

## Sunday Formal Opening: Sitting Meditation and Teaching

**Gil Fronsdal, Andrea Castillo**

**October 26, 2025**

**Keywords:** saṅgha, five hindrances, five faculties, vīriya, samādhi, precepts, refuge, mindfulness, faith, stories

---

So, those of you here at IRC, welcome to our two meditation halls, the sitting meditation hall and the walking meditation hall. We're part of our Saṅgha sitting now, I believe, hopefully hearing the interpretation into English, into Spanish. And for those of you at home or other places where you're attending, participating with us all online, I hope that you have a place that you've established in your home or in your room that is your meditation spot. That it's a place that we'll have by associations, we'll have some familiarity and a place that's meaningful for you to sit down and to sit there. So if you hear things about being here in this hall, it's meant to be kind of a place for you to feel at home. And part of that is just knowing a little bit about you can use any IRC sitting gear that you need to vary what you do at different times.

But if you're not using something, put it back in the shelf so other people can use it. And the idea is not to reserve two places in the hall for yourself. Either reserve a chair or a place on the mats. And then you can go back and forth. You'll find something empty if you need something. But sometimes when people reserve both, then there's not enough people who have been sitting on the floor can't find someplace in a seat because it says reserved.

So, and then... The, and you know, some people sit in chairs and you can sit in any chair that is, you know, comfortable for you. I see here that the, I don't know what those chairs are doing there, but that's for you. Good. So just like Andrea brought the black mess chairs, if those work better for you, you can bring them into the hall. They have some of these chairs are found in what's called the fire closet.

If you go out past the water fountain to the right, there's a closet there that has half a dozen of them there. Or if there's a special, there's some unique chairs in some of the rooms. And if that turns out that chair works really well for you, then you can bring it in here. So we want

you to be able to be comfortable when you're sitting here. And if you're a practice leader, meaning that you're going to be sitting up here during the meditation sessions, there is an art to ring the bell. And what you might want to do if you've never rung this bell before is to come up here sometime when no one's here, maybe like after the beginning of breakfast, when people are downstairs, you can come up and practice.

And, you know, we say in English to strike the bell, but you don't actually strike it. It's more like you kiss it. It's more like you just graze it very gently. And one way to do it is you don't hold the striker. It's unfortunate you call it a striker. But we hold it very loose in the fingers, kind of like so it wobbles almost in your hand, the fingers rather than fisting up around it.

And then you come, there's two ways of doing it. If you come from the outside towards it, you don't go straight in, but you come kind of like an arc. Like if I do really do a wide gesture, you kind of go like this. And then as you lift your hand up, you let it drop, and then you keep going up. So just grazing off the top corner there or something like that. And then you don't want to do it too loud.

It's better to do it too soft, because you can always redo the do-it. But the loud kind of everyone jangles everyone, people sitting quietly, and so you want to just... That's why you come up here and practice, to make sure you don't go... It's very common for people who never did it before, go back. Because they think you're doing it softly, but it's... The other way of doing it, which a lot of people here at IRC who've done this for a long time like to do, is to have the striker get very loose in the hands and put it down into the bowl and then swing it.

And so it strikes the bowl just as you're about to swing back. So you're kind of going towards the edge, and as it swings towards it, you pull it back. So it can... and that way you get the most resonance. And you don't have to hold it like I was just holding it up so you can see. Oops. It's a little bit easier, I think, to do it from the inside than on the outside. And it's important not to move the bell. It could be moved over here to the corner. If you're a chair sitter for this, you just move it over here and put it there.

And the reason is that it's wired. You'll see that there's wire and a microphone here. And someone, one of the wonderful practitioners here at Our World, figured out how to... not have to turn on the original sound on Zoom so that the bell sound sounds nice for everyone on Zoom. And so there's a whole system, an electronic system, I don't know what it's called works, but that's so it uses this mic that's right down here, wired mic. So you can move it over there, but not much more than that.

And there is a schedule here on this day up here. And one of the things that, some of the

different sits are different lengths of time. There's some that are 30, some which are like 35 or 40, some which are 45. And so it's kind of hard to keep track. You kind of guess, you kind of assume they're all the same or something. So just check the schedule here when you first day or whenever you need to. Because it's relatively common for someone to just have the schedule off. They ring this, the end is sitting too early or they ring it too late. So that's what the schedule appears. You can check.

So we're about to start now the formal beginning of the retreat. And we do that by first... giving you a little introduction to the theme of the retreat. It's common here at IRC to have themes that the teachers share and kind of creates a kind of thread that goes through the days. And sometimes they build on each other or they reinforce each other. And there's a sense of continuity, which I think works very well because your experience in the retreat will have, believe it or not, a continuity to it as well.

It's a journey you're on. and to have a theme that somehow kind of matches or coordinates or represents that sense of continuity, it's maybe a little bit better than having just kind of desperate themes in different talks at different times. And there's no clear sense of how they kind of flow together. And then I'll talk a little bit with that, and then Andrea will... talk a little bit about the refuges and precepts and lead you through, lead all of us through it, chanting them, reciting them. And that's the heart of the formal beginning. And when we finish those chants, then we will be in full silence for the retreat.

There might be some functional speech you have to do if you're sharing a job with someone or something, but the idea is to keep it silent and... And the degree of silence we want here is also to be, avoid silent communication, not just talking communication. So, you know, so it's best not to communicate with someone silently by touching them, even if you're just kind of walking by them to make sure that, you know, that you're reminding them you're there or something, you just touch them lightly on the elbow or something. or, you know, there are all kinds of reasons why some people are familiar with touching others. In this environment, that communicates too much. It's kind of a little bit jarring for people, some people in this environment to be touched.

It helps to create a sense of safety, that their physical boundaries are kind of, you know, cared for. And, you know, if you do, if your eyes end up... looking at each other that way, and just kind of be relaxed and look away. You know, appreciate the moment, but don't linger. The idea is to kind of leave each person, and part of that is actually a form of generosity that allows each person to have their own experience. And any kind of assumption that you're supposed to have some communication with them, even touching or smiling or doing some-

thing, You don't know how that's going to be received. You don't know their background, their life experience, and how that's interpreted and for cultural and personal reasons.

And so they just, they adhere to very generously. Let each person be navigating their own experience. It's kind of keep to yourself. Another thing that it's a regular request that me is to emphasize how important it is here to be very quiet how you open and close the doors here. These doors that we have are very special doors required by the fire marshal. So they're really heavy doors.

And so if you let them swing close, they bang really loudly and they reverberate down the hallways. And some people have very light sleep and so it's kind of hard for them. Some people have a startle effect that can stir them up. And even sometimes the clicking of the doors when you close them, that click is a little bit of funny sound for some people. So the IRC way of opening a door and closing a door is consider the door to be sacred. Like there's a whole, we do sitting meditation, we do walking meditation, we do eating meditation, we do work meditation, and we do door meditation.

It's that important. And so just you and the door. There's a famous story of Thomas Merton, who's one of the kind of well-known American Catholic monks. And someone asked him, all your years in the monastery, what did you learn? How to open and close doors? Yes. So this is a monastic thing. So you want to kind of really be there with the door. It's a time to notice whether you're operating on automatic pilot. You know, you're about to get into your private space. You can just like forget this crazy retreat and, you know, go let your mind go and think about something else.

And no, you're there to be just with the door. And you have to, you touch the handle, you turn the handle down. You open the door mindfully, you really feel what it's like. And symbolically, you're always stepping into a different space. So you want to really be there to notice what's going on. And then the important thing is how you close it.

If you want to close it mindfully, still holding the handle, and have the handle, hold the handle all the way until the door is closed, where it touches gently. It's like kissing the bell. You want to kiss the frame of the door with the door. And as you do so, the handle should be down. So make sure your handle is down when you're closing the door, because then it doesn't click. And that's exquisite. The silence of a clickless door. Oh, what that can do for your meditation and your heart and what they're going to teach you about freedom is phenomenal. So you want to really clickless, you know, and then once you have the door all closed, then you lift up that handle and no click. So that's a big plug for, please be careful with the doors.

That's the big, be careful. It's a way of caring for the community. So the theme of the retreat, I'll start with stories. There are scholars of religion who say that the heart of religions are not their doctrines, but their stories. And stories are what moves people the most. Stories are a very important part of human life.

But there are stories that are beneficial and stories that harm us. And as an example of this, I want to tell two stories. One story is of a... that comes from China. there was a great painter who was going to paint a tiger, large life-size tiger in a big piece of paper, a big canvas, and spend a long time really close in making all the details of the tiger and just really absorbed in the tiger world. And then finally the tiger was done. They ordered a step back, I don't know, five, six, seven feet to look at the tiger. and it was so realistic, he forgot that it was painted, and he ran away scared. We're capable of telling ourselves stories that has the same effect. We tell ourselves stories that frighten us, we tell ourselves stories that trigger a lot of desire and greed, we tell ourselves stories that trigger anger and resentment.

We repeat these stories, repeat them sometimes for decades, go back to them over and over again. There are stories we tell about our abilities. I can't do it, it's too difficult for me, I'll give up. That's a little story than we tell. It might be more elaborate sometimes. There are stories that cause fear and cause depression. And as I've often say, that some psychologists will say that one of the leading causes of depression is rumination. is repeating the same story over and over again. And the mood of the story is not good. It's like mood music of a movie.

This is kind of, I mean, it's just over and over again. And it begins to wear us away. It kind of conditions us, shapes us, if we're always with the same stories. So we want to be careful with that. So we don't create our own tigers. And then we get frightened by it or angry with it or something.

The other story is a gardener who had been frightened, had been upset, had difficulties. But the gardener who didn't, would plant these great vegetable bed and flower beds and would plant these seeds, plant these seedlings, and then every day would go out and kind of look at them and care for them and water them and sometimes provide more... nutrition for them. And it was just so delicate, you know, that the gardener knew that they couldn't cause the plants to grow, so it was even more like their little babies. Was there tending them, caring for them, loving them, watching them grow? And lo and behold, the miracle of plant growth happened. And every day there was a little change in development and growth.

And some of the plants grew to beautiful flowers, some grew to create wonderful fruits or vegetables that could be eaten. And it was just kind of like the way to see the unfolding and the growth. And it was so meaningful for the gardener that the gardener grew. the gardener

changed, got softer, got calmer, kind of began to feel that there was something inside that was also tender and warm and peaceful and wasn't so afraid. Something that was not angry, something that was not filled with desire and greed. And so here something beautiful happened.

So the theme for this retreat are represented by these two stories. The stories that we tell us that are debilitating are associated with the hindrances, the five hindrances. And the story that has to do with allowing this plant to grow are the five faculties. Five faculties are seeds or capacities that we have that as we do our mindfulness practice, we're kind of seeing and feeling and tending and supporting and helping to grow. And as these grow, of course we will grow because they are us. And these are natural capacities that we can develop.

The hindrances are sensual desire, greed, desires, ill-will, hatred, hostility, Usually when we say in English, sloth and torpor, I think of it as resistance and lethargy. And then there's restlessness and regrets. And finally there's doubt, uncertainties, indecisiveness. And each of these, part of the reason why they're so strong in us, is not because they're kind of motivational states, but because they're motivational states that are supported by stories. If you pay careful attention to hindrances, you can see there are thought stories. that are what these things will do, like sensual desire.

There might be imaginations of anticipating some wonderful sensual experience you're going to have. And some of you can look forward to the oatmeal in the morning. I mean, that's going to be exciting. And you might spend your night thinking about oatmeal. You can't go to sleep. But it's all about what the oatmeal is going to do for you, and how brilliant it would be, and it's going to be just right to get you enlightened.

and you can't get off the oatmeal track. Or it might be thoughts of ill-will and hatred. And there's a whole story around that. How can they have buckwheat zafus here in their cushion? I mean, don't they know buckwheat is like the wrong thing for my butt? And, you know, I feel like they're really out to get me, and how could they? And so the story builds, you know, about how they could have done these buckwheat cushions And you can't sleep. You can't, you know, you're too agitated to sit anymore on the buckwheat cushions because it's a personal affront. And so these five hindrances, the Pāli word, the ancient world word literally means coverings. There's something that hides.

And so the five hindrances hide. the five beautiful qualities that can grow. They get in the way, they cover them over, they smother them. And the five beautiful qualities called the five faculties are usually, most commonly call it faith, faith, confidence, trust, energy, strength, sometimes called courage, sometimes just called effort, *vīriya*. And then there's mindfulness,

sometimes I call it awareness. And then there's concentration, which is kind of an unfortunate and narrowing translation of the word *samādhi*. *Samādhi* is a state of unification, of unity. And then there's wisdom. And these five, they're more like states. than they are practices.

We do the practice of attention, and we tend and care for this inner garden that we have, and these begin to grow and develop. So because of the hindrances or what smothers or shuts out, turns, shuts out, keeps out the light, the sunlight, from letting these plants or the faculties to grow, We're going to talk about these together. So we've paired one of the faculties with one of the hindrances for the first five talks of the retreat. And that'll be the theme. So we'll see what kind of tigers and gardens that you bring with us, bring with you to this retreat.

And maybe you'll understand that the tigers are just figments of your imagination. and it's safe and appropriate to put them down, to relax, to retire some of these stories. Some of your stories have been around for a while. It's time to retire them. And that in the meantime, then you'll learn about something really tender and beautiful that exists within you, these five faculties. which in the way the ancient Buddhist teachings work, these five faculties first are just faculties or capacities we have that we can use. But once they start waking up, they become... and they're no longer called faculties, they're called strengths. The five strengths. And that's when the hindrances no longer block them out. The hindrances are not covering them over, hiding them.

So that'll be the theme. And with that, I'm just delighted to be sitting up here with Andrea. Pass it on to you. These stories that Gil was talking about, it's wonderful to hear the light stories that Gil mentioned because we can all laugh. But we know we tell ourselves some stories that are so... believable that we really, first of all, don't see. They're invisible to us.

And have been with us for so long, and they have a way of entering our mind like a cloud, so gentle that we don't even notice until we are suffering. So may we in this retreat develop more the capacity to notice when these very, very old stories that we tell ourselves become something we can see, we can see clearly. And so now we're going to move over to one of the few rituals that we have in our practice. This tradition is light on the rituals, but we have this lovely ritual at the beginning of the retreat where we take refuge So you might want to think for yourself, what do you understand with the words to take refuge? Like you take refuge from the rain under a roof.

But here we're talking about taking refuge in the Buddha, in the Dhamma or Dharma, and in the Saṅgha. Most of you have heard this many, many, many times, but I think it's always

helpful to stop and ask yourself right now, what does it mean to me to take refuge in the Buddha? For those of you who are newer, can possibly think of the noble qualities of the Buddha that are possible to be found within you. And even in the most small sprout, that we can find it and grow it, And then the teachings. What a wonderful thing to have this body of wisdom that we can grow together with.

And these are teachings that we come back over and over and over again through the years, that we need to hear many times. And then suddenly we hear it as if it were the first time. And many of us say, why didn't the teachers tell me this before? Thing is, you have heard it before, but you weren't ready to take it in. It's very interesting. It's this timing of when you're ready. It's like this seed that Gil was talking about just falls in the ground the right time. And the soil is ready. And then the Saṅgha. For those who are here in person, we know what a beautiful... support we get from sitting together, for feeling each other's company, for feeling this respect, this way of showing up with awareness, with kindness for each other.

And so we're building this container together. And for those who are doing it online, it's a lovely thing that we can do retreats at home, online. And we want to remember the power of the Saṅgha and always make an effort to even if it takes driving a little bit or walking or whatever it is, go and be part of a physical Saṅgha if you can. So chanting is a lovely way of keeping this tradition of centuries going in the same language that the Buddha first conceived it. So we'll chant it in Pāli, and most of you know it, and we will repeat it three times. And then the precepts will do them just in English, okay?

So you may bring your hands together if you wish, and if not, you don't have to. It's really how it feels right for you. And we just do it together. We don't need to do call and response. So we start with namutasa, okay?

Namutasa, Bhagavata, Araha, Samma, Sambudasa.

Namutasa Bhagavata Arahato Samma Sambudasa

Buddha Saranam Gacchāmi

Dhammaṃ Gacchāmi

Saṅghaṃ Saranam Gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Buddhaṃ Saranam Gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ Saranam Gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Saṅghaṃ Saranam Gacchāmi

And now we go to the five training precepts. And this is a wonderful way to offer each other the gift of safety. If we all follow these precepts, we are making each other safe for the other.



The other one knows that they can be safe with us. So the first one, not refraining from taking life. You know that we have these little cups here with the cardboard, so if you see a little bug in here, please use the bug catcher, take it out.

We are in a place where we don't lock doors, because we understand that we respect each other's property. We can be safe with each other. And in this context, we do not express our sexual energy. It's a way to just learn to be with it. It's a beautiful opportunity to just see it arise, be with it, get to know it. Don't have to follow it and just watch it eventually will cease. and refrain from lying. Here you're pretty safe since you're not talking, but in your interviews, I mean, you might want to really watch carefully and see if there's a little bit of a tendency to exaggerate something that's going well. We all kind of do that sometimes. And the last one is about not intoxicating the mind.

Please, if you need to take medications, by all means, you continue taking them, but we don't take recreational drugs. Good. So, we will just, I will just say the first half and then you repeat, and then the second half and then we repeat.

- For the sake of our training together. For the sake of our training together. I undertake the precept to refrain from taking life. I undertake the precept to refrain from taking life.
- For the sake of our training together, I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given.
- For the sake of our training together, I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct.
- For the sake of our training together, I undertake the precept to refrain from lying.
- For the sake of our training together, I undertake the precept to refrain from intoxicating body and mind. I undertake the precept to refrain from intoxicating body and mind.

Thank you. And I would just sit for a couple minutes in silence before we go to bed. Today's been a long day, so it'll just be a couple minutes. So the retreat has now begun. And by design, we end the formal practice this opening night by 8.30. And that's because people are often tired when they come, and it's really a good idea to try to get a full night's sleep and go to bed early.

If you prefer to stay up, The meditation hall is always open, even in the middle of the night. You can come here if you want to sit. So you're welcome to stay. But if it's all, everything's equal to you. I encourage you to go to bed and sleep well. And sometimes also the first morning, it's sometimes nice to sleep in and skip that first sitting, just because there's more

people in this country need to sleep, they need to meditate. So you just catch up a little bit and get refreshed. But it's best if you didn't come late to breakfast or if you have a Saṅgha service job, that's important, which they all are. That if you wake up for that. And may you sleep well and deeply?

You've come to a really good place to be. And there's a lot of tremendous amount of love and goodwill in this building and in this walls. Yeah. in your rooms. And I hope that you'll feel the ambience of all the people who want you to be here and want to support you to be here, and that you'll be cozy, comfortable, and sleep well and deeply tonight. May you wake up well rested. Thank you.