

## Introdcution to Nature Dharma; Refuge and Precepts

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So, let's see if this is loud enough for people. Is this loud enough? Do they seem to work? So, again, but now more officially or more deeply, welcome to the retreat. Welcome to the silence, the stability, the strength of these mountains that we're sitting with. It's remarkable to meditate and practice in a location like this where the location is really strong.

It's a presence. It's part of our life here, part of what we're breathing in, drinking in the water of the land, the air that these forests make oxygen for, and the history of this land with glaciers and mountains rising and falling and volcanoes. This is mostly volcanic rock too. And that's quite an amazing place we're in. And it occurs to me that in places like this, when there's such a strong presence of the place, that we don't have to do so much. It kind of invites us to do less, invites us to be part of it, to listen deeply, to feel it deeply.

And for me, what makes, kind of what makes a religion a religion, for me in a way that I like the term, is that religion has to do with my place in the natural world, that the religious view that I am part of the natural world, I'm not apart from it, but I'm a natural phenomena as well. And that there is a natural movement towards freedom, a natural movement towards ending and healing, all the things that are in opposition to the natural unfolding of the mind, the heart, the natural healing of the environment that's been scarred by humans, the natural evolution of the natural settings that from some point of view nature scars itself. I mean, the violence of glaciers coming through here and tearing everything up. The amazing... is it violence when it's not intentional? Maybe not. What is it? The cataclysmic movement of volcano that's happened here.

So for me, what's religious is to feel that I belong, that I'm part of this, that I come here in a place like this, and I feel so happily small, so happily that there's this vastness of the universe, the sky, the trees, the mountains, that seems to put me in a really good, what feels like a sacred relationship, with this grandeur that's around me. And what I discovered in through this

meditation practice that there's an equal grandeur, an equally grander place within that it's as vast and amazing the natural world which is within us as a natural world which is outside of us. And that many of us live in opposition to it. Many of us live creating volcanoes that destroy much of this inner world, but then needs to be healed. And it wants to heal. That's what it does. Life heals itself if we allow it to.

Many of us live our lives in opposition to our natural self, the natural movements inside. With greed, hate, and delusion, we rip it apart. The wholeness in which this whole natural system where it operates is. And the religious view that I have is that Dharma practice is returning us to that whole, returning us to this natural working that as we are natural working heals, as our natural capacity to be, there's amazing wisdom, there's freedom that awaits us. And it's the function of living systems to grow, to heal, to die, and be reborn. And all those have been within us, day by day, hour by hour, in big ways, in small ways.

And we're participants in this whole amazing cycle and outside of us. And to come to a place like this, and even this room, this amazing room that's been built, that is a kind of a, to me it's a little bit of a wonder, all the wood, the solidity of it, the quiet of it, to me, sometimes when I've been here, I feel like it's been an extension of the mountain to be in this room. Rather than leaving the natural world behind, there's something about coming in here that it's like part of what we're participating in while we're here. So here we are to practice, to practice mindfulness, to practice being aware of it all. To practice being aware so we can recognize how we separate ourselves from the natural world within, from the natural world without, and find out how to heal that separation. To heal from the mental constructs and beliefs and stories that we live in.

Free ourselves from the forces which, centrifugal forces, the anarchistic forces, the forces that repel us into further division, divisiveness within ourselves and with the world around us, the ways in which we harm ourselves. And to begin discovering that we don't have to do all this work. A lot of what we do is we learn to get out of the way for a natural process to unfold. We will be taken care of in a profound way. The first time that I just really, it kind of became kind of clear to me that this process can operate was when I have told the story before, but when I was 20, or I think I was 20, 21 maybe, I was living and working on a small dairy farm.

And I learned enough about taking care of cows at some point, milking them and feeding them and taking care of things on the farm, that the farmers decided that they could finally take a vacation. Because if you're the only people who take care of the cow, you can't leave the cows alone, like babies. You can't just leave them alone. And so I became the cow sitter. And so I spent a week alone. It was the first time in my life that I ever been alone, completely.

And I didn't talk to anyone. The only person I saw, a living person, was the mail carrier walking up the dirt road kind of somewhat close by. And once. And I wasn't trying to practice. I wasn't trying to do anything except take care of the farm. Right. But the simplicity and the silence of that life, the lack of socializing and the stimulation that came from, and feeling comfortable on the farm, safe on the farm, something in sudden it got quiet. My agitation, my fears, my preoccupations quieted down.

And one of the first things that surprised me was how clear my eyesight got, even with my near-sighted eyes with glasses on. It was like, I remember walking around the kitchen once, it was everything looks sparkling. This is quite what's happening here. And then it got so pristine that I would have a thought, and the thought sparkled. I'd never had the thought sparkle before. It didn't matter what the thoughts was. Just the fact that I was thinking was a sparkle. Like, wow. Wow. And I felt such an intimacy and presence and kind of feeling of satisfaction of just being there.

And I analyzed it, which was mostly because somehow by not having anybody around and nothing complicated to do, that something settled and got quiet. And that's all it took. And that was one of the most really satisfying experiences of my life. And then the farmers came back. And the sparkle vanished. And luckily for me, I think, I decided that my task, my life task, I thought, after that experience, was to discover how to be alone with others, how to have that sparkle, how to have that peace, how to have that sleep, when I'm with other people. Because I didn't think I was going to be a hermit. And that's one of the things that brought me kind of into doing Buddhist practice in a deep way, was that quest, how to be alone with others, how to have that freedom, that peace, that quiet, that peacefulness within.

And I tell you this story, because it's a story of not doing, I didn't practice. Maybe if I tried to practice that week, I just would have messed it up. I would have added that on top of it all, because I didn't know how to practice back then. And I felt sometimes here on these retreats we do have here that for many people, we try too hard. We take too much responsibility. We engineer it. We're talking, am I really going to be tough? I'm going to enter the 17th *jhāna* by Wednesday. And I've been that way. I've gotten headaches from that kind of effort.

And so I've felt sometimes that all we did for one week, which didn't talk to each other, went to the meals, didn't talk, but the meals were served, do our yogi jobs. But otherwise, we're just left to be here and without any devices, without any books, without any entertainment, without any projects, just here, that we would be transformed by the end of the week. Just that. And so rather than practicing to interfere with that process, to trust that process, how simple to be here in a very simple way. Don't be busy here. Be calm. Be settled. Don't try to

do a lot. And then on top of that, like cream on the cake, is the practice. You carefully watch yourself, know yourself, so you understand how to be mindful, how to be focused, how to be present, how to show up and wake up moment by moment, that it supports this deeper process here rather than overlaying on top as an engineering feat that you're going to try to make something happen.

So I don't know if this makes sense to all of you, but I'm hoping that you can appreciate that we are living systems and living systems are dynamic. They're processes. If someone comes to you and say you're going to be a good Buddhist, which it shouldn't be, but just say you're going to try, and someone says to you, who are you? But they're asking you like, you're a Zen master, like, who are you? Because they want the deep, profound answer. Then you say, I'm a process. I'm a whole bunch of processes that are operating. And one of the advantages of that answer is you're not answering with a noun, with a thing. Because, you know, processes, we're, what? There's no there there. Just things moving and changing and shifting and growing. Who are you? I'm a growing life one. And things are constantly shifting and changing. We're designed that way. We're designed to grow. We're designed to heal. We're designed to get old. We're designed to decay. We're designed to do all these things as part of the natural world. And what this practice can teach us is that there's a way of trusting that process, participating in that process, that is glorious. That is one of the best things you can do. And if you have something better to do, do it. But I don't think you'll find it.

So that was a long way to say that part of the theme of the retreat is how the Buddha taught the practice to be something that participates in the growing nature of our lived life. That he was fairly explicit that this is not an engineering project, this is not something we're constructing and building. It's a Dharma practice is something we're cultivating like a gardener cultivates their garden, the plants in the garden. Now, it's like an arborist plants a tree and supports the tree to grow. The arborist doesn't make the tree grow. The arborist supports the tree to grow, supports the natural process of timefold. And this is how the Buddha taught the practice of mindfulness, meditation, that it's a natural process that we're trying to support and bring us into a kind of fullness of being, to be filled with what is wholesome, to be filled with wholeness.

So here we are in this natural world, and the title of the retreat was something like Dharma and Nature and Nature and the Dharma. It seems that with... seems very appropriate. I don't see how we cannot I cannot teach this side of this part of Buddhism in the location that we're in. So I'll try over these days to be offering this orientation and try to show how the Buddha taught this as well. And hopefully if you understand what I'm trying to teach, you'll

understand that a lot of the diligence of the practice, a lot of the hard work of the practice is to get out of your own way. A lot of the hard work is to stay relaxed. Isn't that like a terrible problem to have? And they don't oppose each other to work really hard at being relaxed. You have to be relaxed. You have to even be relaxed in how hard you work at it. But the diligence, the continuity, really, this is something to give yourself over to wholeheartedly, fully. But don't strain, don't push, don't be the doer of it. You're not responsible for how your practice changes. What you're responsible for is creating the conditions that the plant can grow. And the plant that's going to grow in you is inside. And maybe we'll discover that there are other plants that grow. Maybe we grow as a community here. There's a, you know, we don't talk to each other much here on retreat, but it's not a small thing for a community of people to come together, many of them strangers, and have this purpose, this shared purpose, this shared effort, this shared deep looking into themselves, deep honesty. And kind of, even if you don't want to, if you do this practice, you'll end up kind of coming forth with the best qualities of your heart. That's what comes out because that's what's in there. And the worst qualities that you have are just a drag. They're just exhausting and difficult and they just get in the way. And so as we settle, we start seeing that.

So anyway, so that's kind of the over, or kind of my introduction to what the orientation of the retreat will be. And it's a kind of my, kind of the way I like to think of myself as the kind of Buddhist I am, if I'm allowed to be a kind of Buddhist, and that is a naturalistic Buddhist, that we're in a sense of nature, the naturalism of this world, is something we highlight and put at the center of the Dharma. And so maybe this will be meaningful, hopefully, as we go through it, and we'll all find it supportive, this deeper appreciation of our deep nature that's underneath. Some of the very difficult ways we're driven, difficult ways that we're caught, difficult ways that we are in conflict with all kinds of things, difficult ways in which we get seduced by desires and fears. So... it'll be an adventure here on this mountain, may be supported by all the stillness and all the silence that this mountain has to offer as we walk on its land, sit on it.

So a few more things about the retreat. Some of you might want to practice outdoors here, more than in the hall. You're welcome to do that. And... I don't know if you have done it yet, but if you walk around on some of these trails here, there's actually, they're built in as part of the walls for the trails. Some places, there's little sitting areas, almost like they were waiting for people, meditators to come. And so you can walk around and find your little kind of opening, a little area if you want to be able to. Or be down on the lawn and by the pond or... You just be outside here. Many places you can be if you would like to be outside. But one area

to be outside is to propose, as those of you who would like, is every morning, many of us will do the first morning sitting down on the wonderful green lawn looking out across the pond. So that's 615 sitting. There's chairs, there's some Zabats down there. I think if there's any more that are left over from all the ones we put out, that some of them might be taken down there so we have more to put down. And there's this big tarp they have down there. I don't know if it's big enough for everyone, but there's a tarp that we'll possibly put on the lawn because it'll probably be wet in the morning. And if you have sitting gear, you'll have to bring it with you. And there'll be some chairs down there. And what else is down there, Russ? What else do I need to say about it? You have some benches that sit up along the back. So there's some benches back there you can sit on. And so we'll have to find out how it works in the morning. They've come a little early and help set it up. But also some of you don't want to sit outside, which is what they find. The last time I was here, I didn't go down and sit outside. I sat up here, and it was nice for the groups out here. So the idea is to have someone ring the bell at the end of the 615 sitting. And so we need two people to do that. We called out the practice leaders. And I don't know if someone signed up to do already. Yeah. We did. Someone signed up for a 6.15 sitting? You did? Would you like to do it here or you'd like to do it down there? I don't know. I can find us when we do it. Yes. Yeah, at the beginning. But then would you like to... Because we need someone at the... Those people who do it at the end rings the bell to end the sitting. What? Yeah, so you would sit up here. Yeah. How many people would like to try down the lawn? How many people would like to sit in here? The lawn first. Okay, down hands. Sit up here. So there's some. So would you sit up here then today, tomorrow? Great. But then we'd like to volunteer to ring a bell down there at the end of the sitting. And you don't have to sit, that's the advantage of that or the disadvantage of that down there is you don't have to sit in the front. Because the front is, the practice, the real practice leader is the pond. Mountain. What? A mountain. Or the mountain or the lake or the sky or yourself. So anybody like to bring the bell down there at 7 o'clock? It's the end of the bell. The end bell. All you do is the end bell. No one. Is there a bell? We'll have a bell. Great. So thank you. And is everyone set with the work meditations? Does everyone understand that and how it works? And any logistical questions that you would like to have answered to help you feel more settled here? And anything that you'd like to ask? there's things to still tell you about practice discussions, meetings, all kinds of things. And hopefully we'll remember and just tell you as we go along. And to tell you too much all at once is maybe too much. So there'll be more things we'll say in the morning. We'll come here for that. Is it 830 we sit here? So at 830 we'll come back here. And that'd be the sitting where we do the guided instructions and guided meditation for every day. and also make announcements then. And

then tomorrow will mostly be a day of practice, and then their practice discussions will begin the following day. And I'll see half of you one day, and then the other half the second day. And we'll do group practice discussions so that it kind of works with all of you this way. And so maybe that's enough for me for today. And I'm actually very happy that Leanne is here with me to share this. And she'll be sharing some of her wisdom. And the idea is that she'll offer some *mettā* in the last sitting of the evening every night. And or some reflections. We have a room to kind of adapt as we go along. And... But I've asked her if she would kind of do the formal beginning of the retreat, where we actually kind of really starts by what's called giving ourselves over to the refuges and taking on an ethical life through the precepts as a way of supporting ourselves and supporting this retreat for all of us, our community. And so if you are ready, let's go. You just put that on because I'll turn it on for you. Oh, he's on. Okay. So you've taken time away to be here, to do some concentrated practice. And it's useful to... Is it on? Okay. How better? Raise your hand if you can hear me. Okay. So-so. Okay. So-so. So-so. So-so. All right. Is it on now? No. How about now? I'm going to try to speak louder. I just got hearing aids, and it actually makes me speak softer, I think. Raise your hand if you can hear me. A little better? Okay. All right. Yes? Okay, I'll wave your hands if you can't hear. No, still can't. Wow. I'm talking pretty loud, I think. Oh, now it's red. Well, it's either... Yeah, now it's green. Okay. Now can you hear me? Yeah. Oh, now I'm really loud. All right. Yes. Okay, thank you. Oh, goodness. All right. Ah, so we've come... to gather together to practice. And, you know, we were talking, I was carpooling on the way here, and we were talking about the refuges, actually. The basic is the refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha. And then the Sōtō Zen tradition, we have 16 precepts. And the first three are the refuges. And the 16th one is that you don't disparage the three treasures, which is Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha. And when I teach the precepts, I say that it's... It's an ongoing practice. And we start out, many of us, when we think about refuge, we say, oh, this is where I go. And the literal translation of the Pāli is, to the Buddha, I will go. To the Buddha, I will go. And so when we go to take refuge, it's like a haven of safety. And in fact, the precepts are... for protection and for safety. I think that's a really important thing to think about, especially in the world today, right? And so when we take the precepts, we're saying that these are the things I'm going to embody as I do this practice, so that I'm safer myself. and that we create a container together of safety and protection. So the refuge is a commitment really that we make to ourselves and we make to each other. The Buddha is a representation of this practice in which a human being, an actual human being, attained enlightenment, And so this wonderful practice that Jill is talking about, you know, part when he was talking, I'm like, well, he's really selling this. But it's true, right? And I think with practice, we become more strengthened in how it is a

refuge. So an invitation this week is to... Let these absorb. You're going to take them now officially, but just let that absorb. When you're having trouble, like, I could do this, just like the Buddha was questioned by Māra and his enlightenment. Like, you can be enlightened when you have trouble with yourself. You say, ah, the Buddha is an actual human being that did so. I can too. And then the Dharma is both the teaching and the nature, the naturalness of life, right? The laws of nature. That's the teaching of the Dharma, which Jill's going to expound on a little bit this week. So these teachings are also, we can take refuge when we're having a hard time, when we need somewhere to rest, somewhere to land. And then the Saṅgha is the community of practitioners, and we are our Saṅgha this week. And so when we take these precepts, we sing to each other. Together we're going to build this container of refuge, container of safety and protection as we practice together, even though we might not say a lot. But it also maybe can give you a pause when you hear yourself, the way you relate to yourself. Is it in accordance with the precepts?

The basic five are to not kill. More so, I would say, what do you think of them as a positive? To promote life, to promote life. We think that we're in nature, how much and the way we know about the impact of the earth. I think it's a useful one to think about. that we're also committing to promoting life. Next is not kill, not steal, not to take what is not given. It's the basic traditional wording. So it isn't just taking, but it's also, if it's not offered, then I think as practice we can think, oh, what if when something is, we hear ourselves beating ourselves up, we could say, oh, Is this really offered? How is it being offered to my? How am I doing this to myself? And what is a more free way of offering? So maybe the positive of that is sharing or generosity. So what would be a way that I can be more generous with myself in this moment? The third is not to misuse sexuality. And sensual and sexual desire is a strong force. So it's one in which for many of us, it comes up as a reaction. We go to and grasp onto it when we have difficulties. And another way to think of it is that it's intimacy. And it's also a life force. In my one month at Spirit Rock, I actually worked 20 years ago, you know, someone... They had a question time and someone was like, I think about sex all the time. Right? Why is that? And one, uh, Marie Mancha was really like, oh, it's a life force. So it's a life force, but, and how do we use it? Is there a sense that it's a way that brings us closer to connection and intimacy? There it is, not lying, or to tell the truth. And I think it's really important that there are, to accept our truths of our experience. As we go along this week, we're going to, I think, a lot of practices. We hear what we think, we take, and we've assimilated as truth, and then our experience. How do we view it in a way that actually gives us a sense of embodying and really connecting to this is the truth of my experience right now? How is it resonating now, not how it was necessarily taught to me, but how does it resonate right now? What is the truth of



my experience? And the last is, no killing, no stealing, no killing. Oh, no dealing. I have a little spiel that I, no spiel and no dealing. So there's one way I remember the five is not to intoxicate. And classically it is about drugs. And it's also not to intoxicate with anything that takes us away from clarity of heart and mind. So what is the positive way would be? What is the, what am I using to get in between what is the clarity of my experience? So can I... Put that down. So I think in this way, we commit to quieting both our mind and our behaviors. Our precepts are very much things around actions in life. And they can at least seem like rulers, but really they're, again, parameters to help us really give pause. That's why they begin with not, to really give us a pause and say, hey, just a minute, before I rush in unmindfully to act in a certain way of body, speech, and mind, then how can I pause and really reflect on this?

Last year, I was in retreat with Gil for three weeks, and I thought, oh, What a blessing. You know, in the Sōtō Zen tradition, when we get Dharma transmission, and we're empowered to be a teacher, basically we give the precepts. We're empowered to give the precepts. That's the fundamental thing we teach and can offer. And I thought, wow, how wonderful that my life has brought me to the point where I'm able to offer safety and protection to people. So as you take these, my encouragement is to both let it resonate for you, that you're doing this for yourself, and that we're creating a container together. All right. So first we'll pay homage. We'll do three time in the Pāli here. Do people do at the same time or do they echo this one? Usually the first three are the echo. And then the second and third are doing it together? I mean the first either of that is echoed because it's sitting up from the other side. Okay, are we going to do these every now? We're not going to do these every now. I meant the three lines. Is it all an echo or the first line is an echo and then the second one? Okay, everything's an echo. All right, there are different ways you're doing this. All right, so I say it and then you echo.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa,  
Namo tassa mahāyāta, arahato, sammā sambuddhassa.  
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa.

All right, now we're going to take the three refuges. And I apologize, I know the Zen Center tonal here, so you can do your version.

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.  
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.  
Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Dutiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.  
Dutiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.  
Dutiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.  
Tatīyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.  
Tatīyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.  
Tatīyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

All right, in the precepts we'll do it in English.

- I undertake the training to refrain from killing living beings.
- I undertake the training to refrain from taking what is not given.
- I undertake the training to refrain from intentional sexual activity.
- I undertake the training to refrain from false speech.
- I undertake the training to refrain from taking intoxicants which could cloud the mind and cause heedlessness.

May this virtue of mine help bring about knowledge of the path and its fruits. May this virtue of mine bring about knowledge of the path and its fruits. So, let's go. Those of you who are, we encourage you to go to that. It's a good night's sleep. And we'd like to go in there earlier than usual for those of you who are living in this time zone usually. And the meditation hall is always open. So if you want to come and sit here and be on the nights, or if you're late to survive, or if you're early, we're welcome to do that. In the morning, some of us will set up one year in the morning. And we might take a little bit of a delay to figure out the first time out, because we're staying all up and finding for the usual. So, but if you want to go into sitting stuff from here and have it ready and you want to just place it right there, it's probably going to do that. It'll be easier. It'll become a little early. And, like I said, to be aware that the book of online might be right. So, you certainly don't want to get any experience sitting there. Well, it's kind of the decree now and then. and I hope you all sleep well and deeply. And that will be an awesome, great place. And that's the greatest place is, how to feel, what it was ready to do, what it was coming to do, which is say, here are you in a good way to live the best day of the end? Or at the end, and may you think at the end and sit well and deeply and refresh the beginning and the end of the day. Thank you.