Renunciation

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 51:11

For those of you who weren't here last night, I'd really like to welcome you to the beginning of this year's three-month retreat, which, as we remarked last night, is the 25th since the beginning in 1975. It seems quite historic to me.

I can't help but notice tonight that this half of the hall is a little more densely populated than that half. There are only three rows of zabutons for the men while there are four rows for the women, and the women are still denser. What does that say about the spiritual center of gravity for our culture these days? I don't know, but hats off to the women.

After the opening last night, the teachers went back to the staff room and were talking about how inspired we all felt by the opening. It was really your commitment—seeing that so many of you have come together to dedicate this much of your life to deepening your dharma practice is very touching and very moving for us.

For myself, I've been on your side quite a lot in these retreats. I've been at about eight of these retreats in the past, mostly as a yogi, sometimes on staff. This is the first time I get to be on this side of the equation, and I feel really honored to be here.

What's great in teaching a long retreat is being able to watch how much change, how much growth, and how much opening you all go through. It's very touching for us on the teaching side, and for me, it really strengthens my faith. I just see again and again—this stuff works. This stuff really has the power to transform lives and uproot suffering. So it's really a privilege to be here with you, and I'm looking forward to getting to know a lot of you and seeing the rest of you over the course of these six weeks.

It's really a time of rejoicing, and I hope you feel that also. Sometimes we go into a long retreat and we go into our room after the opening dharma talk and we close the door and the silence is really palpable. Sometimes there's that little gulp of "what have I gotten myself into here?" There's understandably a little apprehension at the start of a long retreat. But I also hope you'll feel and really tune into and let yourself appreciate the joyfulness of this beginning.

I actually can't think of any other activity, any other form of life that is such a great support for strengthening the wholesome qualities of mind and heart. So we all have a lot to be thankful for in being here. The outcome from our work together will really do a lot for each other, for ourselves, and ultimately for the world. So I really want to appreciate you for taking the time to dedicate yourself to this work.

This period of withdrawal from a busy life—time to slow down, time to be quiet, just time to

contemplate—is a way of life that is praised by every culture that is grounded in spiritual values. It's something that's even more needed today, I feel.

This is a quote from a Tibetan teacher in Ladakh named Drukchen Rinpoche, whom Andrew Harvey met when he was traveling in Ladakh some years ago and wrote about in a book called *Journey to Ladakh*. It's a young Tibetan lama who's been exposed to Western ways.

Drukchen Rinpoche said, "I was given a Western education for which I am grateful in many ways, but I lost something. I lost the peace of mind that I might have had in another generation. Everyone in our generation lives in a fragmented, complex, and disturbing time in which it is hard to keep one's spiritual balance, hard to find the time to build the balance in the first place. I feel increasingly that I must go into retreat more, must meditate more, must discipline myself more. Otherwise, I shall be of no use to my people."

I really like this passage because not only does it remind us what we're doing here and the importance of it in bringing that balance into our own lives, but it also reminds us of what I hope is a motivation that we all share. We're doing this work not just for ourselves alone, but we really have the understanding right from the beginning that the work we do will benefit those that we come in contact with, and those circles will spread out in ways we may never understand. So we say that we do our practice in order to benefit all sentient beings everywhere. We never know if our actual practice has or not, but this is our understanding. This is the way that we practice.

I'd like to talk tonight about one of the aspects of the retreat that is a great support for our practice and a great support for our awakening, and that is the aspect of renunciation. Obviously, one of the biggest differences between what we do here and what we do in our daily life outside is around this aspect of simplicity of lifestyle, of having put aside a lot of the occupations and, in many cases, distractions that we live with day by day.

The archetype, of course, for this kind of practice was the Buddha, who as a young man, just twenty-nine years old, was visited by the heavenly messengers in the form of a sick person, an aging person, a corpse, and then a renunciate. After being visited by those, he saw the vulnerability that we're all exposed to—of illness, aging, and death—and the possibility of a way out. The bodhisattva understood that within this bodily form, we're all subject to suffering. From that understanding, he dedicated his life to finding the way out.

So he left home at twenty-nine. I'm sure you know the story, so I'll just read this short passage from the Middle Length Discourses: "While still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessings 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."

I put on the yellow robe and went forth from the home life into homelessness.

This is really the same journey that each of you has made in coming here. In leaving behind family, in leaving behind friends, perhaps in leaving behind children or parents, you have all made that step of renunciation, of leaving the home life. And for the time that you're here, whether it's six weeks or three months, you're really in a homeless kind of lifestyle. It's a floating monastery that we create for the time that you're here.

In this homeless life, you've had to give up. You've had to renounce a lot of comfort. The Buddha gave up all his comforts, as you probably know. The idea at the time was that if he mortified the flesh, the spirit would be liberated. So he began to consciously starve the body. He was eating one spoon of rice a day, and then one spoon of rice a week, and then one grain of rice a day. This is the time in the bodhisattva's career when he became extremely thin, what's called the emaciated Buddha.

He says of his life at that time, "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."

Fortunately, this is not required practice here at IMS. The Buddha came to understand that the mortification of the flesh didn't work and turned back to the middle path of taking enough food to be healthy and to keep the body fit and strong, but not indulging in luxury.

I'm reminded of the power of this quality of renunciation. Michelle mentioned that she and I were on staff together in the late 70s. In fact, the last thing that I remember doing on staff was giving the manager's talk for a retreat. It was a special retreat for us at the time. In the spring of 1979, we were visited by somebody I'd been hearing about for years, somebody who's one of the greatest meditation masters of this century—Mahasi Sayadaw.

It was really his meditation technique that we teach and practice during this retreat. He was responsible for founding hundreds, if not thousands, of meditation centers in his lifetime. You could almost say he revived the widespread practice of meditation in Burma. Mahasi Sayadaw was the teacher of Joseph's teacher, Munindra, and also the teacher of one of Jack's teachers, Ajahn Asaba, whom Jack practiced with in Thailand. So we were very excited to have him come visit. He was the grandfather of our whole sangha.

As a staff person, I got to go to the airport to meet him. A few of us drove there and went into Logan and waited at the gate where his flight pulled in. We were standing at the gate, watching all the people walk off. No monks. A lot of people kept coming out, but no monks were appearing. It's hard to overlook bald men in brown curtains. We were pretty sure we hadn't missed him. Everybody filed off the plane, still no monks. We were getting a little worried. Did they miss their connection in Bangkok? Did we get the wrong day?

So we were standing there, still intently watching the exit gate, and then very slowly, very mindfully, one step at a time, came Mahasi Sayadaw and four other monks who were traveling with him. Each of them

was carrying a fan. If you see any photos from that retreat—and there are some around in the archives of IMS—you'll see these brown fans that they all carried. They had orange embroidered lettering that said something like, "Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw, 1979 World Tour." So the rock star lineage of the tour was in effect.

It was really a very powerful assembly. Mahasi Sayadaw himself, of course, was very renowned. And he brought with him two monks who have continued to teach Westerners, who I know some of you have practiced with. One was Sayadaw U Janaka, who still teaches Westerners in Burma. Another was Sayadaw U Silananda, who lives and teaches in the Bay Area now, and two other monks as well.

At the time, I was still fairly young in my practice. I'd been practicing for a couple of years at that point. Looking back, I feel I didn't appreciate their teachings as much as I would today. There was a simplicity and an unadorned quality to their teachings that at the time I wasn't quite mature enough to receive. I enjoyed being with them in certain qualities of their being.

I really was struck by many qualities, but the teachings at the time I found a little bit dry. I wish now I'd had a chance to go back and listen again, because basically what these men were about was repeating the words of the Buddha—not just in a blind way, but repeating the words of the Buddha as they had proved them and experienced them through their own lives and practice.

Individually they had a great deal of power. There was a purity and nobility and great presence in every one of these monks. I could tell right away that they didn't need anything from me—I was just a staff person here. Joseph and Sharon and Jack and Jacqueline were the teachers, but they didn't need anything from them either. They had their air tickets home and were so self-reliant in a way that felt like a great testament to their renunciation. They were complete within themselves, and because of that, they had an unshakability. They weren't looking to be liked. They weren't looking to impress us. They were just there.

Renunciation is actually one of the ten paramis—these qualities of heart and mind that when developed fully bring the mind to liberation. Renunciation in the Theravadan list is the third of these qualities. Some synonyms for renunciation that give you a sense of its power are relinquishment and letting go, both of which point to the undoing of grasping. If grasping is symbolized by a closed fist, renunciation is symbolized by the open hand, much like generosity. As you probably know, grasping and the undoing of grasping is the heart of the Buddha's teaching. Renunciation goes right to that heart.

From the Dhammapada: "If by renouncing a lesser happiness one attains to a happiness which is greater, then the wise pursue that happiness which is greater."

In the list of the paramis, it's said that the proximate cause of renunciation—what really triggers it—is a sense of spiritual urgency. I imagine that most of you can relate to that. Having committed this much of your time to Dharma practice, I have a feeling that there's a little fire going on in all of you, that fire of ardor and urgency.

I want to tell a few stories about renunciation in the Buddhist tradition. One of the great Tibetan masters of the century is a teacher named Dingo Khentse Rinpoche. He was one of the leaders of the Rimé school, a school that tried to unify the different Tibetan sects. He was very accomplished in the Nyingma and Kagyu methods of meditation, and a very loving and compassionate man. Khentse Rinpoche spent about twenty-two years in retreat over the course of his life.

I thought I would read to you one passage from a letter he wrote to his parents when he was first embarking on the renunciate life. 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 and 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 leave my valuable belongings behind. A begging bowl, a staff, and Dharma robes are all I need.

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."

This was written when Rinpoche was thirteen. When he was fifteen, he left his teacher to enter a cave where he spent seven years, from fifteen to twenty-two. Three of those years, he actually didn't speak.

Sometime after that period of cave practice, continuing on in his spiritual journey, he spent four years at a spot in Tibet called White Grove, a very isolated place. I have a photograph that some of you can see—his hut perched on top of a hill, looking down into an isolated valley, and then across to broad, deep mountains in the background. When he was in his early to mid-twenties, he spent four years in this place. In total, he dedicated twenty-two years to retreat practice.

Another Tibetan lama who intrigues me greatly is named Lama Shabkar. Born in 1781, he began a three-year retreat on a remote island in Tibet when he was twenty-five. That would place the date in the early 1800s—about the time on this continent that we were making the Louisiana Purchase, taking away more land from the native people, and preparing to fight the War of 1812 with the British. Just to give you a sense of the enlightened nature of life in America at that time.

Lama Shabkar wrote one of the greatest meditation manuals I've ever encountered, called *Flight of the Garuda* in the Nyingma School of Meditation. It's a truly beautiful work, translated by Keith Dowman, and he wrote it while on this remote island. As you know, Tibet gets quite cold in winter, and he was staying in this cave without heat. There were just a few other people on this remote island, but they would come

asking him meditation questions. He was already renowned, even though young, as a great meditator.

Lama Shabkar found that these interruptions were disrupting his meditation practice somewhat. So for one particular winter on the island, he mudded himself into his cave. He took in some supplies of butter and tsampa and water, and completely sealed himself off from human contact for the entire winter.

For the rest of the year, he wrote: "Throughout the year, my teacher's attendant occasionally brought me goat's milk and curd. In the summer, some vegetables were to be found. By the end of autumn, however, my supplies were exhausted, and for two months I was reduced to eating only a thin soup of tsampa"—roasted barley, a staple in the Tibetan diet.

This is not an austerity we will inflict on you during this retreat—you will have truly wonderful food, as you know. But this exemplifies the kind of dedication and courage that practitioners have embodied over the centuries.

Here was another statement of his commitment: "Until I achieve unchanging stability of mind, I won't remain in busy worldly places, but will stay alone in isolated places of retreat. Teacher, please accept this offering made to please you. The length of my practice shall equal the length of my life."

That is a beautiful vow.

Coming into this retreat situation, you all sacrifice a great deal. You give up contact with your loved ones, families, and friends. You surrender the opportunity to speak. You release special foods, reading, writing, music, television. You even give up your email—quite a sacrifice indeed.

To keep pace with technology at Spirit Rock, part of the manager's talk now includes asking people to turn off their cell phones during retreat. It happens. I suspect that in another year or two, we'll need to ask people to disable wireless internet access as well. It's all coming, making things increasingly complex.

There's nothing inherently wrong with these things we enjoy in daily life, these sources of pleasure. The issue is that most of us lean on them. We've grown accustomed to depending on them. When they're removed, we feel unhappy, lonely, or deprived. This signals that there's an aspect of the Dharma we haven't quite grasped—because consciousness itself is self-sustaining, self-supporting.

When our consciousness becomes wrapped around an object, another appearance, or bound to that object, our being becomes slightly distorted. We become off-center. Coming into a situation like this retreat, we truly have the opportunity to let the mind return to its natural strength and steadiness.

Because consciousness is self-supporting and self-sustaining, we don't actually need those other things. We don't need to rest on them or rely on them. They serve as wonderful grounds—relationships are magnificent grounds for understanding, for developing compassion and love—but we need not depend on them.

In this situation, we get to rediscover our inherent strength, which is our own true nature and our birthright. The essential spirit of the renunciate life is something that truly applies here.

It's the spirit of taking what's given—taking that which is freely offered and not demanding more and not taking more.

If you've practiced in Asia, you probably know this spirit really well. When I was a monk in Thailand, our whole training was we took what was placed in our bowl. We might like it or we might not—that wasn't really so important. It took some acculturation to get to appreciate some of the things we were offered. Goose eggs, for instance, that have been pickled—if you haven't had them, it's kind of a wake-up call to the taste buds.

Most of the places I practiced were forest monasteries, and we tend to eat one meal a day there. It was usually served at 8 in the morning, and then there wasn't anything until the next morning at 8 o'clock. So when we gathered the food for our morning meal, we were usually really hungry. And sometimes it was great food, and sometimes, I have to say, it was pretty disappointing, especially when you're that hungry. If you haven't, for instance, eaten a red fish curry on an empty stomach at 8 in the morning, you haven't really lived.

The place I spent most of my time was Wat Suan Mok, which was Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery in the south of Thailand. Ajahn Buddhadasa had a very, very spacious mind in practice. He incorporated many different elements in his teaching—Mahayana elements, Zen elements, Tibetan art—very broad-minded man. There weren't many demands placed on us at his monastery. He just wanted to set us loose in the forest and let our minds calm and let us develop meditation.

The food at his monastery was the worst of anywhere I practiced in Thailand. It was absolutely the worst food. I actually think he intended it that way, so that people wouldn't just come and hang out because it was a comfortable place to be. You really had to want to practice in order to stay there. So it was a good filter, actually. It was a great spirit in that monastery.

In the Zen tradition, they say that the mouth of a renunciate should be like a furnace—it can burn the finest sandalwood or dried cow dung with equal ease. So you won't be served that either, but please keep that in mind as you accept the meals that the kitchen prepares. Sometimes they'll be to your liking and sometimes they may not. Most of the time they probably will be.

There's a saying up on the notice board in the kitchen at Spirit Rock. It says that when we serve you delicious food, that's our practice. This is the cook speaking to the yogis. When we serve you delicious food, that's our practice. When we serve you undelicious food, that's your practice.

Please try to work with it in that way. Know that the cooks really are putting their hearts and souls into the food that they prepare for you. And then try to work with your own likes and dislikes really as an important part of practice. It's another way to release grasping and to release fixed views, really to open to

the reality of what is.

In the monastery, sometimes our accommodations weren't so ideal. Again, at Suan Mok, we were living in little huts out in the forest, and there were all the tropical forest creatures who would come to visit us. I could tell sometimes that one had come to visit because I could hear in the next cabin over a thump, thump, thump—actually, it was more like a bang, bang, bang on the tin roof from inside. And I knew what that meant. It meant my friend was hitting a stick against the roof of his house from inside because a snake had fallen off onto the roof from a tree and he wanted to scare it off. Because if he didn't scare it off, what it would do is slither down to the edge of the roof and then come in under the overhang and make a nice, cozy place for itself in the rafters of his cabin. And because half of the snakes were poisonous, he really didn't want that to happen.

So I'd hear that thump, thump, thump, and I'd know that a snake was on the roof.

One night in the middle of the night, I got up from my kuti, my hut, to go out and pee in the forest, and I was walking back up the stairs, put my hand on the handrail, right on top of a scorpion. Boom. That was a sting. That was a painful moment.

Another night, I was just going to bed. I just sort of tucked my mosquito net in around my little mat, and I felt another bite in my foot that actually became the most painful sensation I think I've ever experienced. It was a poisonous centipede.

These are really scary-looking creatures. They're sort of orange-colored, about eight inches long, and their pinchers look like they make up about half of the body. They're really wicked-looking pinchers at the top. And they inject this venom. It felt like what it did was inflict about an eight-hour cramp into my muscle. It wasn't until the next morning that it relaxed enough that my foot felt normal again.

So again, you don't have to deal with that kind of stuff here. Of course, you have other things to deal with. We really wish everybody could be in single rooms. The long-term plan is for the retreat center to be transformed so that everyone on retreat can be in single rooms, but unfortunately we're not there yet.

Some of you may have really wanted a single room and it just wasn't possible to offer you one. Some of you may have accepted being in a double room and then discover uncertainties about your roommate. Others of you may be in a room and wish you were on a different side of the building. Why can't I be in a south-facing room? Why does my room have to be above the laundry?

These are the things that we need to accommodate and really work with as practice. To look at the force of wanting or aversion that comes in the mind and to take our stand of mindfulness right there. Not to make a demand on the staff that it be different—because in most cases it's just not possible—but to really work with it as part of our own renunciation, our own letting go inwardly. And that's where we can really expand our freedom, our internal freedom.

One of the other big renunciations that you make here is around communicating. As Michelle talked about last night, part of the silence obviously is not speaking to one another, not writing letters or receiving letters or cards. We give up phone calls. We give up reading and writing. These are big changes. So we really ask for your support in that.

This is an area where the impact on the community is especially strong. When we have the motivation that we're practicing to benefit all beings, the beings we can most immediately benefit are those right around us. So please remember that your guarding of the silence, your attention to the silence, will not only help your own practice, but will really also help everyone who's practicing around you.

When we give up all these outer things, it definitely has an impact on the inner life. We become less burdened. Our hearts become open in a way. Because we drop off a lot of unnecessary activities, the channels are really clear for the Dharma to come in.

One of my Tibetan teachers was just talking about this phenomenon. You know how you go into the toilet on an airplane and you lock the door and then it says "occupied"? So it's kind of like when we busy ourselves with all the other activities, there's a sign on our hearts that says "occupied." And then the Dharma can't come in. So when we drop those things, then the heart is really open to receive. It's open to receive the teachings of life, and life is teaching us all the time when our eyes and ears and hearts are open. This is a beautiful aspect of the simplicity of retreat.

This is from a writer named Scott Sanders from Audubon Magazine who had just come back into his home after being away on a backpacking trip and was totally shocked by all the stuff in his house. He said: "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. So I vow to purchase nothing that I don't really need, to give away everything that is excess, and to refuse all chores that don't arise from central concerns. The simplicity I seek is not the enforced austerity of the poor, but the richness of a gathered and deliberate life in which your belongings and commitments are few in number and high in quality."

This is really a great description of what you all are doing here.

When the outer activities drop away, sometimes what we see isn't always so easy to see. Michelle likes to use the expression of being here through the autumn. As we watch the leaves fall off the trees, what gets exposed are the bare branches—you might say the framework of the trees, the more fundamental framework.

In a similar way, when we drop our outer concerns, what gets exposed for us as meditators are the inner structures of the mind. So we start to see the fundamental patterns of our minds that don't have so much to do with the externals. These forces of liking and not liking, of wanting and fearing, of preferring one thing and not another—the whole complex of grasping gets laid out clearly before us.

Sometimes that's not so easy to take. At this level of renunciation, often some of our deepest fears and

emotions get triggered.

In the early days of retreat, I often notice myself experiencing what feels like grief—a mourning for all that I've left behind. My wife, my activities, commitments, friends. This letting go can bring up waves of insecurity, loneliness, or feelings of unworthiness. All of these emotions are part of seeing that inner structure clearly, witnessing the bareness of our hearts and minds just as they are. This becomes a place of profound learning.

I think of Ani Tenzin Palmo, a remarkable Western Tibetan nun who was among the first Westerners to take robes. She ordained in India in 1964 with Kamtrul Rinpoche at just twenty-one years old, having been born in London. After spending years convincing her teacher to grant permission for solitary practice, she retreated to a cave high in the Himalayas—twelve thousand feet up in a bitterly cold, utterly isolated location—where she practiced for twelve years.

Toward the end of her time there, she undertook a three-year retreat in complete silence, speaking to no one. Her supporters would bring food, but she maintained her vow of silence throughout. Imagine her surprise when, near the retreat's conclusion but not yet ready to emerge, she heard an unexpected knock at her door. Opening it, she found an enraged Indian policeman declaring that her visa was invalid and she must leave the country immediately.

Talk about integration challenges! After three years without speaking to anyone, how would you like that for a transition back into the world?

She asked for just one day to prepare, then went down to speak with him. As they talked, the policeman's heart softened—he too had a love for spiritual life. He allowed her to complete her retreat, though she did have to leave afterward. She now lives near Assisi in Italy.

When she visited Spirit Rock for a public talk, I had the chance to meet her. She struck me as remarkably grounded, down-to-earth, and clear. I told her how much I appreciated her commitment to such extended practice, acknowledging that twelve years in a cave was beyond what I could imagine for myself. Her response was wonderfully matter-of-fact: "You know, it really wasn't such a big deal. It was just what I wanted to do."

I suspect many of you would receive similar reactions if you told friends and family exactly what you're doing on this retreat. "How can you possibly sit in silence for six weeks or three months without talking to anyone?" Yet for you, there's likely that same knowing: this is simply what I want to do. And it is also, undeniably, a big deal that you're doing it.

When a journalist writing her biography—the wonderful book *Cave in the Snow*—asked if going on retreat wasn't a form of escape, Tenzin Palmo's reply was illuminating: "Not at all. To my mind, worldly life is an escape. When you have a problem, you can turn on the television, phone a friend, go out for a coffee. In a cave, however, you have no one to turn to but yourself. When problems arise, 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 of dealing with it."

This is precisely our situation as well. In retreat, the inner life becomes extraordinarily vivid.

Cutting off the outer entanglements really wakes up the inner. Just like when you're listening to a symphony with your eyes open and suddenly you close your eyes and go more within—how much more alive the music becomes. It's the same way in our setting. As we drop off our connection to the outer, the inner life becomes extraordinarily alive and awake in all its beauty, and in all its glory, and in all its difficulty too. This is part and parcel of the package.

Sometimes our emotional reactions become quite strong on retreat—this phenomenon that I'm sure you all know called yogi mind. I've witnessed many great examples of yogi mind over the years. My favorite is the one where a retreat manager at Yucca Valley in California received a note asking if he could please contact the airline so they could change the flight patterns so the planes didn't have to fly over the retreat area. This was a serious request. Sometimes perspective gets a little lost in the middle of yogi mind.

Often this lack of perspective really shows up around our relationships with one another. In the middle of retreat, I'm sure you know, we can get on each other's nerves. Things that we do will annoy or frustrate one another: the person who always comes into the sitting late, the person who almost knocks you over in the lunch line, the person who won't wait their turn for dishes or by the tea urn, someone who wears a crinkly nylon jacket in the middle of all the meditations and just happens to be sitting right next to you.

In one retreat, quite a long retreat, I was sitting next to someone who breathed really loudly. I had to make a choice really early on: Was I going to follow my breath or was I going to follow his? I had two easy objects to choose from.

So one of those typical notes might read something like: "Dear fellow meditator, we've been asked many times not to wear nylon in the hall. In case you haven't noticed, this is actually a mindfulness practice. Please don't ever wear that nylon jacket in here again." And of course you know how the notes are always signed—Metta. Always signed Metta.

What's so striking is that when we're in the middle of one of those attacks of yogi mind and we're about to write a note like that, we might not even know that we're angry. This is actually the way the hindrances work. The hindrances sort of swoop in below our radar, and they're in full display before they've quite crossed our screen yet. We don't know quite what's on the map. So we think this is all very reasonable: "Well, of course, anybody would write this person such a note at this time. I'm doing it for the benefit of all sentient beings, right?"

But if you've ever been on the receiving end of one of those notes, you know that they can be really devastating. As we go through the days and weeks here, we all become extraordinarily sensitive. Part of the opening up process—the Indian teacher Goenkaji describes this as open heart surgery without the

anesthetic—is that you become very vulnerable. Everything that touches you touches you quite deeply and immediately. When you feel a burst of anger from somebody else in this sanctuary, in this safe place, it can have an extraordinarily disturbing impact. It can honestly take days or even a week for someone to recover from a note like that.

So please, please don't write each other notes. If there's any communication you feel needs to happen with a fellow meditator, please do it through one of us or through the course manager. Please don't contact each other directly. It can be so disturbing—it can ruin days of someone's practice. So please be very careful in that area.

If you feel you really need to write an angry note, better to write it to one of the teachers. Joseph is actually a good person to write to if you're really upset—Joseph is so spacious that he would be a good choice. So much better than writing to one another.

On retreat, we simply take these turmoils of our own mind as part and parcel of the experience. We try not to share them with the rest of the retreatants who have their own turmoils, probably quite enough to deal with.

This facet of outer renunciation is so important because it clears the decks for the inner work. And then inwardly, it's really important also to have a heart that's free from a lot of grasping. There's this inner attitude of renunciation where we don't hold so tightly to our own hopes and fears and likes and dislikes and wants and not-wants. What that does is create a lot of space within—a great deal of openness where we can start to really accommodate our own movements of heart and mind.

So this is the dance of our practice during our time together. Outwardly, in the realm of discipline and our behavior with one another, we follow the form with great care. We are truly mindful in our actions with each other. And then inwardly, we remain very open—very light, very informal. This is a beautiful combination and a wonderful direction for practice.

I just returned from a retreat at Spirit Rock where I was sitting, led by a Tibetan teacher named Sogyal Rinpoche and Ajahn Amaro, a Theravadan Buddhist monk who has taught here many times and whom I'm sure many of you know. It was the first time I had ever witnessed a Theravadan monk and a Tibetan teacher leading a retreat together. It was truly beautiful to see how well they harmonized. By the end of the retreat, it was clear they had developed genuine affection and deep respect for one another.

Sogyal Rinpoche said something very touching about Ajahn Amaro at the retreat's conclusion. He said, "You know, this bhikkhu—I never met anybody like him before. He has very strict vinaya. In his discipline, he is impeccable. But inwardly, his heart is very open. I never met anyone like that before. Usually the ones with strict vinaya are very tight inside. This one has very good discipline and is very open within."

This offers us a wonderful model for our own practice—to keep finding that joy and ease within ourselves

as we remain truly careful about our interactions with one another. It is the best way to practice.

This is again from Drukpa Kunley Rinpoche: "We must be still within ourselves, still and calm, and yet we must also, at the same time, be moving forward towards each other and towards the world. What is not useful for this endless transformation must be abandoned. Anything that prevents a finer flowering of our spirit must be left behind. The clearest and wisest person becomes awake, becomes the world. She enters without fear and without hope into the full presence of reality."

The Buddha himself taught that discipline is simply the first step of a sequence that leads to freedom. He explained that discipline is for the sake of restraint, and restraint is for the sake of freedom from remorse. Freedom from remorse is for the sake of gladness of mind. Remember that this is truly the spirit behind renunciation, behind restraint—it is for our own gladness of heart and mind.

I would like to close with words from the Buddha, where he spoke in a sutta about his own liberation, his own enlightenment. We remember that the spur to his practice was the encounter with the four heavenly messengers in the beginning. This, then, is the summation of his practice, also in relation to those heavenly messengers:

"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 subject to aging, having understood the danger in what is subject to aging, I attained the unaging supreme security from bondage, nibbana. Being subject to sickness, I attained the unailing security from bondage, nibbana. Being subject to death, I attained the deathless security from bondage, nibbana. And being 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. There is no more renewal of becoming."

Let's just sit together for a moment.

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