Opening Session

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:35:22

Welcome everyone to this online retreat. I'm grateful for the technology that makes it possible for people to join in from so many different places. My name is Joseph Goldstein, and as most of you probably know, I've been involved with IMS from the very beginning.

Let me give a brief overview of what we have in mind for this retreat. The Buddha gave very comprehensive teachings about how to live in accordance with the Dharma—that is, to live in a way that brings greater happiness and ease in our lives. These teachings cover a wide range, from how to live more comfortably and easefully in the world and the kind of happiness that comes from that, to the happiness that comes from developing concentration and developing insight, all the way to the happiness of enlightenment, of awakening.

During these few days, my colleagues and I will be touching on this whole range of offerings, from how to be living in the world more easily to the potential for the development of insight and for developing the possibility of liberation in our lives.

For my part in the retreat, I'll be giving two talks and two question and response sessions. We've decided to change the name from "question and answer" to "question and response"—and you can decide for yourselves whether the question really got answered or not. But we'll do our best.

In the first talk, I really want to lay out in some detail and some depth the underlying causes for suffering in our lives, for distress, for inner conflict. So the first talk is going to lay out the problem in some depth, and the second talk is going to address the remedy for that problem—that is, how we can work with the forces that cause suffering in a way that frees us. That's my general plan for this retreat.

And now I'd like to have my colleagues introduce themselves so you get a chance to hear their voices as we go forward. So again, welcome.

Thank you, Joseph. Hi, everyone. I'm Roxanne Do. I'm currently in Montreal, in unceded territory of a gathering of many First Nations I want to acknowledge as we start, including the Kenyakihaga, the Mohawk, the Wendat, the Abenaki, and my own ancestors, the Algonquin Anishinaabe. So welcoming us all on this land of gathering.

I also want to acknowledge the Nipmuc people where IMS is situated, honoring their place and being custodians of this land and water, and thanking them for being of support as we practice. Perhaps in the

next months or years, we can return to IMS, so honoring those people there.

I'm very happy to be with all of you as we dive into this practice this weekend. I'm a French-Canadian and a guiding teacher at True North Insight here in Canada. I've practiced mainly under the lineage of Mahasi Sayadaw instruction, so I'm offering deep bows today to people in Burma who need peace and freedom right now.

As we acknowledge this lineage, I also want to offer deep bows to all the protectors of the Dhamma for all those 2,600 years of practice, of oral tradition that has come to us on this day in 2021. I bow to all the Asian countries that supported the unfolding of the Dhamma—people in India, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, China—all Asian countries and all Asian Americans who brought this practice here to the West in many ways on this continent. Thank you all, as we are touched by the Dhamma in these days.

All the teachers here want to welcome you fully with care and deep appreciation. We welcome all bodies of all abilities, all shapes, sizes, ages—bodies with challenges that are visible or invisible. We want to make sure that we welcome all experience, which might mean some pain in the body or some comfort at times. Allowing all of this to be fully welcomed as we practice in the next few days.

We also welcome all bodies of different race, ethnicity, and culture—queer bodies, trans and cis bodies—welcoming all the gender spectrum and diverse identities you might have: non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, two-spirit. We welcome all various sexualities, whether straight, queer, pansexual, asexual, or perhaps a label that doesn't quite fit. All are fully welcome here.

Welcome also to people of all classes, religions, all languages. Just here on this teaching team, we have different languages being expressed that you might hear in our accents, with all levels of fluency that might entail for all of us. All of us are fully welcome, whether we were born here on this land, or perhaps our ancestors or parents came here for the first time, or perhaps we're listening from Africa or India or Europe. Some of us are on the other side of the ocean. We want to make sure that everybody really feels welcome for the next few days.

That also means welcoming this body with the range of emotions that might arise. Can we allow the full potential of this heart to really feel supported in the next few days? So a deep welcome to everyone.

My practice these days is really being moved by this potential to free our hearts in all conditions. I invite a sense of courage, trust in the practice, and confidence on this path. I'm going to be offering different talks on this deep intention: Can we have trust, and can we show up to our experience fully?

I'll be giving two talks and also offering some guided meditation around this practice of the heart of metta, loving-kindness, so we can actually support what is needed in each moment fully. I'm wishing you all an easeful and fruitful retreat and gathering, honoring everyone fully wherever we are.

Thank you, Roxanne. So good to be here with you all. We can't see you or your faces, so I'm just taking a

moment to feel you out there, all of you joining us in this space. I'm calling in from Portland, Maine, formerly land of the Abenaki. I'll be offering movement for you each day.

Just to tell you a bit about myself: I was born in San Francisco, grew up there, and spent many years in New York before moving to IMS, where I spent six years in Barre, Massachusetts as a cook. I started offering movement there and recently moved here to Portland, Maine, where I'm now working for a collective of healers. I identify as mixed race, Mexican and white, and as a cisgender woman.

The practice I'll offer is an hour long, a gentle practice that should be accessible to most bodies and most ages. I'm really aiming for that. It's a mixture of yoga, qigong, and intuitive movement, and is really designed to loosen and soften the body after long hours of sitting, and also to bring us into the body, into a finer listening to the body, into relationship with the body, into attunement with the body. My intention in practice these days is really about coming into relationship—with my body, with the earth, with others around me. I look forward to spending time doing that with you during practice.

Thank you, Sabrah. Thank you, Roxanne and Joseph for being on this wonderful team. My name is Bart Van Melik, and I'm in a very special place that I'm zooming in from—a trailer in a campground. I'm in my bedroom, zooming in from the Netherlands, which is my home country. Usually I'm based in New York, but in the summers we have the opportunity to come to the Netherlands and spend time in this trailer.

Last summer, my wife and our seven-year-old son, whom I'm living with, found out that in the Netherlands it would be possible for a seven-year-old to go to in-person schooling. We decided to stay longer, and so I've been in this little teeny tiny trailer now for ten months.

And this is what this retreat will be about. Your home and the messiness of it all—whether it's in a trailer, whether it's in the kitchen, wherever you are—that's going to be your temple. Thich Nhat Hanh, the famous Zen teacher from Vietnam, says this line: there is no enlightenment outside of daily living. This will be our temple.

I really want to share with you that we still call this time a retreat. And although it will be different from retreating as you would usually think of it in the forest of Massachusetts, even in the messiness of wherever you are right now, it's possible to retreat. These formal sessions that you can join—or, because of time differences, watch later—are moments when you can step away from daily activities, daily responsibilities, and truly retreat.

In this opening talk, what I would also love to share with you are the traditional refuges and trainings that the Buddha offered, which can really help you find a way to make these four days as retreat-like as possible. I found it amazing—after a year, we were saying as a team that it's already been a year that we've been holding spaces online like this. What's possible?

I remember once I was doing walking practice in my parents' home in the Netherlands. Another phenomenal thing is that I'm not even on a landline internet here—I still feel the connection, but I bought

cell phone plans. Right now this is being streamed through a cell phone plan all the way to a tower in the Netherlands, coming all the way to you. But then I didn't have enough data, so I did that retreat in my parents' home.

And I was doing walking practice in my old bedroom. The whole room has changed. My mom painted the walls red. I couldn't see any signs of a teenager living there anymore. And it was already quite interesting to just watch my mind, going to this place where I've spent so many countless years.

When I was almost finished with my practice of walking, my hand was on the doorknob. The doorknob and the light switch were the only things that hadn't changed. And in just a moment, I saw the mind remembering all these fears I used to have when I was a child. Then this voice came and said, "Not present anymore." It was this really deep sense of release, of seeing the impermanent nature of some of these fears that were the biggest thing in my life when I was a teenager.

So on this retreat, what we really want to invite you into is to make it work for you—in the midst of your home that you might be sharing with other people, maybe also acknowledging that you still have to attend to some work. All that is possible. And it's possible to hold that with the support of mindfulness.

Just pause for a moment. Maybe take a moment to look at your space, the space that you're in. Your temple. Just like you would if you were in a meditation hall at IMS. I would love for you to make everything that you do on this retreat as sacred and mindful as possible.

I love this from Barbara Brown Taylor. She says, "Hanging laundry on the line offers you a chance to fly prayer flags disguised as bath towels and underwear." Home retreating allows us to see the sacred in the mundane.

What I'd like to do now is give you an overview of what you can expect in this session. In just a few moments, I want to invite you into a meditation that really supports the establishment of mindfulness, just to get started. We'll explore what kind of experiences you can easily connect with again and again. We'll also explore some suggestions for movement meditation. After that, I want to offer a teaching on how to take refuge as a reflection.

We've had a lot that's been coming toward us. We're still in the midst of the pandemic. There's a lot of social and racial injustice. There's so many things that we're holding right now. So I want to invite the Buddhist teachings on the three refuges, and in the talk also explore how we can protect ourselves and bear witness as we're holding what sometimes might feel unbearable.

Another thing that I would love to invite you into is to pause. I love how Roxanne already started saying welcome, really welcoming every body and everything that you bring to this retreat. So this first session, you could sum it up in two words: pause and welcome. All in the support of finding ways, even in your home, to be as continuously mindful as possible.

I love this teaching from Ajahn Chah pointing exactly to that. Ajahn Chah was a Thai forest master monk. He said, "In practicing, don't think that you have to sit in order for it to be meditation, or that you have to walk back and forth in order for it to be meditation. Don't think like that. Meditation is simply a matter of practice. Whether you're giving a sermon, sitting here listening, or going away from here, keep the practice in your heart and be alert to what's proper and what's not."

And then, referring to his teacher Ajahn Mun, he said, "Ajahn Mun once said that we have to make our practice the shape of a circle. A circle never comes to an end. Keep it going continually. Keep the practice going continually without stop."

I listened to him and thought, "When I finish listening to this talk, what should I do?" And then the answer came: make my mindfulness timeless. Make sure that the mind knows and sees what's proper and what's not at all times.

This is our invitation, this encouragement to explore how to make this practice like a circle. I really also love how the Buddha puts it. He would say that mindfulness is established in one just to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And in that way, we can dwell independently, not clinging to anything in the world.

So pause for a moment. Just notice the body. Can you welcome the bodily sensations of touch, of temperature?

For this first day on retreat, and for any other day, I really want to invite you to keep pausing. And it doesn't really mean stopping. It means way more remembering—remembering to be mindful.

At IMS, there's a staff dining hall. And the door going back to the hall where everybody is in silence, meditating most of the time—that door on the inside of the staff dining hall, on top of the doorknob, it says "the pause that remembers." Just going back into the space where a lot of mindfulness is being cultivated, and maybe you've been talking, and then—oh, pausing. It's really kind of my favorite meditation instruction. And really use the pause throughout the retreat.

Also, maybe all of a sudden in your practice over the course of these days, you might have a question. Pause. And know that you can actually send us a question via email. And maybe even doing the typing or the touching of the screen, however, whatever device you use—can you make that also into your practice? So that you get really clear: what is it that wants to be asked? Then pause, maybe even pausing before you click send. Because when we pause, we can not only know our experience unfolding in the moment—when we pause, we can also connect with the experience of being mindful, which to me feels like a great protection and a refuge.

And so in this session, the guided meditation will be a little shorter, about fifteen minutes. And when it comes to our guided meditations, please know that they are simple suggestions on the basis of "come and see for yourself."

In the packet that you might have already seen, we've also suggested a structure or a schedule that you could follow. If that works for you, take advantage. And if not, then that's okay. Really again, emphasizing to see what works for you in your home, wherever you are on your retreat.

So stepping into a moment of pausing again. Maybe the body has been in one position for half an hour. Just check if it wants to move a little bit, if it wants to hydrate. And see if you can find a comfortable position and yet an alert one. Perhaps lengthening your spine.

And starting with directing mindfulness externally, by simply noticing, looking around again into your dharma hall and the space that you're in. You might have been sheltering in place for a long time. The space might feel familiar. Can you find something new in the space? Something you haven't seen before. Mindfulness oriented externally.

And then taking a moment and see if you would like to have your eyes kind of softly cast down, or open, or closed. And taking a moment to see if there's any tension in the body. Would it be helpful to soften your belly as an act of compassion? Loosen the jaw. Soften the mask of the face. Just see if you can really kind of let your shoulders hang down, let the arms be heavy. And lengthening the spine. Tuck the chin in a little.

And pause. Just check if you're in a comfortable position. If sitting doesn't feel good to you, know that you have options. You can also stand or lie down. Really go back to the basics of exploring what experience is easy and natural to be aware of. To ground awareness.

And inviting you to become aware of hearing—the sounds that are appearing and disappearing in the space you're in, your temple, your meditation hall.

Or the sounds that are coming in from my end, this voice. Sometimes you might hear a cracking sound of the sun touching the plastic of the trailer, expanding.

Tuning into the experience of hearing. Let there be in the hearing simply the hearing. How much effort does it take to be mindful of hearing? Welcoming the sounds as best as you can.

What's your experience of being mindful of sounds? Is it something that might feel natural, that you can connect with? Is there resistance to it? Also notice when the mind might wander off, when another experience is calling for attention. And checking for now if it's helpful, when that experience passes, to come back to sounds. Is that a helpful place to ground awareness back into?

Just like sounds appearing and disappearing, so do body parts, body sensations come and go. I invite you now to attune to how the body is speaking to you, as though you were listening to it with that same receptivity as listening to sound. Sensations of tingling, touch, temperature. Listening to the body, to how it speaks. There is a body.

Is it difficult or easy to be aware of bodily sensations? Can it be an anchor to return to again and again? This body always being in real time.

Sometimes it can be helpful to let awareness be more specific and attune to how the body is breathing, to support the momentum of awareness. Where in the body do you feel the breath moving the most? Maybe it's the chest or the belly. Breathing, and know you're breathing. What's that experience like? Is there resistance to feeling the breath, or receptivity?

In the midst of sounds, in the midst of thoughts, there's this wave of the breath coming in and going out. You're never too late for the present moment. You can always start over again when the mind is lost in some planning or thinking. And then checking for yourself: is there an experience, especially in the beginning, you can connect with to support this kind awareness, this knowing? Your home base.

As we're coming to a close of the guided meditation, also take a moment to notice the state of mind and the heart. Can we say welcome to it, as best as we can?

In a few moments, you'll hear me ring the bell three times. Just noticing sounds again, appearing and disappearing.

So again, I'd like to welcome you to our retreat. And maybe because of causes and conditions, you tuned in a little later. My name is Bart Van Melik, and I have the great privilege to get us started with our opening talk.

I want to begin by encouraging you, especially this morning—if it's still your morning; I'm calling in from the Netherlands, where it's already the afternoon—to pause and really connect with an experience you can easily feel, that you can come home to. We sometimes call this your anchor of practice. It can shift throughout the day. Sometimes for me, it's just sounds in and out, which creates more space in the mind. Sometimes that gets too spacious, and then it's helpful to really feel the preciseness of the belly rise and fall to establish mindfulness.

But we don't want to be too rigid, just staying there, especially as we're meditating in the complexity of our daily lives. It's also about being open to whatever is calling for your attention, externally as well.

Another practice that we invite you into, if it's possible, is to do some formal walking meditation. And there too, it can be helpful to find an experience in that movement that you can easily connect with and come home to.

So I'm going to invite you now, wherever you are, to see if you can place your hands on your lap or your table, or if you're lying down, next to you. First pause and really feel the hands touching—just like you would if you were standing and feeling the feet. See if you can become very curious, and if your body is able to do so, lift your right hand up with a lot of curiosity. Maybe playfulness. Feel how the hand and the arm are going up, as high as you like. Know that you're feeling the movement. And also notice when you're going to go back, going down. Notice and feel that moment when the placing is happening, the hand back on your lap or wherever. Pause.

And shifting to the left, let your left hand slowly come up. And when you know you're feeling this, that's mindfulness. That's what we're cultivating. Bringing the hand back down at your own pace. And pausing again. Allowing the hands to be there. Maybe one more at your own pace. Lifting. Placing. Lifting. Placing.

In the same way we've just played, you can maybe find outside or in your space indoors a little route of about twelve to fifteen steps. When you stand looking at your trail, just take your environment in first. You could even do that right now where you are. There's still awareness. It's just knowing something that's happening externally, probably coming in through the eyes. And if you were to do walking meditation on your retreat later on, bring that same attention to your feet and your legs—lifting, moving, and placing as your anchor. At your own pace, at your own speed. And that might change too. Sometimes we want to be really slow, and sometimes to pick the energy up, it's helpful to go a little faster.

When you've reached the end of your fifteen- or twelve-pace trail, stop. Pause for a moment. Notice the turning. Slowly go back. And the anchor could be the lifting and placing of your feet, or the movement of the legs, or the whole body. Play with that. What's easy for you to stay connected with?

And then when something else is calling for your attention—and it will—just maybe stop. You have options. You always have options in meditation. Let that come in and be known. And when it fades, maybe go back to walking or just continue your movement, but then letting go of the anchor and becoming present to whatever is calling for your attention. It could even be someone in your household saying, "It's your time to cook dinner." It could be anything. This is a retreat in the midst of daily living.

Please know that you can meditate in any posture. My favorite one in terms of real movement is outside swimming. Even in the winter—I already did my swim because I'm six hours ahead of the East Coast time. And just going into that cold water, really feeling how the body is speaking. So that's my anchor, just feeling the movement.

And in New York, where I'm having this great privilege to teach meditation to many different people—young people who are in homeless shelters and incarcerated, but also a group of dedicated veterans in a VA hospital—there was one man who once asked me, "Is it okay while you do walking or sitting practice that I pretend as if I'm dancing salsa with my wife?" And we all looked at him and I said, "Sure."

He said, that really kind of brings me into the present moment. And it was just lovely to see how everyone has their own way of creating a meditation that's like a circle we can always tap into again and again.

I'd like to share with you a Zen koan that a dear friend of mine introduced me to about a year ago, and it's been so helpful. It goes like this: The student asks, "When times of great difficulty visit us, how should we meet them?" The teacher says, "Welcome."

Just the simplicity, but the profound power of that koan has been really shifting my practice quite a bit. This welcome—at first I thought, does that mean I just have to accept everything? No. Because I looked

into the history of that koan, and it was shared in a time of great social unrest and injustice. That's not what the teacher was coming from. It's this welcoming of the reality or the truth of our experience in the moment. I think that's been very helpful for me. I think it can be helpful also to hold the things that might feel almost unbearable to hold.

Like in this very moment, the trial of George Floyd is happening. Yesterday, there was a car driving into an officer at the Capitol. Both in my home country and in America, this surge of hatred against Asian Dutch, Asian Americans, police brutality. It's a lot. And then we're still in the midst of this pandemic.

This very powerful koan sometimes gives me a sense of space, saying welcome to feeling exhausted from the pandemic. Welcome to worrying thoughts. How are we going to make it? What it also does, this powerful koan, is it allows you to see when we're bouncing off the truth of suffering, which is there. The Buddha called it the first noble truth. When we're not welcoming, when there might be personal challenges—for me, that might sometimes mean hiding from needing help, not going to a doctor, not asking for help. Or we might hide from relational challenges. We might be in a position to really let someone know about what they're doing and give them feedback, but not do it.

And one of the things that I've noticed within myself is how I can hide from social challenges, cultural challenges. Also because of the social location that I find myself in, in this society—both in the Netherlands and in America—of being this white cisgender male, able-bodied, a father and married, and who has the privilege to stay in place and shelter in place during a pandemic. Then it can be easier to be silent, to not speak out, but to hide from the discomfort of addressing patriarchy or addressing racism, white supremacy.

So there's something really powerful about this welcome, because it can also allow us to see when we're not wanting to welcome. But then can we maybe—that resistance—can we welcome that? Pause and welcome.

And I found out for myself that my intention to say welcome really supports taking refuge in what traditionally is called the triple gem: taking refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. If we were to be together in that big hall at IMS, with that beautiful Buddha, the plants, the light coming in from the windows—on the first opening night, what we would usually offer, and I've been practicing on many retreats, is this tradition of reflecting on refuges that can protect us and support us and bearing witness to our experience, to say welcome. And then on those evenings, we follow that by kind of as a community taking also these vows, these five mindfulness trainings or precepts. But I also want to just touch a little bit upon these and see how they might guide you on your retreat in the midst of your home.

I want to unpack these three refuges with you.

The first one, refuge in Buddha. To me, my interpretation is to take refuge in kindness and awareness. And every time when I pause and remember to be mindful, that's in a way a manifestation of taking

refuge in Buddha. Because it means that you're taking refuge in the potential to wake up, in the potential to meet experience with this welcome, with kindness. The simplicity of pause and welcome is in a way taking refuge in Buddha.

Another way of looking at this refuge is reflecting on this historical being who made such an enormous impact in the world. And it's still reverberating 2,600 years later. It's the reason that we are here right now. This being woke up to understanding suffering and the cessation of it. And this person was human, just like us, having this potential to fully wake up.

And so another way that I take refuge myself is to sometimes ask in practice: in this moment, is there any craving, wanting things to be different?

And sometimes the answer is no. It's fine the way it is. Then I would ask, is there any aversion or ill will present? In that moment, no. No resistance. Then I would ask, is there any confusion in this moment? Or is there clarity?

Sometimes we actually really touch into what you could call Buddha nature, and we're noticing that craving, ill will, and confusion are absent. And we can rest there.

Maybe just pause right now. Does it feel like a refuge, a protection?

Perhaps give yourself the opportunity to check—is your body still comfortable? Your posture will inform you if it wants to shift. Refuge in kindness to the body.

The second refuge is the refuge in Dharma, or Dhamma. These are Sanskrit and Pali words—the Buddhist teachings are recorded in both languages. Just as taking refuge in Buddha means for me taking refuge in kindness and awareness, taking refuge in Dharma means taking refuge in nature and wisdom.

The word Dharma has multiple meanings. One is the Buddhist teachings themselves. What the Buddha discovered are very natural laws operating in nature, and out of compassion, he began to teach his understanding of these laws.

One law that he saw was that in order to understand suffering and be free from it, we must understand clinging. He also saw that nothing whatsoever should be clung to as I, me, or mine. He really saw that when this happens—that natural inclination of taking things personally—stress comes about.

Another law he discovered was one of the most, perhaps for me in the beginning, obvious laws: the law of impermanence. But having heard of it is one thing. Having really understood this law of change is a whole other matter, and to live in harmony with it.

On his deathbed, the Buddha asked the monastics caring for him, "Is everything I taught clear to you?" They responded, "Yes, venerable sir." And then supposedly his last words were, "All conditioned things, all phenomena, are impermanent. Keep practicing diligently."

I've found it so powerful to notice that the Buddha teaches about this law so frequently that it's become a refuge for me to really tune into the changing nature of experience. I might settle into listening to sounds, knowing there's hearing. Then shifting awareness just slightly and noticing how the sounds are changing. We come to trust that experience of change moment to moment.

Because it's a hard law. Things change in ways we don't want them to. But it can also be very freeing when we notice we are totally in harmony with it—taking refuge in Dharma.

Finding refuge in Dharma could also mean going out into nature, pausing, and simply connecting with a tree. In the Netherlands, spring has sprung. Yesterday when I was swimming outside in the lake, I saw the very first swallow. Perhaps you're in an apartment and nature is unfolding in a plant you have in the house that you can also really pause with. Just open up to that plant.

And also know that we ourselves are not outside of nature. Coming home more internally again and perhaps just noticing that I am nature—this too can be a refuge.

You will also be invited to keep coming to our sessions, whether live or later. Even knowing that the wisdom of the Buddha being offered is a way of taking refuge in Dharma. I see hearing the Dharma just like eating food—I just need to do it every day.

Let's also be creative. What can support me in finding refuge sometimes in wisdom and nature? It could be poetry. Music. Are there spiritual teachings to support you to say welcome to this experience?

Let's pause for a moment. Is there any way that this refuge in wisdom and nature is unfolding right now for you?

And then the last refuge, the refuge in community—or in Pali, Sangha—a community of people with that same intention to wake up.

The more we attune to nature and its unfolding laws, the more we start to see that everything is connected. Even if I stretch the body out this way, you can feel it all the way down in the left leg. It's like this web of life from which it's impossible to fall. And then there will definitely be moments where we feel this natural feeling of being lonely, but we're not alone. We're kind of caught in this inescapable relationality, this mutuality. Through the breath, even through the internet right now—all the people and actions it took for us to be here, who made this device—it's amazing.

In the talk I want to offer tomorrow about befriending difficulty, I looked at what kind of suggestions the Buddha gave. Whether it was for ill will or for worrying, always he would suggest finding refuge in friendship and in suitable conversations. And so taking refuge in Sangha could, for example, mean when you really feel like you need some support with something, can you ask for help? You can reach out via email. Maybe also, because you're at home, asking yourself: Where can I connect? With whom can I connect right now? There's a manifestation of taking refuge in Sangha.

Right now, you might only be seeing me on your device. What happens if you just realize for a moment that we're together with hundreds of people sharing this moment? Maybe just also realizing all the people and the support we were given to be on this path, to be here right now. Refuge in Sangha.

I want to close now with also bringing us into these five mindfulness trainings, or five precepts, that we on retreats at IMS traditionally take. They're universal—they're in every spiritual tradition. And they're offered as a way to create protection: to protect oneself from harm, to protect others from harm, and both ourselves and others from harm. They're really true practices of compassion and understanding. I like the way Thich Nhat Hanh has framed them. I'll just offer them and then see what arises for you and how they might inspire these coming four days.

The first training is to protect life and to decrease violence in oneself, in the family, and in society. Just pause for a moment to notice how that lands—to protect life. Reconnecting with this vow, maybe you take it every day, this training. What could it mean for you, knowing the specifics of these four days?

We want to encourage you to see what's feasible in terms of attending the sessions or also creating time for formal practice. Doing the best you can and letting that be good enough. Being mindful of the people whom you might be sharing the space with and their needs. Another way of framing this is: knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I vow to protect and respect life.

The second mindfulness training, or precept, is to practice social justice, generosity, not stealing, not exploiting other living beings. Pause, welcoming whatever comes to mind hearing these words. Be generous also if other people might need your attention these next four days. Generous with your attention that might then be more outwardly oriented. If you have to take your kids to school, making it a mindful trip to school. It's totally fine if you need to address some work things or have to fully work in the midst of this retreat. Can you be generous with your attention? Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I vow to cultivate generosity in every possible way.

And the third mindfulness training, or precept, is to practice responsible sexual behavior in order to protect individuals, couples, families, and children. Pausing again to connect with that. At IMS, it would mean taking the vow to abstain from any sexual behavior, any activity.

That's something you might want to explore these next four days. Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I vow to abstain from sexual misconduct.

The fourth training is to practice deep listening and loving speech to restore communication and reconcile. You might be in a position to make this almost a fully silent retreat, and that's fine. Others might find themselves in a more relational retreat as well. Speech is such a powerful practice—to be mindful, to pause. If you're engaging in conversation, perhaps just check: Is what I'm saying true? Is it kind? Is it appropriate? Is what I'm saying beneficial? And is it timely? Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I vow to cultivate wise speech.

The last training is about mindful consumption—to help us not bring any toxins into the body or into the mind and heart. Just pausing to consider what that might look like for you. Perhaps retreating from technology a bit, if possible. Consumption of news, of alcohol. Maybe not taking the cell phone into your bedroom with you. Knowing how deeply our lives are intertwined, I vow to commit to a clear mind that sees the truth of experience.

These are the five trainings.

Just pausing for a moment as we come to a close of our first session. See if you can connect with an aspiration or an intention that you might have for this special time. What wants to be cultivated or let go of? Maybe an intention is clear, or maybe nothing is arising—that's fine too, and it may come later. It can sometimes be really helpful to make that intention into a refuge when things become difficult, reconnecting again with that heartfelt aspiration.

In the next couple of hours, I encourage you to explore, pause, and connect with experience. Find something you can anchor with—walking, doing dishes, cleaning the house, whatever it is—and see if you can keep saying welcome, just receiving the truth of experience as best as you can.

I'd like to end with a very powerful poem by Václav Havel. He was a Czech statesman, the first president of the Czech Republic. The poem is called "It Is I Who Must Begin."

It is I who must begin. And once I begin, once I try—here and now, not excusing myself by saying things would be easier elsewhere, without grand speeches and gestures, but all the more persistently—to live in harmony with the voice of being as I understand it within myself. As soon as I do that, living in harmony with the voice of being, then I suddenly discover to my big surprise that I am neither the only one, nor the first, nor the most important one to have set out on this road. And whether all is really lost or not depends entirely on whether I am lost or not. Whether all is really lost or not depends entirely on whether or not I am lost.

Words of wisdom from Václav Havel.

I want to close now one more time by saying welcome—welcoming you, welcoming all that you bring, welcoming the forces at play in our lives.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.