start running up the pillars, swarming all over the cottage in a matter of ten minutes. If you've never seen an Asian ant attack in a tropical forest—there's nothing like it here. We'd go to work trying to sweep them off and keep them out of the house.

One evening, I got up in the middle of the night to go outside. I walked down my stairs, put my hand on the banister in the darkness, and got bitten by a scorpion. Another evening, just as I was preparing to sleep—I'd stretched out, turned off my light, it was about ten o'clock—I was covered by a mosquito net, so I thought I was safe. But underneath the mosquito net had crawled a poisonous centipede, which bit my foot. It was actually the most painful sensation I've ever felt, as though they had injected venom that caused the muscles to cramp incredibly. It didn't go away until the next morning.

Sometimes at night, around nine o'clock, I would hear the sound of my neighbor banging on his roof with a wooden pole. I couldn't see another hut from where I stayed, but there were huts scattered throughout the eighty acres of forest. I would hear this rhythmic banging: *bang, bang, bang, bang, bang*. After a while I realized what was happening. A poisonous snake had dropped from an overhanging tree onto his roof, and he was sitting in meditation when he heard it land. He was pounding his roof to try to get the snake off, because otherwise it would come over the eaves, crawl in underneath, and try to make a home in his

hut.

This was some of the life we lived as monks there. Even though some of the rooms here are doubles, they don't look so bad to me in comparison. And the bathrooms are a lot cleaner too. But still, it's a renunciation.

Another big area of renunciation is around the schedule. This is a very interesting area, and I hope you'll all explore this with great consciousness during your time here. Each of us in the course of being here for three or six weeks will find our own personal relationship to the schedule. For some people, it's basically an outline of when the three meals are served, and the rest doesn't matter too much. For others, we approach the schedule with the kind of religious fervor we might bring to the words of the Buddha and follow it very closely.

And honestly, what works well for one person with the schedule might not work so well for someone else. So you really need to find your own way in relation to it.

But I'd like to put in a plug here for trying out, at least, surrendering to the schedule. It is a very powerful way to approach the retreat. If one simply surrenders and says, "When I hear a bell, if it's inside, I'm gonna walk. And if I hear a bell and it's outside, I'm gonna come sit," those are the only decision points, really, of the day. If you hear a bell, you know what to do next.

What's nice about that approach to the schedule is it keeps life really simple and it keeps the mind from getting involved in a lot of thinking. Because once you start making choices like, "Well, maybe I'll skip this walking period and have a cup of tea. And then would this be a good time to wash my socks, or the sweater that I want to wear in two days time?" Once those sorts of thoughts start creeping in, the whole day can kind of get filled up planning what we're going to do next, and it can get really complicated.

So I just encourage you to play with this. Try maybe just for a day—maybe when you're a little further into it—try and surrender to the schedule and see how it feels. Talk with your teacher about your relationship to it and see how it goes for you. It really can greatly simplify the thought process.

So why do we do this? What's the purpose of this kind of simplicity, this kind of renunciation? Well, first of all, we become unburdened. I think that's really at the heart of it. We become unburdened, and yet have you noticed how the days can seem really full, even though you're unburdened? I mean, there have been days in retreat I've been hard pressed to find twenty minutes to take a shower. I don't know if you've experienced that, but sometimes it seems like it's really busy here.

But when you look at it, apart from the work meditation, you only have one job all day long, and that is to be with your experience. That's really the only occupation that you have here. So looked at in that way, it gets really simple.

That sense of unburdening then really lets us focus on what's important. I came upon this from an

Audubon magazine. This is written by a backpacker about his experience coming home from a backpacking trip:

"One moment I can lay everything I need on the corner of a poncho. The next moment, it seems, I couldn't fit all my furniture into a warehouse. Coming home, I can see that there are too many appliances in my cupboards, too many clothes in my closet, too many strings of duty jerking me in too many directions. The opposite of simplicity as I understand it is not complexity but clutter. Returning from a backcountry trip, I vow to purchase nothing that I don't really need, give away everything that is excess, refuse all chores that don't arise from central concerns. The simplicity I seek is not the enforced austerity of the poor. I seek instead the richness of a gathered and deliberate life, which comes from letting one's belongings and commitments be few in number and high in quality."

I think this is a lovely way to think about what we're doing here. Our commitments are few in number, but they're really high in quality. The Buddha said that this quality of present moment awareness, of paying full attention to our experience in each moment, is the single greatest gift we can give to ourselves, the single greatest source of virtue. So this unburdenedness is an important part of it.

There's another level though to renunciation that goes a little deeper. When the outer activities fall away, what really stands out are the workings of the mind and heart. And it's in the workings of the mind and heart that we understand the fact of suffering, the origin of suffering, and the end of suffering. So this is the deeper relevance of renunciation.

Somebody said in an interview, "Gosh, with all this quiet, what I really see clearly are all my own opinions and views and judgments," and they become really loud, don't they? When everything else is so quiet and there's nothing else to take our attention away, this internal chatter comes right into the foreground. That's what we need to see. We need to see where the mind is hanging on, where it's attached, and therefore where it can be free.

There's another book that's come out recently that I like a lot. It's called *Cave in the Snow*. It's about a woman named Ani Tenzin Palmo who is a Tibetan—well, she's a Westerner in robes as a Tibetan nun. She actually ordained in India with a Tibetan teacher when she was twenty-one years old in 1964, so a long time ago, and she's been ordained ever since then. She asked for years and years to get the teachings and to be able to go off and practice alone, but they weren't used to Western nuns at that time and nobody would allow her to do it.

Her teacher wouldn't give her the teachings and they wouldn't provide a place for her to go practice. She begged and pleaded and begged and pleaded, and finally she was given this space of a cave up at 13,000 feet in the Himalayas in India. She moved into the cave and stayed there for twelve years, summer and winter.

In the cave, she had one little wood stove, which she would only light at lunchtime to cook her noontime

meal. You can imagine the snow outside. Sometimes the snow was so high that it went over the top of her cave. One time she actually had to tunnel out through the snow to get air. She had a front on the cave, so it wasn't just back in the cliff. Her lay supporters mudded up the front of it, so she was somewhat protected from the elements, but not completely.

She was in the middle of one three-year retreat—in the Tibetan tradition you're supposed to do three years, three months, and three days so that you really get three good years of practice. She was about three years in, hadn't spoken to anybody or seen anybody for three years, and an Indian policeman barged in her front door and told her that her visa had run out and she'd have to leave. How do you keep your equanimity in the middle of that?

She persuaded him to let her stay a little longer, but that's what eventually made her leave her cave. Now she's settled in the West, setting up a center in Assisi, Italy. She passed through Spirit Rock about a year ago, and I had a chance to meet her and have lunch with her. I told her how much I admired what she'd done, because I have a great respect for people who really live this renunciation—I know how difficult it is. She just said, very simply, "You know, it was just what I wanted to do. It was nothing special. It was just what I wanted to do."

There are many people who would hear that you are doing a three-week retreat or a six-week retreat and probably think to you, even if they don't say it, "My, you're so brave. How can you possibly imagine doing that? I could never do something like that. I have so much respect for what you're doing." For you, it probably feels like a stretch, but it probably also feels like just what you want to do. And that's beautiful.

The reporter who wrote this book on her life, obviously not a heavy-duty practitioner herself, said to Tenzin Palmo, "Well, wasn't it just an escape from life? You're going to this cave. Aren't you just avoiding the trials of real life?"

You know the answer to that one, don't you?

Tenzin Palmo replied, "Not at all. To my mind, worldly life is an escape. When you have a problem in daily life, you can turn on the television, phone a friend, or go out for a coffee. In a cave, however, you have no one to turn to but yourself. When problems arise and things get tough, you have no choice but to go through with them and come out the other side. In a cave, you face your own nature in the raw, and you have to find a way to work with it and deal with it."

I think this is really a great truth and one of the great strengthening aspects of a retreat, especially a long retreat. We gain so much self-confidence by being willing to come up against these difficult areas in ourselves and find that we have the strength to go into them, go through them, and come out the other side. We do this again and again in a long retreat.

Sometimes as we confront these difficult parts of ourselves—and the beautiful parts of ourselves too—the inner life becomes very vivid. You may notice this quite early on, that you start to get sensitive to nature,

that things touch you really deeply. You may start to have really vivid dreams, and there can be a tendency to really want to go into the dreams because they seem so rich and meaningful.

Someone asked Joseph Goldstein this question on a retreat. She said, "You know, in this retreat, my dreams take on so much life and vitality. I really think I should analyze them because, as Carl Jung said, a dream unanalyzed is like a letter unopened."

Joseph replied, "Well, you know, when you're on retreat, it's a good idea not to open your mail."

So by and large, the dream life may get very vivid. It's probably most helpful to kind of leave it there. Leave it in the dream world. Once you wake up, just come back into the practice of this present moment.

Sometimes our emotional reactions get quite strong, even over little things. This is a phenomenon we call "yogi mind." I'm sure you've seen many times how we can make mountains out of molehills. Sometimes we lose a little touch with reality. One meditator in a retreat in Southern California asked the manager if they could please call the airlines and have them reroute the planes because they were flying over the retreat center and it was a little too noisy. Usually not possible.

When I went on retreat last fall for a six-week retreat at IMS in Massachusetts, there were a whole lot of issues related to Spirit Rock and the board that came up for me again and again in the early days of the retreat.

I spent many sitting periods writing letters to Arlene, our executive director, telling her what I thought should happen while I was in retreat. Fortunately, I refrained from ever putting them on paper, and Arlene, fortunately, never had to receive them. But I sure wrote a lot of letters in my mind about things that it seemed like my advice was just indispensable.

So when these impulses come, give them a little space. Don't act on them too quickly.

Sometimes we may get irritated with someone else who's on the retreat with us. It may be somebody who comes in late to a sitting or somebody who's sitting near us who's a very heavy breather. I was sitting next to someone at a retreat once whose breath was so loud I had to make a choice—I either followed his breath or mine. It was a hard choice.

Or somebody comes in and they keep wearing a really crinkly jacket and they're sitting near you and every time they shuffle it's rattle, rattle, rattle. And the temptation to write notes to one another gets really strong at this point of the retreat. It seems so important that you stop that person doing what they're doing. And so you write this note that says something like, "Dear fellow meditator, please leave that crinkly jacket out in the hall next time. Don't come in and do that again." And of course, they're always signed metta, right? I always sign metta, but the person who gets it of course reads it and feels the passion of the anger that really went into the note. And it can be really upsetting for people.

Getting a note in the middle of a silent retreat can be such a shock. You all know how sensitive you get in

this setting. It can upset people's equilibrium for days. Really.

So one of the things I would really like to reinforce—Lynn mentioned it the other night—is to ask you please not to write notes to one another. I know you'll be thinking that you're doing it with all the loving kindness in your heart, and it's good for all sentient beings in the hall, and it really advances the cause of the Dharma. But please, if you're upset about a fellow meditator's behavior, please write the angry note to us and let us interact with them. It'll be much more helpful for everybody involved. In fact, if you'd like to write them to Eugene, that would be best. He's really good at dealing with that stuff.

All of this is really just part and parcel of the retreat experience. You could say in a way that this situation is kind of designed to bring the difficult stuff up into consciousness. If there's any material left in our minds, this setting will bring it forth. And that's actually a very good thing. Sometimes it may not feel like such a good thing, but it's actually a very good thing because what's held deep within us, we can never become free from. We can never find liberation in relation to what's deeply held. Only when it actually comes into our actual experience can we begin to understand it and release it through awareness.

So as we sit and we do this practice, basically taking up the meditation, we get one of two outcomes. Either we get the direct connection with the meditation focus—the breath or the body or sounds—and in that direct contact, the qualities of mindfulness and concentration deepen, deepen, deepen in a very steady way. So that's one possible outcome.

Another possible outcome is that we get the unresolved issues or accumulations that are the material of the mind, that are expressions of our holding of difficulties we haven't yet come fully to understand. And if that's the case, then these are the things that are hindering the deepening of awareness and of concentration, and it's in the understanding of these that the meditation actually deepens to the next level.

So in fact, both outcomes take place throughout the retreat for both of us. It's really not an either-or situation. Sometimes the mindfulness and concentration are developing very steadily because we can connect with the chosen focus. Sometimes we get the obstructions or what are sometimes called the hindrances, which Marie will talk about in a few nights. And then the meditation deepens by our understanding those processes and those forces.

Either way, whatever your experience is in that moment, what is happening is just what needs to happen for you. This is sometimes a really hard thing to trust in, but if you can trust in this, it will really help the unfolding of your process.

This unfolding is so organic and it's so individual. It's not something we can think out ahead of time. It's not something we can direct with our thoughts or beliefs. We have to surrender to the process of awareness and let it show us where we need to open and how we need to open.

If you look at a rose where it's in the form of a bud and all the petals are very closely overlapped and tightly tied around that bud, if you tried to open it with your mind and say, "Well first this petal needs to

go and then this petal needs to go and then this," it would just become ripped apart. But in the unfolding of the bud, it knows exactly which petal needs to open next. And just one by one, the full beauty and richness of that rose becomes open to the world.

Our practice unfolds in precisely the same way. If you can trust in the rightness of both the mindfulness and concentration that arise, as well as the difficulties that emerge, this will provide tremendous support for your practice and confidence during the retreat.

When we don't trust in this natural process, we begin to believe that our aversion stems from external circumstances. We think we're actually suffering because lunch was five minutes late, or because the person next to us coughs during sitting meditation, or because the door rattles when someone arrives late to the hall. We may genuinely believe our suffering comes from these outer conditions.

But we fail to see that the force of aversion itself is what we need to understand, because that is the root of suffering—not the outer situation, but this reactive force within our mind that objects to what's happening.

The difficulties we experience here aren't actually peculiar to this retreat setting. Though the degree of renunciation can make it seem otherwise, making us feel we're suffering because we miss friends and family, because we can't go out, because we lack opportunities for intimate conversation, or because noises disturb us. But if we simply trust in this process, we'll begin to understand our minds more deeply.

During that six-week retreat, I found myself reacting strongly to various situations. Sometimes I disliked the weather—it was fall in New England, often rainy and cold, and I couldn't walk outside for days. Sometimes I disliked the food. I found myself deeply averse to walking meditation practice. For a while, I blamed each of these circumstances.

Then I began to notice something interesting: the same reaction kept arising again and again. It was the force of disliking, the force of negativity. I realized this was where freedom could emerge. When I thought the external situation should change, I could never transform my own mind. But when I recognized that the root of suffering lay in my own mind, ah—there was the possibility of freedom.

So I began looking directly at the aversion itself. I discovered it was transparent. Then I could be with the rain, and it was perfectly fine. I could be with the food—fine. I could be with the walking meditation—fine. The aversion would fade in and out, and I could see how it wasn't solid, but simply another layer of mind that could be seen through and released. There was tremendous freedom in this recognition.

Ultimately, the deeper sense of renunciation is an inner letting go. Through renunciation, we release our preferences, our need for experience to be one particular way or another. We could say we're letting go of our hopes and fears, our likes and dislikes, so that clear awareness can simply abide in the truth of the moment. That is the true place of freedom.

As we allow awareness to rest more and more in the truth of each moment, a greater sense of trust and peace becomes established within us. We discover a way of relating to life's changing conditions that isn't bound to the conditions themselves. We find a place of rest that is, in some way, independent of changing circumstances.

Having taken birth, we're all subject to the fluctuations of pleasure and pain—this is inescapable. But through practice, we begin to find another center of gravity: a state or dimension of peace, an absence of conflict that doesn't depend on changing conditions.

I'd like to close by reading a passage where the Buddha spoke about the quest he undertook in leaving home, and the fulfillment of that quest through his liberation:

"Then, friends, being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, I attained the unborn supreme security from bondage, Nibbana. Being myself subject to aging, having understood the danger in what is subject to aging, I attained the unaging supreme security from bondage, Nibbana. Being myself subject to sickness, having understood the danger in what is subject to sickness, I attained the unailing supreme security from bondage, Nibbana. Being myself subject to death, having understood the danger in what is subject to death, I attained the deathless supreme security from bondage, Nibbana. Being myself subject to sorrow, having understood the danger in what is subject to sorrow, I attained the sorrowless supreme security from bondage, Nibbana. The knowledge and vision arose in me. My deliverance is unshakable. This is the last birth. There is no more renewal of becoming."

This is truly why we practice. This is the purpose of our renunciation: to simplify enough that we can discover that dimension of peace present even amidst all the changing conditions of birth and death.

Let's sit together for just a moment.

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