Starting A Long Retreat

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 54:57

I hope you had a pleasant day today. In terms of an ordinary start of retreat, was this perhaps a little more pleasant than usual? You got a few extra things to do—talking to each other, getting to know some people, picking apples. I think we're going to be eating apples for the rest of the three months. You did a great job.

But it is a special time starting a retreat like this. Whether you're here for six weeks or three months, it's a big undertaking. Tonight I want to talk about this approach of starting a long retreat, because it's like nothing else in our lives and nothing else in the world.

I think we all believe that this is one of the greatest things a human being can do. There are many cultures throughout history who have revered this practice in that spirit. When you practice in Thailand or Burma or other parts of Asia, you practice in a culture where this has long been understood as one of the greatest undertakings a person can make. Meditators who undertake it are really respected—more highly than government officials or well-paid generals or politicians. It's very unusual to be practicing in a culture where a meditator is at the pinnacle of status, because as you know, it's not like that in our culture. Rather the opposite. Our culture doesn't really have any frame of reference for what we're doing.

If you look from the outside with modern Western eyes, this looks pretty strange. The only thing I could really compare it to, in order to get any respect in this culture, is like an extreme sport. You're doing one of the most extreme things you could possibly do.

A few years ago, I went to Burma and ordained for about six weeks and practiced with a very wonderful meditation master named Pa Auk Sayadaw. The conditions were difficult. I lost, on average, about half a pound a day while I was there—eating just one meal, not a lot of protein, rainy season. When I came back after six weeks, I met some people I've known for many years. One of them, a friend—not a close friend, but a friend—is an ex-Navy SEAL. For those of you who aren't from this country, the Navy SEALs are a very elite part of the fighting force. They're the kind of people who get dropped off from submarines in James Bond–style operations, climb up on the shore, and do battle in foreign lands. They're trained to do that kind of work. Their training is very intense, physically demanding. Sometimes people die in the training.

So I came back. I'd lost a lot of weight. My head was still pretty shaved. I looked pretty bedraggled, to tell you the truth. The monastery didn't impress him. Buddhism didn't impress him. Meditation didn't particularly impress him. But what he was really impressed by was that I sat still for eight hours a day. Because he knew that was not an easy thing to do. And it's not an easy thing to do, as you all well know.

There's this combination of extreme effort required in doing this practice fully, with wholehearted commitment, but you also know the incredible benefits that come out of it. I don't know any other path to get to this range of benefits so directly and have them be developed so strongly and so reliably. We heard a number of them this morning as you were stating your intentions: the development of peace, of compassion and love, of wisdom, of coming toward the end of suffering, of healing, of equanimity, of spaciousness, of inner strength and balance. The benefits, when you stop to think about it, are really unmatched—but the effort is also kind of unmatched. We are fortunate enough to know that it's worth it. A lot of people don't.

I want to appreciate again the challenge that you're all undertaking and also the possibilities, which are really tremendous here. Given this very unique and fruitful situation—and I know it's going to be fruitful and a wonderful experience for everyone, because that's been our experience through so many of these retreats—I want to talk about how to approach it. Both in very practical terms, what to do with the body; in heart terms, what to do with attitude and motivation; and also just some information, conceptually, about undertaking a long retreat. Those are the three areas I want to address this evening.

I want to start by touching on two things Carol mentioned last night: inspiration and aspiration. The first one, inspiration, is a very important element of why we're here. I was curious what the dictionary had to say about it. When I looked it up, I found, as many of you know, that it's from the Latin word *spirare*, which means to breathe. This word is also the root of the word *spirit*. So inspiration and spiritual are linked in their root meanings, and both are connected to the breath.

You'll find this connection between breath and spirit in a number of cultures. It's in English and Western culture, of course. In the Hawaiian language, the word *aloha* means the breath of life. It also means love or affection—it has broad meaning. When someone in Hawaii says *aloha* to you, they may be saying hello as a greeting or goodbye as a greeting, but they're also saying love, affection, and life in that word. In Pali, the language of the old suttas—

The famous sutta about breathing is called the Ānāpānasati Sutta, the discourse on the mindfulness of in and out breathing. So breath here is *pāna*. Of course, it's central in our meditation practice. In Sanskrit, which forms the basis of a lot of Hindu thought, that word becomes *prāna*. And again it means the breath of life. So breath and life are closely associated.

And now here's the payoff. Inspiration is defined as being filled with an exalting influence. So you can sort of feel like the breath of life and all that life means fills us. And that's what it is to become inspired—to be full of the breath of life.

Carol touched on this last night, and so I wanted to bring it in again. Often these moments of inspiration are very central to our dharma life, to our path. And so I wanted to ask you again to reflect on what have been some of the inspiring moments in your spiritual life. They may have been things that happened before you knew about practice. They may have been things that came through practice. They may have

been the things that started you on a path. It could have been a book. It could have been an experience when you were younger—children have lots of very inspiring experiences. It could have been meeting a teacher, someone who's being inspired you. It could have been an experience in your own meditation or hearing about a friend's experience.

So as you think about those experiences that maybe are at the base or kind of underlie your understanding of spirituality, your understanding of your own potential, what comes to mind?

Someone shared that at the conclusion of a mettā retreat here, the person sitting next to her and she exchanged blessing cords. She was so full of love at that moment, crying from happiness, perhaps a little sadness, full of love. They tied the cords on each other, so she tied it on her partner with the utmost love and affection, and her partner did the same for her. She still wears it, but that moment was so explicitly clean. Beautiful—speaking with a partner and tying a red blessing cord around each other's wrist and doing it with a real spirit of care and openness of heart and loving kindness. Moments like that can move us and stay with us and show us a human possibility, a possibility that's real within our own hearts.

Another person shared that on his first ten-day retreat here, he was really struggling with a lot of inner suffering through his mind going over and over. And what happened? He was carrying around a history of suffering, coming into the present moment, touching a railing, just feeling the freedom in the here and now, and that whole cloud of mental construction just evaporating, opening into freedom. Beautiful.

So I'm sure all of you have your moments, near or far in time, that in some ways maybe inspire your whole path. I'll just share one from my own history. I was in my early twenties, and I was out in a forest in Texas. I was living in Texas at the time. And it was late afternoon, the sun was setting, and I was surrounded by these tall pine trees of East Texas. And the light coming through the pines was so beautiful—you know, the green of the pines and the kind of streaky sunlight coming through them—that I just said to myself, I mean, I don't even know where this came from because I'm not particularly theistic, but the thought came: God is love. And just that there's this kind of ecstatic and exalted feeling of touching something really divine. And in some ways that moment has always provided inspiration for me on the path—that there's the possibility of feeling that degree of love so directly. And I wanted to live with openness to that, availability to that.

So in some ways, these moments of inspiration, when our heart responds to them, form what we want from spiritual life, or what Carol called our aspiration. And this morning, many of you shared your aspiration for this retreat, which were all lovely, beautiful to hear, and I could relate to all of them. I'd also invite you to think about your aspiration over the long term. You know, I hope you think about your spiritual practice as a lifelong thing. For me, I consider it extending beyond one lifetime, possibly to many lifetimes. So when you think on that bigger scale, where do you want to go?

Where do you want your practice to take you? I'm not going to ask you to share this because it can get quite personal. But to think on a really big scale—what's possible for you? What would you really like to

realize through your Dharma practice?

Just to mention that the Buddha's aspiration when he started his journey was for the complete end of suffering. He was convinced that there had to be a way, and he didn't care what it took to find it. That's what he dedicated his journey to—finding that complete end of suffering.

Aspiration is an important thing. I work out in a gym near my home in California, and there was a guy who used to work there who was one year a competitor in the Mr. America contest. This was back before it became Mr. Universe and Arnold won it—things changed after it got into the movie world. But back in the days of Mr. America and that level of competition, this guy who worked at our gym was a Mr. America competitor. They had a photo of him in the window in his Mr. America outfit—you know, the skimpy bathing suit, body oiled, striking one of those poses where all the muscles stand out in great relief. He was very impressive.

I had been working with him; he was giving me some pointers on a couple of exercises. I happened to put my hand on his shoulder, and it felt like touching a brick wall. He was so solid—no soft give there at all. Very solid. His name was Lance.

One day I was in the gym, and two teenagers were working out together, spotting each other on the machines and helping each other with the heavy weights. I was eavesdropping on their conversation, and one of them said, "Did you see Lance in here the other day? He pressed 515 pounds." For me, that's an inconceivable amount of weight. At my level, it's considered really good if you can press your own weight, which for me would be about 160—and I'm not quite there. So Lance pressed 515 pounds, and these young guys had witnessed it.

These were teenagers, not highly developed in their physiques yet. But the way they talked about their hero Lance really indicated to me that they were basing an aspiration on that. Something about Lance had inspired them with a sense of what was possible, and because of that, their motivation was somewhere up here, whereas my motivation was somewhere down here. It's a different kind of inspiration than we're interested in here perhaps, but for them Lance was really inspiring, and he changed where they aimed their workouts. They had a different idea of what was possible.

So I encourage us all to think high in our aspiration. There's no downside, as long as it doesn't come with expectation in a certain amount of time. But as we aspire to something like the compassion, the clarity, the wisdom of the Buddha, or the Dalai Lama, or Thich Nhat Hanh—or whoever is a great being for you—that can only uplift us and move us down that avenue. It's a beautiful thing.

With aspiration, a few people mentioned it this morning and I wanted to draw it out: whether we consciously include it or not, it's always helpful to remember that as we develop our own hearts and minds, as we develop our practice, we touch and benefit many, many other beings—through our example, through our kindness, through just our way of being in the world. So we can take that into account. We

never know how far those ripples will go.

We say—it may be a little inflated, but we like to say—we practice for the benefit of all beings. Because we may inspire friends who then might take up practice, open their hearts, touch many other beings, and we never know how far it goes. So we like to remember that our practice is never just for ourselves but always for the benefit of many, many—we could say countless, we could say all—sentient beings.

From this beautiful aspiration, from the inspiration it came from, and from a great deal of faith—everyone here has a lot of faith. To put yourself in this situation for six weeks or three months, there's a lot of trust, a lot of faith. It's a beautiful quality.

We come here and leave behind our normal life. We leave behind our friends and our family, the comforts of our home, our choice in food, our cars, our choice in music or movies or books or television—all the pleasures of our daily life—to come into this very spartan environment. The word for this classically in the tradition is renunciation. We let go of all those pleasant things of our daily life in order to come into a situation which is not so gratifying on that level. This is not an easy thing to do.

Of course, we're really reenacting what the Buddha did when he left his very comfortable home life—his palaces, his family, the wealth of his family—at age twenty-nine and embarked on six strong years of spiritual practice.

We're reenacting that in our own way.

This quality of renunciation, an important step in any spiritual life, is in our tradition one of the ten pāramīs. The pāramīs are the qualities that when fully developed lead to complete freedom and awakening. They're qualities like loving-kindness and equanimity and patience and determination and effort. And one of them is this factor of renunciation—the willingness to let go of our usual comforts.

But it's not an easy thing to do, and in the Buddha's discourses he sometimes talked about the sorrows of the renunciate life. You may feel those in the early days of the retreat. You may feel the missing of what you left behind at home—comforts, friends, family, food, chocolate, all those things. You may miss that, and there may be a little bit of grief. This is part of the adjustment to this life, the sorrows of the renunciate life. The Buddha said that in the end, these sorrows, these forms of grief, are overcome by the joys of this life. I'll talk about that more in a minute. But just to acknowledge that there is some difficulty in making this shift. The transition is usually felt quite keenly in the first several days, where the contrast is more apparent.

Sometimes this word *renunciation* doesn't sound so good in our culture. It seems like something really unpleasant, like a hair shirt being forced on us. And so some of the synonyms that are also used are simplicity, voluntary simplicity, letting go, relinquishment. It's said that the proximate cause for this letting go is spiritual urgency. There's something we really want to understand, and that urgency allows us to let go. So it's important to stay in touch with the urgency of why you're here. It all has a purpose.

This is from Thoreau, Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*: "I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach me and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

In a way, you could say we're here in order to learn how to live. Sometimes all the vocabulary of meditation doesn't make that connection so apparent, but that is really what we're all doing here. We're learning how to live wisely and with love.

The world has both beauty and pain, and a big part of the spiritual life is opening to both those dimensions of what life contains. We'll find that also in our retreat experience. A lot of it is about opening to the joy and the love that's available, and also the dukkha, the difficulty that is an essential element of life. As we open our hearts, we feel the beauty and love more directly. We feel the pain more sensitively too. But it's through our capacity to open, to feel both of those, to continue to open and hold them, that we grow and that we learn. That's an integral part of our journey.

It's such an interesting choice to come into this renunciate situation. I feel we're very lucky today as lay people. We have the chance to do this. In many cultures, even in Buddhist worlds, one is either a nun or a monk choosing the renunciate life, or one is a household person with family and responsibilities and work. In order to taste the beauties of the renunciate life, one has to abandon that daily life completely. But our situation is different. We can live a full daily life, a rich daily life, and come into a situation like this and in a way feel what it's like to live as a true renunciate.

I think on shorter retreats—like a week, ten days, even two weeks—we get a little taste of that. But as you settle in for six weeks or three months, you get to really explore that terrain. In the first week, you sort of settle in. And then—this has been my take on it—you're really living here. As you really live here, you're adjusting to this new life, this new style of life that is like a monastery, a temporary monastery. And then you get to experience that opening time, the opening to the beauty and the difficulty that's always been integral to deep spiritual life through many cultures, across traditions.

It's such an interesting choice. And the riches of this life are often just covered over by the busyness of our daily life. I think it was T.S. Eliot who described life in the twentieth century, normal kind of busy daily life, as "distracted from distraction by distractions." We don't even notice we've become distracted because the distractions have carried us away again.

In this life, there's only the essential activity to occupy us: sitting and walking and breathing and eating and sleeping and working and taking care of the body. Then that richness opens up out of that simplicity.

I don't know if you all tuned into this, but two weeks ago in California there was a very lovely event: the ordination of a bhikkhuni—that's a word for a Buddhist nun, a fully ordained nun—in the Theravadan tradition. That's the Southeast Asian tradition of Buddhism that our practice comes out of. It took place in California, and it was the first bhikkhuni ordination in our Theravadan tradition to happen in North

America. There have been many legalistic complications and obstacles that prevented it from happening, but the first one took place two weeks ago and four women were ordained. That means they took the 254 precepts of a fully ordained Theravadan nun. So it's quite a step forward, I think, for the Dhamma in the West.

Our good friend Sylvia Boorstein was there. Sylvia teaches at Spirit Rock, an old student here, a friend of all of ours. She wrote about it for the Huffington Post—when you get home, you can look up Sylvia's article. It was a beautiful description of the event. Afterwards, we were at a couple of days of meetings together at Spirit Rock, and Sylvia was just reflecting on that experience. She said, "You know, I could have been a nun." She isn't—she has a family with a husband and four children and lots of grandchildren, very involved in an active daily life. But that call to a kind of quiet contemplative life was really speaking to her, as it has spoken to all of us.

As you make this transition from busy, active, engaged daily life into this simple way of living, there are often a lot of different feelings—especially when you're looking at six weeks or three months ahead. I just want to name some of these to let everyone know they're included and just part of the normal process, part of our practice at this point.

A common one is exhaustion. Often people come in from their busy lives thinking, "I just need to sleep for two days, then I'll be ready to go." There can be some nervousness, some fear—such a long time, maybe you haven't been in retreat for such a long time before. There can be inspiration as you reflect on the possibilities, and a sense of excitement. Often there can be self-doubt: "Am I going to be up to this? Am I going to be able to do it?" Based on our experience with many, many people, the answer generally is absolutely. There can be some loneliness, and also some confidence—"Yeah, I can do this. I've done days and days. I've done weeks. I can do this." All those feelings may be at play and may alternate during the early days of the retreat. We just take them into account. Notice that they're present. Don't resist. Don't hang on. They're all part of the heart's opening.

In terms of living in this renunciate way, I'd say—especially having practiced as a monk in Asia where conditions are a little tougher than this—the essential spirit of that life is to take what's given. We have lost control of our outer situation. We have surrendered in being here. We have thrown ourselves on the mercy of strangers. In some cases you may know the staff, and you may know they're really lovely strangers, but in many ways we're at the mercy of the cooks and managers and teachers and housekeepers. We've surrendered in a big way.

So in this spirit, we take what's offered to us. We take the food that's served—it may not be our first choice; we may have many good ideas on how the cooks could improve it. We generally refrain from expressing those. We accept the room that we're given. We might like one with more sunshine or a better view of the forest, but we accept where we have been offered to stay. We notice that the clothing we have with us is what we'll be working with and living with for the time that we're here. When we're a monk or

a nun, we accept the medicine that's offered by the monastery. We work with these conditions, whether they're to our liking or not. Most of the places that I practiced in Asia as a monk, we received just one meal a day.

Usually it was at breakfast. And I have to tell you, if you haven't had a red fish curry at eight o'clock in the morning, you really haven't lived. So it's a little easier here.

In Zen, they have a saying: the mouth of a renunciate should be like a furnace that can burn the finest sandalwood or dried cow dung with equal ease. I don't think you'll be served dried cow dung, but just in case—with equal ease.

The Spirit Rock cooks have a sign on the bulletin board that says, "When we prepare a delicious meal, that's our practice. When we prepare an undelicious meal, that's your practice."

Along with the renunciation of our control, we also give up communication. We settle in here and, in the spirit of noble silence, we make a commitment not to communicate with our friends and family back home unless there's an emergency. We make a commitment not to communicate with one another, with other yogis who are on the retreat. We give up conversations. We give up different forms of contact. We recommend that even through the process of snail mail, you keep your letters to what's really necessary and urgent. No need to check the mailbox every day. No need to send outgoing letters every day. They'll know if they don't hear from you that you're doing fine.

This also includes all these new forms of communication that are multiplying at such a rate in our culture today—cell phones, text messages, instant messages, email, Facebook, Twitter. You may be used to following two dozen friends' activities through social media. All those things stop when we come here.

It's so interesting because five years ago, we didn't have to say much about this. Cell phones didn't work so well here, and there weren't smartphones, so people couldn't really check their email. Now you bring in a smartphone or a tablet or a netbook, and you could be running your own internet business from the annex for all we know. But we recommend that you don't. We ask that you not.

Really, for the sake of your own practice, we recommend that you give up all those forms of outside communication. It's not necessary to check your email or text messages or IMs or Facebook and Twitter while you're here. And if there's a continuing temptation to do that, Marilyn is really happy to receive your smartphone or tablet or netbook—whatever it is—and keep it under lock and key for the duration. This is what's going to make the kind of space and simplicity that lets those beautiful qualities of heart and mind unfold. It's the lack of complication that allows this flowering. I really encourage you to be very careful and follow this kind of guideline.

It's getting harder and harder to unplug from this always-connected world. Nielsen, the company that used to rate who was watching what TV programs—they're still a media rating company, but they've extended it beyond television—just released a report saying that American teenagers on average send or

receive over one hundred text messages a day. The actual number was 3,146 a month. So those images you have of teenagers wandering through the malls with their thumbs never stopping? That seems to be fairly accurate—over one hundred a day.

One of our teachers works with a lot of young people and commented that this year, unlike any other year, it was harder for that group to unplug from all these different forms of connecting. She said the young people on this retreat seemed more afraid of the silence and solitude than in any other year. When they unplugged, they reported feeling a lot of fear of the emptiness.

This is a great place, as Thoreau said, to get back to the essential facts of life. What is it to just face life in its bare and simple form? What we often find is that we have a lot of self-identity based on this frequency of contact. It's sort of like: Is somebody talking to me now? Is somebody being aware of me? Is somebody messaging me? Because every time that happens, we get affirmed in someone's eyes. We get validated and appreciated, at least recognized that we exist. We've in a way started to construct our identity—a different kind of identity—on the frequency of these contacts. It's a new kind of phenomenon.

Based on this, I think we need to do an update of Descartes' famous posit of *cogito ergo sum*: I phone, therefore I am. This is the new rendering.

We're in a place where we're not looking to build up the self. We're looking to decrease the formation of self. Letting go of all those connections will help with that.

We also really request, in the spirit of this renunciation, that you not communicate with one another. This is so central for keeping an even keel in our community. As you know, when you drop into the silence and start to open up, you become really sensitive. A little bit of contact from someone else, especially when it's not expected, can be very disturbing.

Maybe somebody just wants to say, "I love you, I really think you're cool." Even that can set a lot of thoughts off. But what's more problematic is—let's take it from the other side. Let's say you found someone's behavior annoying. God forbid it should ever happen during these three months. But just occasionally, sometimes one yogi doesn't one hundred percent like what another is doing, and they feel the need to let the other person know where they are falling down. So they'll write them a note expressing this level of irritation. It's always signed "Metta."

But if you're the receiver of a critical note in this silence, with this sensitivity, it's like a bomb has gone off in the middle of your body. People are thrown into tumult by that for days—literally days—because we hear about it and we track its effects and its progress. It's one of the most difficult things that people can deal with on a retreat like this.

So please be kind to one another. Please don't send notes to one another. If there's something that someone else is doing that you feel is inappropriate—maybe annoying you, maybe annoying other people—please tell one of us and leave it to us to work it out with that person. We'll try to smooth the

situation out in the way that seems most appropriate, and you don't need to try to work it out on your own. If there's one request that I would make, that would be it: if you're having a problem with someone else, please let us know.

I wanted in this spirit to say a little bit about the many different ways to communicate. You can write a note. You can touch someone. You can make gestures, pantomime around somebody. All of these are different ways of communicating, of connecting with someone here, that can feel intrusive if you're on the receiving end. It feels like somebody's coming into your space or making an inappropriate communication with you. So please refrain from all those different ways of communicating.

Sometimes in seeking to communicate, we might look to make eye contact as a way of starting a communication, initiating something. So again, I would refrain from using eye contact as a way to start communicating with somebody—hoping to catch someone's eye and maybe a spark will fly and then you'll be married by the end of the retreat, or whatever.

But if we were to say, "Don't make eye contact with anybody," then it would feel too frozen, too rigid. So it's not like that. Looking at people's faces in the middle of the retreat can be very heart-opening. I've learned a lot and opened to a lot of compassion and affection through just noticing the expressions on other people's faces while sitting a retreat. And if somebody happens to open their eyes and you make eye contact, it's not a problem. It's not that we always have to go around eyes downcast, never looking at another person's face. Just be sensitive—eye contact sometimes can be a little electric. Some people may prefer not to have any and may want to keep their eyes down. But if your eyes are up and someone else's eyes are up and they cross, it's not a big deal. Don't worry about it. But also don't use it as a way to say, "Now we really have something going together." Just simple. Keep it simple.

Remember that the purpose of living so simply as we're doing here is so that the mind's activity gets laid bare. We're not really so concerned with the things that the mind is fastening onto—whether it's the food or the bed or the noise or the teacher's instructions that day or the Dharma talk that didn't work for us. Those are the outer places where our movements of mind land and sometimes fixate, but we're more interested in the movement that's landed rather than where it's landed. Movements of liking and disliking, greed and aversion—that's what we want to understand, not the external circumstance so much.

The simplicity here lays bare those workings of the mind. It's like, as we're here over these six weeks, most of the leaves will come off these trees. And then you can really see how the limbs are filling the space that the leaves are currently covering.

The leaves obscure the structure of the tree. When the leaves fall, that structure becomes really clear. So when we take away the busyness of life, the bare movements of mind stand out like those limbs in fall. And that's what we're here to learn about, because that's where the freedom comes.

This is from T.S. Eliot: "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." It's this complete simplicity that allows the wisdom and the love to grow. These are the deep sources of happiness that come through in an experience like this.

And that's why the Buddha said in 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." That's what you're doing here. By letting go of the lesser happiness of our daily lives and all the pleasures and comforts of it, you're all pursuing a happiness which is greater, deeper, more reliable and lasting. This is why, for me, it's so inspiring to see all of you here, wanting to do this work, wanting to undertake this.

Just a couple more things to say before I finish. I want to talk a little bit about what really matters during your time here. You're going to hear from us lots of Dharma talks—most nights of the retreat there will be some Dharma talk. You'll hear lots of instructions. At times they'll sound really complicated, and you'll probably go crazy trying to figure out which one you should be doing at any given point in time.

I just want to say that all the techniques are really secondary. They're refinements that are very helpful, good skillful means. But the two primary things for me are the silence—and I don't mean the external silence, but the silence that you feel as you stop and listen—the silence and your presence within it. If you carry on and return to those two elements, your retreat will unfold. That's our baseline. So even though the instructions may get complicated, the techniques may get complicated, just keep coming back to that: the silence and the presence.

Silence has so much to teach us. This is from Walt Whitman: "There is that in me—I do not know what it is, but I know it is in me." That's sort of what we hear when we touch into the silence. There's something there. I can't say what it is, but there's something there. And that's what we want to let unfold in us.

Another beautiful quote I love on silence is from W.S. Merwin—a very handsome man; any biography you read of Merwin will always talk about what a good-looking guy he is. He's in his eighties now, lives on Maui. I got to meet him once when he was doing a book signing and autographed a book. He's a very lovely, gentle presence. It turns out he practiced Zen Buddhism, I believe with Aitken Roshi, who lived on Hawaii and taught for many years but recently died. So Merwin practiced Zen for many years under Aitken Roshi. And a line from one of his poems is: "Now all my teachers are dead except silence." All my teachers are dead except silence. So this continues to teach us, continues to inform us.

And the quality of presence, awakeness—it leads to the more specific forms of mindfulness and awareness that we'll be talking about. Just that sense of being awake and present in this moment. This we can trust in; this we can always come back to. It's very, very simple.

Really what we're learning is to live well, to live wisely. And there's an art to this. It's not really a science; it's an art. When I first started meditation practice, I was very focused on the technical aspects of meditation and the technical descriptions of the progress of the Buddhist path—things like the possibility

of enlightenment, the stages of concentration referred to as jhānas, stream entry, arahantship, and so forth.

Those really called me. And I didn't realize that when I was going through the long retreat experiences here, what I was really learning was how to live—artfully, skillfully, wisely, compassionately, and lovingly.

But over the years, as I've taken the practice back into daily life and applied it and grown in the Dharma and grown in my daily life, it's really clear to me that I learned all those things here. In silent retreat, I learned how to listen. I learned how to open to what was difficult. I learned how to have compassion for myself and acceptance and loving kindness. I learned to wait before I spoke. I learned to know whether my mind was in a loving place or an angry place before I acted. And then all those flowers have come over years of carrying these teachings back into daily life.

This is from Alan Watts: "The art of living is neither careless drifting on the one hand, nor fearful clinging to the past on the other. It consists in being sensitive to each moment, in regarding it as utterly new and unique, in having the mind open and wholly receptive."

Does that remind you of meditation? That's a lovely description of meditation. That's what we're learning to do here—how to find that place in the mind and then how to meet each new moment from that kind of place. We discover it here because it's easier to discover it in the simplicity. We get grounded in it, we get steeped in it, so that when we take it back home, it becomes our baseline. That is what more and more over time we live from. And that's the place that allows all these beautiful qualities to flower.

I'll close with a quotation from Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the great translators and teachers of our time: "Liberation is the inevitable fruit of the path and is bound to blossom forth when there is steady and persistent practice. The only requirements for reaching the final goal are two: to start and to continue. If these requirements are met, there is no doubt that the goal will be attained. This is the Dhamma, the undeviating law."

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