The Joy in Renunciation

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 56:18

I think there's something about the start of a long retreat that has a different atmosphere than anything else that I know of. For me, this retreat, even though it's only the second day, already feels different than most retreats that I teach. And I think you all bring a different attitude coming in than in most other retreats.

Some people are here for two weeks, and that happens to be longer than any other retreat that we have on the calendar this year. Some of you are here for four weeks, some for six, some for two months. And I just want to say that I really appreciate the degree of commitment that you all are coming in with. It's something that I feel from you, and I feel like it makes us elevate our game also. So I just want to acknowledge that up front, that it's a special time that we're entering. And for me, it's really a privilege to be working with you all who have this degree of commitment. It's great to be here.

The subject of the talk tonight is the joys in renunciation. And it goes along with the commitment that you are making in coming here. In a way it's kind of an echo of what the Buddha did. The young prince Siddhartha Gautama left home when he was 29. This is how he described it in his own words:

"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."

You notice he doesn't say anything about the reaction of his young wife. But I attribute that more to Indian culture of the day than to this particular person.

So this has really been the heart of the life of monks and nuns for the last 2,500 years, this leaving of the home life and going out into homelessness. That's what constituted becoming a monk or a nun. And you all are actually doing the same thing here, because we're basically creating a temporary monastery here for the next two months.

And we give up certain things in entering. We give up using money for the most part. We give up entertainments. We're celibate. Well, you are anyway. You notice we didn't chant that third precept when the retreat started. We're on a different set of vows than you. In our tradition, the monks take—and it used to be the nuns took even more—the monks take 227 vows. The nuns used to take 254 before their order died out. And this is quite a difficult practice in and of itself to keep these vows in a conscientious way.

But I really feel from my own personal experience that what you're engaged in here is harder than that, is

more arduous than that. It was easier for me to observe the monkly rules than it is to do the kind of intensive practice that we do here. So I think that you are practicing on the level of renunciation that monks and nuns historically have practiced at.

And in fact, the commentary to the suttas from ancient days says that in the context of mindfulness practice, anyone who sincerely endeavors to accomplish this practice is considered a bhikkhu. Or if you like, a bhikkhuni. That's the old term for a monk or a nun.

So as we read through the suttas during the retreat and you see the word bhikkhu, don't interpret it as a monk or as a nun. Interpret it as a committed practitioner, please, because that's what the commentaries say that is meant by the term. So you qualify for that category.

And in a very real way, you are homeless now. You've left behind the security of your home life. And you've kind of cast yourself upon the mercy, often, of strangers. The cooks, the managers, and the teachers kind of hold your fate in our hands, in a way. And yet you have trusted us to do that. And I hope your trust won't be misplaced. But we'll see how you behave first.

This retreat experience, this renunciate experience, is in a large part powerful because it's a withdrawal from busyness. It's a great simplification of our daily life. It's a time for silence, for slowing down, and for contemplation. This is really honored by all cultures that have a strong spiritual value. And we may think that we don't have enough time today to do this, but just because of that, we need it even more than ever.

This is from a young lama in the Tibetan tradition who's living in Ladakh, India, named Drukchen Rinpoche. He's a modern teacher:

"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. It's hard to find the time to build that 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.

This degree of renunciation is solidly within the tradition that we're practicing, beginning from the time of the Buddha. One of the most striking images of his practice career—I'm sure you've seen it—is the emaciated Buddha. During one period in his practice, he had resolved that if he diminished the body enough, the spirit would become free. So he cut down his eating, ultimately to one grain of rice a week. The statues portray him at that time in his life when he had become extremely thin.

This is his own description of that period: "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." That was the degree of commitment with which he approached his own practice. I like

to reflect on that sometimes when I go down to tea and think there's not enough protein in the meal. I like to remember the emaciated Buddha and that level of renunciation.

Renunciation is one of the ten paramis. These are considered the factors that, when we develop them over time, blossom into liberation. They lead to unqualified freedom. Renunciation in this context is a practice—a practice like mindfulness or concentration, like energy, like generosity, like sila or virtue. You could say that this particular practice is freedom from desire, freedom from wanting. In this way, I think of it as the practice or the manifestation of the Third Noble Truth.

The Third Noble Truth states that the end of suffering is in the end of wanting. The practice of renunciation—of giving up or letting go—is the practice that acts out our trust in that Third Noble Truth, in the giving up of wanting.

Sometimes in our culture, renunciation has a dark tone, something we don't want to get too close to because it seems unpleasant, something being forced on us by some spiritual authority. But that's not meant to be the flavor of it at all. This is 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."

This is really the spirit of renunciation as a practice. It's letting go of less important things in order to reach the highest kinds of happiness available. So renunciation itself can feel like a beautiful quality, can feel like a natural movement of the heart, and its outcome is happiness.

It's said that the proximate cause—the near cause—of renunciation is spiritual urgency, a sense of wanting to understand. This is expressed over and over in the suttas when the Buddha would say to practitioners, "Look, there are these roots of trees. There are these empty huts. Practice with diligence before it's too late." None of us knows how much time we have left. So that sense of urgency is to really take advantage of this moment, of this opportunity, and to look to the deepest understanding while we still can.

Because this is such a core practice in the Buddhist tradition, I wanted to share a few stories and examples of practitioners over the ages. Someone from this century whom I have tremendous respect for is a Tibetan named Dingo Khyentse Rinpoche. You may have seen photos of him before. He was born in Tibet quite early in this century, and when he was thirteen years old, he resolved that he would leave his worldly life. He was brought up by parents who were fairly well off and was given a good education, but he resolved to leave his worldly life and go off into the wilderness to meditate.

This is from a letter he wrote to his parents when he was thirteen, telling them of his wish:

"My dearest parents, you gave me birth with all the advantages of human life, and you have cared for me with love from my infancy till now. 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 leave my valuable belongings behind. A begging bowl, a staff, and Dharma robes are all I need. I've cast aside this luxury and wealth with no regrets. A handbook of profound advice is all I wish to collect. 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 peak of experience and realization, I shall repay your kindness. Of that you can be sure.

So he went away into retreat when he was thirteen. When he was fifteen, he entered a cave and spent seven years in retreat, three of them without speaking, from age fifteen to about twenty-two. Then he went into a meditation hut that was several days' walk into the wilderness from where he was brought up. This is the view from that hut, where he spent four years in a tiny little cabin out in the wilderness in solitary practice.

I'm going to put this on the board afterwards as a reminder of the possibilities of dedication that people realize in this life. Altogether, he spent twenty-two years in silent retreat. When he came back to teach, it's said that he had a mind that was so spacious that no one ever saw it ruffled. He could give teachings all day and receive visitors and attend all kinds of meetings, never disturbed from that profound place of rest he had found through his retreat practice.

Another great Tibetan practitioner was Lama Shabkar. He was born in 1781—not that long ago, actually. This was between the Declaration of Independence and the forming of the Constitution of this country. So while we were out on the plains of New England battling, he was engaged in very deep practice.

He went into a five-year retreat on a very remote island on a lake when he was twenty-five. There were some other retreatants meditating on this same island, but they would come over and ask him questions occasionally, and he didn't want to be bothered. So he actually mudded himself up in the cave for about two years, because life was too disturbing otherwise. He did his practice in the cave there.

He wrote about this time: "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 the autumn, however, my supplies were exhausted, and for two months I was reduced to eating only a thin soup of roasted barley." Amazing dedication and commitment.

We actually go through the same kind of thing here. It's only a question of degrees. You all have made tremendous sacrifices to come here. There's the income that you may be losing from your work, and there's the leaving behind of all your connections—your partners, your family, your children and friends, your creative activities, your work relationships, all the entertainments of the world of movies and books and music and television. You've given all those up to be here.

You've also renounced the Super Bowl, which some of you may not be aware you've renounced. It's the

best kind of renunciation—effortless renunciation. I know there are always people on retreat who desperately need to know the score. That information is available, but at a price. We will tell you, but you have to listen to the tape of this talk again. Let us know if you want to make that devil's bargain.

So we leave behind all these things, not because there's anything wrong with them. There's nothing wrong with them. But because the problem is that we've gotten used to leaning on them. We are, for the most part, in relationships of some dependency on these fixtures of our daily life. What happens in doing that is that our consciousness actually gets distorted. It gets bent out of that leaning on and clinging relationship to the things, the people, the affairs of daily life.

It doesn't need to be that way. When consciousness gets distorted in that way, it loses some of its innate strength and power. Consciousness is actually quite self-sustaining and doesn't need external supports. When it returns by letting go of the external supports and comes back into its own natural balance, then we rediscover the strength that we actually possess—our birthright, a natural part of us.

But when we're separated from the things we've come to depend on, of course we all feel a kind of loss. The Buddha talked about, in one sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, the six kinds of grief based on the household life. These are the kinds of sadness that come to us when we abandon the six kinds of sense objects—the objects of the six senses, the five physical senses and the mind—in order to live a renunciate life and practice the Dharma. He said such grief as this that comes from that loss is called the grief based on the household life.

Fortunately, though, it's workable. Because in the same sutta the Buddha goes on to talk about the six kinds of joy that are based on renunciation, and how these six kinds of joy based on renunciation offset, abandon, and surmount the six kinds of grief.

Basically what he says is that we come to understand through wisdom the truth of impermanence, and that understanding brings a joy that the objects themselves can't give. When we truly come to understand the changing nature of these outer props and relationships, these external objects, when we see with wisdom clearly that they all have the nature of arising, persisting and passing away—that seeing brings a joy that no outer kind of support can. So these are the six kinds of joy based on renunciation. It's basically the happiness of insight, the freedom of insight.

As we let go of the externals, the mind can come back and rediscover that innate freedom where it supports itself, where it doesn't need to rely on anything outside. And that's why you read in the Satipatthana Sutta on the foundations of mindfulness, the Buddha said over and over: "A practitioner abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world."

This is a great joy—to find that we have this freedom that's already inherent in our mind. It really contributes to a great sense of self-reliance. This joy was really apparent in the time of the Buddha. There's a section in the suttas where the king of Kosala, King Pasenadi, was visiting the Buddha and just remarked

on the quality of the Sangha, the practitioners. The king said to the Buddha: "Here I see practitioners smiling and cheerful, sincerely joyful, plainly delighting, their faculties fresh, living at ease, unruffled, subsisting on what others give. I thought, surely these venerable ones have realized states of distinction in the Blessed One's teaching." This is the manifestation of their freedom—this joy and serenity.

So we give up a lot of things to come here. We give up our choice of food—it's a big one in our daily life. Although with the meals we have here, it's not a great deprivation. I mean, I eat better here than at home. I don't know about you.

The food issue really brings out an essential aspect of the renunciate life, and that is an attitude of taking what's given. It's really the foundation for the way that the monks and nuns ate. They went out with their begging bowl in hand, they were offered food, and they subsisted off whatever they were given for that day. So that's very much the spirit that we try to work with as yogis on a retreat like this. We really have the sense of taking what's given. It's been prepared with a lot of thought by the cooks here. It may not always be exactly the meal we wanted at that particular time, but we really approach it with the spirit of: this is what I've been given, this is my practice to accept and work with it.

When I was in Thailand as a monk, this was a big area of practice for me. Mostly I lived in forest monasteries. We only got one meal a day. Not only was there no tea—most monasteries have no dinner because there's no eating after noon for monks and nuns on these precepts—but in most of the monasteries I practiced in, there was also no lunch. So there was one meal a day, and it was served at eight AM. You took your bowl, you ate what was there. That was it for the next twenty-four hours, pretty much. And if you've never feasted on red fish curry at eight in the morning, you really haven't lived. That was a frequent staple of our diet.

Actually, the monastery that I enjoyed the most was Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery in the south of Thailand, Wat Suan Mok. And I have to say—I think now that he's dead, I can safely say this—that monastery had the worst food of any place I have ever eaten. And I think they did it on purpose, actually. The monastery wasn't poor. It was very well supported. He was a very well-known teacher, even then. But I think they felt that if they made it too comfortable, people would stay for the wrong reasons. So they made the food very plain and not very tasty, and then you really had to want to be there in order to stay. And so it worked. There was a great atmosphere there.

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. So I don't think the cooks have any dried cow dung in the fridge for this retreat. Nonetheless, it may not always be exactly what you like. There's been a sign—I don't know if it's still in the kitchen—that is from the cooks. And it says: "When we prepare a delicious meal, that's our practice. When we prepare an undelicious meal, that's your practice."

It's very well said.

As monks, our accommodations weren't always the greatest. We were living out in the forest in really simple conditions. We only had electricity for about two or three hours a day in the evening, and there were all the creatures of the forest that we were sharing it with. Some were lovely—I'd look up in the afternoon and monkeys would be swinging by through the high boughs of the trees overhead. These little deer would come wandering through the clearings during the days.

But there were also some really fiendish insects out there. They had this type of insect I'd never seen before called brocks—basically like a big ant, but their pinchers are kind of like the size of little crabs. They would form long lines that often crossed our walking paths, and we'd be going out for alms round at six in the morning before the sun was up. We couldn't see very well what was on the path in the darkness. You'd cross one of those paths with the brocks on them, and they'd get their pinchers into you. It was very hard to get them out and very painful.

One night I got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom—it was outside, a walk down a lane. Foolishly, I didn't take a flashlight, put my hand on the railing of my kuti, and was bitten by a scorpion. So you don't have those same risks here.

Another evening—this happened more than once—I'd be sitting in my kuti about nine o'clock, doing my last meditation before going to sleep. I had a good friend, another Westerner, who had a kuti about fifty yards away from me. I couldn't see him, but I could hear him. All of a sudden I'd hear this pounding—the roofs were metal on our huts—this pounding of a wooden stick very loud against the roof. I'd understand what had happened: a snake had fallen out of a tree and landed on his roof. What the snakes then do is crawl down the edge of the roof, slide around under the eaves, and make their way inside to live in the ceilings of the huts if you let them. So here was a snake looking for a new home, had dropped onto the roof, was preparing to crawl in, and my friend was trying desperately to get it to leave. Generally it worked—they go off with that kind of prodding.

So here, the accommodations are pretty luxurious compared to that. Pretty luxurious, but still it can be difficult. We come and we wanted a single room, but we've got a double room. We wanted one roommate, but we got a different roommate. Or we wanted a really quiet room by the creek, and we got a room by the road right by the stairs, where we can hear people coming and going all night. There's still more renunciation and sacrifice needed to practice in this situation.

Again, I hope that with the same kind of attitude of taking what's given, we can approach it with the sense that the situation is what it is—my reactions are where I establish my dharma practice. I work with the kinds of mind states that come up, with a willingness to go through them as best I can.

In coming on retreat, we may be giving up our intimate relationship partner, and because that's one of the biggest aspects of our outside life, this can be the person we miss the most. I want to talk a little bit about this because I've worked with this over many years.

For those of you who don't know, Sally and I are a couple. We've been married for seventeen years now, together eighteen years. We spent a lot of time in retreat when one of us would go away and the other would be at home. Other times we would both be sitting the same retreat, somewhere between six weeks and three months. We've done that kind of retreat together or apart.

I have to say it's been nothing but strengthening for our relationship. What happens is we find that when we come back from retreat, because we've both gotten more established in our own self-reliance, our own individuality, there's less clinging, less leaning on each other. We actually have more strength in ourselves and therefore more to offer to the relationship. When the other person is having some difficulty or problem, the other is better able to give support.

It's been a very wonderful part of our relationship. Our time apart has been great—she would agree.

If you come on a retreat with your partner, my basic advice to you is pretend they're not here. Let's really pretend they're not even here. We regularly go through six-week retreats together where we're both sitting, and we don't make eye contact for that length of time. We don't communicate by note. We don't try to sit near each other or touch or hold hands or anything like that. It's just like the other person isn't there, and yet we really know that they are.

I always look out to see where she's going to walk, if she's on time for her walking, if it looks like she can still smile. So we're still staying in touch with each other, but there's no outer contact. Nobody would know that we were connected in any way. I feel it really helps support both of our practices and makes the retreat congruent for the other meditators.

Sometimes it's difficult if you're not in a relationship or your partner isn't here to see two people on a retreat who are communicating and keeping up the relationship. I want to really encourage you if you're practicing with a partner at this retreat or another time to do it in a really separated way. It will support your practices best that way.

We also give up a lot of choice around our schedule, our daily schedule. Your time is pretty well accounted for from 5:15 in the morning until 9:40 at night. There aren't too many hours during the day when it's unclear what you're supposed to be doing.

Obviously, we're all adults here, and everybody makes her or his own relationship to the schedule, and that's perfectly appropriate. We're not trying to fit everybody onto a Procrustean bed here. So it's helpful to find what works for you with the schedule. Also I'd suggest if you want to deviate from the schedule, talk with your teachers about it in your interviews. We've worked with people going through a wide range of experience on retreat. We have a lot of flexibility in how we encourage people to work with the schedule. But it's really helpful if you make that a topic for conversation and trust that we can offer some helpful support and guidance in that area.

Our basic feeling is that if you're able to do the schedule, it's really good to do it. If you have basically the

fortitude of mind and body to do the schedule as it's written, we really feel that it will deepen your practice the best to do it that way, by and large. Again, the tailoring can be done in the interview.

There are times when you're settling in where you might want to sit a little longer or walk a little longer. That's fine. But the basic concept of moving from a sitting and going fully through a walking period, fully through the next sitting, fully through the next walking—that kind of continuity there is no substitute for. There is no intellectual approach to the Dharma that can get you the kind of insight that comes from that continuity. That is really what will give you the deepening of the mindfulness and concentration that insight is born from.

So I want to encourage you to really be wholehearted in your effort in relation to the schedule. If you find it's not working for you, talk with one of the teachers and we'll help you tailor it for you. It gets so much simpler when you surrender to the schedule. When the bell rings, you sit. When the bell rings, you walk. There's really not much to think about. So a whole layer of conceptualization and decision-making is just taken away. It's just eased.

So where does all this lead? What's the purpose of all this structure and the renunciation and simplicity? It can lead to a lot of joy and happiness, as I mentioned earlier, but it's also really difficult. We know that. We've done these retreats in this way too. We know it's arduous.

It can bring up a lot of different feelings, this level of renunciation—sadness, loss, insecurity from not being in your own home, a sense of loneliness. The loneliness can kind of accentuate a sense of unworthiness. There can be feelings of self-doubt and self-judgment that are heightened through the isolation. All those things are a part of the experience. Sometimes when they're strong, we kind of wonder, well, why did I do this? What have I gotten myself into and what's the point of it?

So I want to say that the first point of the simplicity, the kind of extreme simplicity of life, which Sylvia last night referred to as a Spartan kind of life, which it really is—very extremely simple—is that we become unburdened. As we let go of the outer burdens, what happens is that inwardly we become unburdened too, so that the mind really can be open, be uncluttered.

And in that way, when the mind is really uncluttered, the Dharma can come in so directly and so easily. When the mind isn't distracted by anything else, the insights that you have, the words of the Buddha, the meditations on loving-kindness can come right in as deeply as they can ever go.

This is from an essay in the Audubon magazine from a journalist who had just come back from a backpacking trip and was commenting on this issue of simplicity:

"One moment, while backpacking, 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. I then 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. 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."

This is the situation that you all have created for yourselves right now. Your commitments are very few in number—your yogi meditation job, showing up for sittings and walkings, taking care of your body. And apart from that, your only real commitment is to be present. And they're very high in quality. So there's a beautiful opportunity to drink that in.

When the outer kind of distractedness falls away, really what we're left with is the bareness of our own experience. And what we really come to see is the way that the mind works. It's a little bit like in the wintertime when all the leaves fall off the trees—you really see the outline of the branches very clearly. So the outline that we're looking for in this simplicity is how the mind works. That's really why we simplify. We want to understand basically what leads to happiness and what leads to suffering.

And when everything else is stripped away, we're really just left with the mind and our reactions, our relationship to life, to the food, to the accommodations, to the weather, to one another, to the talks, and so on. That's all we're left with. And as Sylvia said, I love that quote from the movie Kundun that she used last night—the Dalai Lama, in rephrasing the second noble truth, expressed it as: "Most of my suffering comes from my own habits of mind."

So this is really the point. When we can start to see that the areas of conflict in this simple situation mostly come from our own habits of mind, then we have a possibility of understanding those habits and, in understanding them, becoming free or freer.

There's a Western teacher who really inspires me named Ani Tenzin Palmo. She ordained in 1964 as a nun in the Tibetan tradition and spent most of the next twelve years practicing in a cave in India. She now teaches and is establishing a center in Assisi, Italy, and did some very serious and long stretches of practice.

She was getting to the end of one three-year retreat where she'd taken a vow of silence. So she'd been on her own, not speaking to anybody for three years, in this cave high up in the mountains. And then that day, she was getting near the end of her retreat, there was a knock on the door. She said, "Who is coming to barge in on my retreat? Everybody knows I've taken a vow of silence." And she opens the door, not knowing who's going to be there, and it's a policeman—an Indian policeman who has come to tell her that her visa has expired, is no longer valid, and she needs to leave the country. Several days before the end of her three-year retreat.

So she has to climb down from the mountain, go to the police station. They won't renew her visa. She has to leave the country. And she just had to deal with it.

When she was here at Spirit Rock a couple of years ago and gave a talk, some of us had lunch with her, and I just expressed to her how much I admired her commitment, doing those long periods of solitary

practice. It's way beyond what I felt I could do. And her reply was really instructive. She said, "You know, it was just what I wanted to do." She didn't make any big deal about it. She wasn't laying any claim to fame. "It's just what I wanted to do." That was a beautiful teaching for me.

So a journalist was writing a book about her and said, "Well, aren't you escaping when you go on retreat? Isn't it an escape from the world?" And her reply was, "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, or 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."

As the outer activities fall away, the inner life becomes much richer and moves to the forefront. It's like attending a symphony where you're initially captivated by the beauty of the concert hall, the musicians in their elegant black dresses and tuxedos, the gleaming instruments. You find yourself watching the performers as much as listening to the music. But then you decide to close your eyes, shutting off the sense door of sight, and suddenly the music becomes extraordinarily rich—alive in an entirely new way.

The same transformation happens in retreat. As we release our grip on the outer world, the inner realm becomes vivid, colorful, and intensely awake. Sometimes people report having remarkably strong and vivid dreams, especially early in retreat—dreams so disturbing they wake up energized, carrying the full emotional weight of what they experienced in sleep.

Emotional reactions intensify dramatically in this setting. Things that would barely register in daily life—moments we'd simply walk past without a flutter—suddenly seem enormous and can completely overwhelm us. This is the phenomenon we affectionately call "yogi mind"—the remarkable ability to make mountains out of molehills while on retreat.

One manifestation appears as the retreat progresses: teachers and managers begin receiving lengthy notes from yogis about various logistics or format issues that desperately need attention. These notes seem almost reasonable as we read them, almost making sense but not quite. For instance: "Please ask yogis not to unzip the Velcro on their shoes so loudly when leaving the meditation hall."

The classic story comes from a retreat in Southern California where airplanes frequently passed overhead. A yogi wrote to the manager: "Could you please call the airlines and ask them to reroute those flights? They're really disturbing my practice."

As you notice your emotions intensifying throughout the retreat, take time to reflect before acting on them. We especially request that you resist writing notes to other retreatants about how they should be fixed. Like you, your fellow retreatants are experiencing yogi mind and heightened sensitivity.

Living closely together as a community, we inevitably irritate one another. We're human beings, and that's simply what human beings do—we cause problems for each other. It's no different here. You'll

notice people who arrive late to every sitting, move around frequently, take your customary seat in the dining hall or your usual walking path, or wear noisy nylon clothing in the meditation hall.

The typical note reads something like: "My dear fellow yogi, didn't you hear the manager say not to wear nylon clothing in the meditation hall? And if you must wear it, please don't move around. Please observe the rules. Signed, Metta." These notes are invariably signed "Metta."

I genuinely believe that people writing such notes often don't realize they're angry. This is how hindrances operate—they're sneak attacks, and we remain unconscious of what we're actually feeling. But a note like this, delivered to someone in such a sensitive state, can be like a depth charge. The recipient might feel their entire being shaken to its core, precisely because we all become so vulnerable and tender during retreat.

So please be really respectful of each other's space and each other's silence. If somebody is really troubling you, write us a note—perhaps write to James, as he's particularly skilled with such matters. But especially, let us handle the communication. Either refrain from writing the note altogether, or inform us first. If there's a communication that needs to happen with another yogi, we'll facilitate it. This way we can truly protect each other's silence and sensitivity, allowing the practice to continue deepening.

All these challenges are simply part and parcel of the experience. You might say that this situation is designed to bring such things up—that's part of why it's structured as it is. When we meditate, we encounter one of two outcomes: we get the meditation object, in which case mindfulness and concentration continue developing, or we get the obstacles to the meditation object. We encounter the karmic knots, the unresolved issues in our lives, the accumulation of tension and pain in our bodies that prevent us from connecting with our chosen object.

Either way, as James said on opening night, is just what we need. Remember he said that when we come here, we get exactly the retreat we need. It's mysterious how that happens, but this is part of how it unfolds. Either we get the object clearly, or we get the obstacle. If there's an obstacle present, wouldn't you really rather know about it than not? Isn't that where we're bound? If we're going to become free, isn't that precisely where we need to bring freedom in order to find freedom?

So either way is actually just fine. We either deepen simply and naturally, or we meet the obstacle. Most often, we deepen simply and naturally until we meet the next obstacle. Then we learn to work with that, to relate to it, and to find our freedom in relation to it. Then we deepen simply and naturally again until we encounter the next obstacle. This is really how the practice moves through these cycles, and both sides of the cycle are equally important, equally valuable. Because in the long run, this practice only leads in one direction—the direction of freedom, of liberation.

The outer renunciation is an important piece. We truly ask that you please try to stay closely with the form of the precepts we took together, the noble silence, the respect for one another, your wholehearted

commitment to your own practice. The Buddha put it this way: discipline is for the sake of restraint, restraint is for the sake of freedom from remorse, freedom from remorse is for the sake of gladness of mind. All these forms of discipline—the precepts and all the rest—are really for the sake of greater happiness. They lead in that direction, so the outer discipline is important.

The inner renunciation is also really key. You could say that in a way, the deepest letting go is the letting go of our own desires and aversions, our own likes and dislikes, our hopes and fears, our views and opinions. When we let go in that inward way, it brings great spaciousness to mind. We can let life unfold and accommodate our own reactions to life, to our relationships.

This reminds me of a quote from T.S. Eliot that you may have heard many times before, which comes near the end of the Four Quartets: "Quick now, here, now, always—a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything. And all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." This condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything is this inner state of renunciation where we've let go of the clinging, the holding, the views that form this concrete notion of self, of who we are.

When we're willing to really let go of those things—those likes and dislikes—we find ourselves in a very open and clear relationship to our experience. This is again the area of the Third Noble Truth. In letting go of craving, letting go of desire and fear, we open ourselves to that deep, deep kind of peace that's very close to nibbāna, to the unconditioned, to very deep realization.

So the combination of outer discipline and inner renunciation is really powerful. A couple of years ago, we had a retreat here led by Sogyal Rinpoche, a teacher of Dzogchen from the Tibetan tradition, and Ajahn Amaro, a Theravadan monk living a couple hours north of here. They had never taught together before, and I'm not sure how long it had been since any Tibetan Lama had ever taught with a Theravadan bhikkhu—perhaps back in the days of Nalanda in India around 1000 AD. These two traditions haven't been exactly close for the last thousand years, so we felt it was a beautiful, historic occasion.

At the end of the retreat, Sogyal Rinpoche paid what I thought was a wonderful compliment to Ajahn Amaro.

He said, "I've never met anyone like this bhikkhu before. He's very strict in his vinaya, his code of discipline for the monks, but inside he's very open." He observed that usually when a monk is very strict in vinaya, he tends to be very tight inwardly. "But this one," he said, "very strict outwardly, but very open inwardly. That's a beautiful way to practice."

That's the kind of spirit that can really make the practice come alive for us here. To have that sense that we're going to be really impeccable in our outward form—with the discipline, with the silence, with the non-communication and respect for others' space, in relation to the schedule as it seems fit to you. But inwardly, we practice with being really loose and free. That's the place where happiness can really flower most beautifully, because it's based on not clinging and leads directly to freedom.

I'll close with this quotation from the Buddha, from the Dhammapada:

"How very happily we live, free from anger among those who are angry. How very happily we live, free from unhappiness among those who are unhappy. How very happily we live, free from busyness among those who are busy. How very happily we live, we who have nothing. We will feed on rapture like the radiant gods."

Let's just sit for a moment together, please.

How very happily we live, we who have nothing. We will feed on rapture like the radiant gods.

Thank you for your attention.

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