

Formal Opening: Sitting Meditation and Teaching

Gil Fronsdal, Adrienne Ross

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Let's see, now it comes. You know, when I was being trained to be an insight *mettā* teacher, they failed to teach me about buttons and technology, and it just, that wasn't part of the training. So I'm kind of slow to learn all this, but I did remember to record today. Last retreat, I didn't. So, welcome to your meditation hall. I think of this room here as kind of the physical heart of IRC, and it's meant to be your home, your meditation home for this week.

And I hope that that proves to be the case, that you come to find that this is a very meaningful place to be. You feel like you belong here, that this is your own place for this week. I don't take it lightly, the group of people who've gathered together to do a retreat like this. This is an exceptional thing to do, to do this kind of retreat, personal work, spiritual work, liberative work that this practice entails. One way or the other, it has something to do with some of the deepest parts of our hearts, deepest parts of our being, deepest suffering, deepest possibility of freedom, deepest possibility of goodness. And it's a journey to learn to touch into that, make room for that, to welcome the depths of yourself, maybe in a little bit the way I welcomed you all to this meditation home of yours, to really discover what's here.

And we're doing this together. And to have a group of people to do this kind of work together is a remarkable thing to do. And I kind of assume that there is a powerful connection between all of us now. There's a powerful commonality. There's a powerful shared purpose, shared care, shared care for each other, support for each other. It's not a small thing that goes on here.

And it's all too easy to take others for granted, to see the surface of someone, and not to appreciate their depth. Everyone here has a phenomenal depth. This practice is about our depth, and to be careful with each other, care for each other, and see if you can really see past some of the surface ways in which we often evaluate each other or judge each other or

all kinds of things that we do, because here we're doing something very different. Here we're really helping each other, supporting each other, to really be able to see the deep, deep kind of goodness, the deep, deep wholeness that we all are, we're all capable of, and it's a shared journey we're taking here. And so to value, for all of us, to value each one of us, each and every one of us, because we really do this as a community.

We really do this with the support of each other. I can say very confidently, I couldn't have practiced as much, I couldn't have benefited as much from the practice if I hadn't been doing it with communities of people practicing. I didn't know it at the time. I just thought it was a coincidence I had to practice with people. But it turned out that it was invaluable. And so here we are, to share this for this week.

I thank you very much, each one of you, for being here. And I'm looking very much forward to our time together, to meeting each of you, and offering what support we can for this journey that we're all on. And I think I know Adrian very well, that I think I can speak for her. She has the same feelings of how wonderful it is to share this journey together. And it'll be part of the wonderfulness of this retreat, the online community.

So there's more people online than there are people here in person. And we have a wonderful teacher for them, Ines Friedman, who's guiding them there and doing practice discussions with them. And they'll be with us. This room is open, the meditation room is open all the time for anybody to come and sit. And my guess is that there's not going to be any hour of the 24 hours where someone's not sitting in this hall, whether it's someone, one of you, or our community that's online practicing with us here.

And then, the way we do these retreats, at the end of the retreat, you'll have a chance to meet them in this wonderful, magical way in which the entire technology allows us to do. So, a couple of things about being in this room. There are some chairs, and you see signs on them saying it's for occasional use only, and that's so that you don't claim it for yourself. And there's a little sign on the wall just above the chair that points down at it. And so that way, first come, first serve, some people who are sitting on the floor can always have an opportunity, a chance to find a place, a chair that's empty.

And if we need more chairs in here, you're welcome to bring other chairs in here. And then, by this point, there probably won't be any good places along the wall, but you might be able to just put it on one of the cushions or one of the mats, or fold the mat to the side. And there are more of the black mesh chairs in what's called the fire closet. So if you go out here to where the water fountains are and down the little hallway, the next door is a closet that has foldable black mesh chairs. Some people find those work much better for sitting in for meditation. So

you're welcome to bring those in here.

In the last year or two, there seems to be often a group of people who like to sit just outside the door there in the foyer. I'm not quite sure of all the reasons for it, but I'm sure they have reasons. So that's been an option. So also we ask you don't reserve both a place on the floor for yourself and a place on a chair. So don't reserve two places for yourself, because we want to make maximum possibility that everyone can find something available depending on what they need at any given time.

And the chances are really high that if you should reserve one, if you need to use the other chair or cushion on the floor, you'll find it. It'll be available if everyone shares on this kind of idea. And tomorrow morning, before the first walking meditation period, which I think will be about 9:30, there'll be some instructions in walking meditation. So if you see that on the schedule or are wondering how we do it here, the instructions will be given for that. And then we have the walking hall next door, which is a wonderful place. If you wanted to use the walking hall, you walk a short distance.

But starting Tuesday, twice a day during the afternoon meditation sessions, we'll have our affinity sits there. And I believe it's the BIPOC group affinity sit that meets at 1:45 sitting there, and the LGBTQ that meets at 3:15 sitting there. And the first day on Tuesday there'll be a member of the community who will welcome you and just kind of get it set up. It's a very simple way of being welcomed and being connected. And then it's a silent sitting there. And it's proven to be a very important part of our community here at IRC to have the affinity sits.

I feel like it strengthened the whole community to have it, supported a lot of people to be here in a fuller way. So, we'll announce it again, but that'll be happening on Tuesday. So I think that's kind of the basic logistics I want to say right now. Maybe I'll say some more at the end. But does anyone have any questions at this point that would help you be more settled for being here? Maybe it all seems clear enough or trustable enough to go along for the ride.

Yes, but you have to speak louder for my ear. There's a specific area for stretching. Oh, you can stretch, yeah, you can stretch outside on the deck, and probably on the deck because the dirt's wet now. But all the decks are going to be, you do yoga there and stretch. It's that wonderful carpet in the community hall down there. It's pretty impressive, the things that can happen there.

Some people will do walking meditation back and forth, first come, first serve, but they'll

do the walking meditation back and forth. It's very nice on the carpet. And there's people who do their yoga and things. There's people who take their nap there. So yeah. But we ask that you don't do stretching and yoga in here, and probably not in the walking hall next door, unless you're the only one there.

But if someone comes, you should let them be, let it be a walking hall. So we'll have Adrienne, she's going to... So at these retreats at IRC, especially the ones I teach, there's always a theme. And the theme creates a thread through the retreat that's kind of supporting the journey. I think of retreats as journeys. And if you've never been on retreat before, trust the journey.

And often the beginning of almost any journey is a little bit hard. Getting used to it, getting settled in. And so we'll probably have some rough patches the first day or two, but that's just part of the journey. And you'll be in a very different place at the end of the week than you are at the beginning. And it's a wonderful path to be on. And so anyway, so we have a theme and Adrian is going to... Push yourself first. Yeah. Adrian is going to provide that.

So... Thank you, Gil. So welcome everyone. It's wonderful to be here even if it's on Zoom. I really wanted to be with you all in person, but here we are. So, as Gil mentioned, we have a theme and all of you came with a range of different motivations and intentions.

Some to see more deeply, others for peace, perhaps to see more clearly, for healing, to build resources, and really wanting to align with non-suffering for ourselves, each other, and healing for the earth. It's difficult enough to be with our own personal difficulties, let alone the suffering of the world. And because there are so many causes, our distress and ability to cope and function get really threatened. And the Buddha taught about only one thing, suffering and the end of suffering, and that happiness is possible. And some of the most transformative and liberating insights that result from our practice are known as the three characteristics.

And I'm sure some of you are familiar with them, but they are insights first into the fact that everything is inconstant, unstable. That's the insight into impermanence, **anicca**, that everything is always changing. And the more we want it to stay the same, it won't. The more we want it to change, it doesn't in the way we want it to. And so the second characteristic is that things are unsatisfactory. Nothing can give us lasting, guaranteed happiness. That's **dukkha**.

And then finally, that there isn't a solid separate self, **anattā**. Or as I like to use the three P's, permanent, perfect, and personal. Things are not permanent, perfect, or personal. And those insights are challenging because so much of it, of all of them, are about learning not to cling. And we really want to hold on. It's just such a conditioned response. And that push-pull

of I want, I don't want.

And so as a way of laying the ground for those insights to arise, because often we talk about those insights sort of towards the late middle or end of a retreat, we wanted to give you an opportunity to cultivate qualities that would support that transformation. So the first quality would be stability. That provides a kind of grounding from which to explore change. So we start to hold on a little less tightly. And we need that stability. And you're familiar with that because of our mindfulness practice.

That's what we're doing with mindfulness, wise effort, concentration. We're building stability. And the second quality is well-being, sometimes joy. But really it's more well-being that gives us the strength to really be able to look at and understand suffering. And where we have a choice to be able, if we're comfortable and at ease, it's easier to see, oh, I don't have to do that. Oh, I could let go there. Or there's an option actually to not suffer in this situation.

And then the third one is confidence. And that's a growing faith or deep self-trust in our practice and our capacities. And that's about if we can feel safe and trust in ourselves, we're able to release more into our experience as not being solid and unchanging. We're more and more able to be with things without identifying with them or becoming them. We're able to see, oh, this is just a mind state. Depression is arising rather than I'm a depressed person. And we have the confidence to really get, that's how it is. This is a mind state. It's not me.

And so we'll be exploring cultivating stability, well-being, and confidence over the next few days here. One of the most helpful groups for me of the Buddha's teachings that comes in the *Eightfold Path* is wise effort. Where the Buddha saw really clearly we're always cultivating something. There are thoughts I have that lead to skillful actions, or there are thoughts that I have that lead to really unskillful ones. And it's possible to recognize that certain habit patterns increase suffering while others lead to well-being and non-harming and liberation.

And so he taught to avoid and abandon the ones that make things more unsatisfactory, maintain the ones that lead to well-being. And of course always from a place of having mindfulness established. And I love this from the Buddha. And I'll probably say it again at some point during the retreat. He says,

Seat yourself with body erect and establish mindfulness in front. So foremost, foremost mindfulness. Do not occupy the mind with self-affliction or the affliction of others or the affliction of both. Sit with the mindset on your own welfare, the welfare of others, on the welfare of both, and even on the welfare of the whole world.

And so starting to see throughout the retreat, what am I cultivating? Is it leading to stability

or to more restlessness? Is it leading to more suffering or to well-being and so forth? And I like to, for me, it helps to think of what seeds am I planting. And I'll just give you an example for what happened in the last 24 to 36 hours.

I had checked into my flight and later in the morning I started getting some chest pain, and I have angina and normally it's controlled. And I thought, I don't live very far from the hospital. I'll go get an ECG and, you know, a quick blood test and just make sure I'm okay. And so I go in to do that. But there is a young doctor who is very determined to have things right and, you know, do it by the book. And so before I know what's happening, I've been given a gown and I'm in a bed.

And she said, we're admitting you, you're not getting a flight. And I'm like, what do you mean I'm not getting a flight? I'm supposed to be leaving tomorrow morning. I'm teaching a retreat. I didn't say this. And I'm thinking, Gil and I planned this over two years ago, and we thought 2025 would never come. You can't do this to me. And I just felt awful.

But she said, well, you can leave if you want, but you'll have to sign a waiver saying you've left against doctor's advice, which sort of made me calm down a bit. And I sort of, I thought, oh, is there any stability here? No. And what do I need to do? Oh, I could breathe for a few moments, close my eyes, and she goes off to do her thing. And then I noticed all these thoughts coming in about this shouldn't be happening to me. That's what happens that causes more suffering. We resist how it is.

And so, oh, what am I cultivating? I'm cultivating resistance. I'm cultivating, it's the not-fair two-year-old. I'm cultivating states that are leading to a lot more suffering. What seeds could I sow? And, oh, this is really hard. I could sow some kindness and compassion, and I felt that. And then more acceptance came. This is how it is.

And I saw into the *anattā* part, I'm identified with not growing old and not having sickness or death. I've identified with that. And so that started to release too. And so I was able to be with things as they were or as they are. And that's so helpful. There was so much less suffering than there could have been. And very grateful for that.

So encouragement to see if you can give yourself kind attention during this retreat, to have that be one of the first things that we cultivate, kind attention. And am I being attached to expectations? Do I want something else to be happening in my meditation? And you can hear how there's a sense of humor in that. We're not being hard on ourselves. We're cultivating curiosity, kindness.

And so those are some of the things we'll be exploring with you in the next few days. I'm really

looking forward to meeting some of you, unfortunately on Zoom. I wish I could see you all in the hall, and actually I guess I should say in reassurance I was fine enough that they let me go home. They just weren't going to let me on the plane. I think one of the most important things we can do at the beginning of a retreat is align with non-harming and giving a gift of friendliness and well-being to everyone else on the retreat. And so Denise is going to share the refuges and precepts with us, I believe. So I'm turning it over to Denise.

Good evening, everyone. So we take this first kind of gathered together practice of creating a sense of safety and refuge for ourselves and each other by doing this ritual of taking the refuges and precepts together. And for those of you that this is new to, and for those of you just as a good refresher. And as I talk about these, see if you can move into your heart. First, we'll talk about the refuges.

And it's interesting, the word refuge means to fly back to. It's really beautiful. So what we're doing when we take refuge is we're remembering where a safe home is for us in our practice. And we take refuge in the Buddha, in the *Dhamma*, and the *Saṅgha*. And when we take refuge in the Buddha, we can bring to heart the wholesome qualities of the Buddha, the qualities of kindness and compassion and clarity, freedom.

And if you touch into your own heart and sense into these inherent qualities that are here within us, but we often lose contact with them for a myriad of reasons. So we take refuge in our goodness, our Buddha nature. And then we also, secondly, we take refuge in the *Dhamma* or the teachings, these priceless teachings that lead us from suffering to freedom. And that we practice, we study, we listen to over and over, and slowly but inevitably, they permeate our whole being. Little by little bit, there's more and more freedom. And so we take refuge in the *Dhamma*, these teachings.

And then we take refuge in the *Saṅgha*. All around the world, millions of people are practicing the *Dhamma* right now, just like we are. And in this room and on Zoom, here we all are together practicing to end suffering, both in ourselves and with the kind of ripple effect out into the world, which we all know is so important right now. Offering a sense of refuge to each other, of safety, of ease, of kindness. So we take refuge in these, the triple gem, these jewels.

And we'll do this by chanting in *Pāli*, this 2600-year-old practice of taking refuge. And I'll do it call and response. And so if it's new to you, just play. The words may or may not come easily, but just let it be playful. So... And I'll just start with the, do just two words at a time.

Namotasa Namotasa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhassa. We'll do the next two times

altogether. Namotasa, Bhagavato, Arahato, Sama, Sambuddhassa. Namotasa, Bhagavato, Arahato, Sama, Sambuddhassa. And now we'll take refuge in the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Saṅgha*.

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

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

Tatiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Tatiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Tatiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Tatiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Tatiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Tatiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

These refuges that we fly back to over and over as we practice this week. And then this other practice, these training precepts that we undertake while we're here on retreat as a way of offering safety to both ourselves and each other, the safety of non-harming in these different ways. And the first training precept is to refrain from taking life. And so if you find a bug in the room, just going ahead and seeing if you can usher it back outside is just one example. But this commitment to being a safe refuge for all of life.

And then the second precept we'll take is the precept of respecting each other's things and even space, like when you're in line, like just allowing people room and going slowly. So not taking that which isn't freely given and really offering each other this safety that way. And then the third precept, this precept of really refraining from engaging in any sexual energy. And this includes like making eye contact and just creating a space where everyone can tune into their own energy and that they know they're safe with one another. And even, you know, any time during the retreat, not engaging in that. And at the end of the retreat too, like not leaning in, if you find yourself kind of paying attention to particular people, just notice that and allow your energy to come into your own body.

And then the fourth precept of not engaging in false or harmful speech, which is pretty easy for the most part because we're not talking. But also to look at how you're talking to yourself internally. And just being attuned to that, this commitment to not be harmful toward ourselves, it can really help clarify what's happening in our practice to make that internal commitment too. So practicing in that way, and also this ties into noble silence, of really respecting that this is a place for us to turn inward and not making eye contact with each other,

communicating that way or touching each other to communicate. So just be really mindful of that too.

And lastly, we engage in this precept of not engaging or clouding the mind by using intoxicants in any way. And of course, if you're taking medications, always, of course, take your medications, but anything that's extra that might cloud the mind. So all of these are about creating a sense of safety internally for ourselves and with each other in the larger community, so that the heart and mind can be as bright and as clear as possible. So we can take these together as a way of this shared commitment to one another. And so I'll just, we'll do this in call and response.

So I'll just say the first portion of the precept, and then we'll all say that together. And then the second part of it is feeling into the body and into the heart. And really feeling this intention of kindness and safety for one another, for ourselves, really offering this space where the whole body and heart can relax in ease, knowing you are held with the utmost care in this *Saṅgha*, whether it's online or in person. We'll begin with the first precept.

I undertake the training precept to refrain from taking life. I undertake the training precept to refrain from taking that which is not freely given. I undertake the training precept to refrain from sexual misconduct. I undertake the training precept to refrain from harmful speech. And I undertake the training precept to refrain from the use of intoxicants.

Just letting those settle for a moment in your body, in your heart. May we take these precepts for the benefit of all. Just sit for a few minutes, feeling the gift of this intention to be a safe refuge for each other during this retreat. Such a gift of generosity to offer these to ourselves and each other in the world.

So before I wish you a good night, tomorrow morning, as I said, you're welcome to sleep in, though the bells will probably wake you, just turn over and go back to sleep if you'd like. But it's nice to get up to do the *Saṅgha* service at 6:40. And some of you will be doing this for the first time, and finding the tools and understanding what to do. You might have questions, and the managers will be circulating around. And so they'll be just walking around, so you probably don't have to wait too long before one of them shows up. And you can ask them a question about something.

And so I hope that you'll use this opportunity to go to bed early. For some of you, maybe it's not early. It's really late from where you come from, and that you sleep well. And I hope that my wish is that something deep in you, your subconscious, your heart somewhere deep inside, recognizes that we're being carried here at IRC by the goodness of, and the love, the

care, generosity of many, many people who have kind of filled the space, filled the walls, the floor, and your room with a lot of history, of goodness, of practice, of care and love, and so that you go to bed feeling like you're in a really good place to be. And you sleep well and deeply, refreshed for tomorrow morning. Thank you.