

Formal Opening: Sitting Meditation and Teaching

Gil Fronsdal, Andrea Fella

November 30, 2025

Keywords: Vipassanā, Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha, six sense bases, sense contact, precepts, noble silence, refuges, mindfulness

So we'll start with about a 10 minute sit. And I want to just check and see, can those of you online hear me? Thumbs up if you can hear me. Great. Okay, so we'll start with about a 10 minute sit.

So welcome to the meditation hall, whether you're here in the room or in your own home, those of you practicing at home. You are sharing this space with us through the camera on the iPad here in front of us. We can see some of you on the screen. And so the hall is, you can think of it almost as one of your homes here on the retreat. And so we want you to feel comfortable here in the hall and you're welcome to use, for those of you here, you're welcome to use the equipment that's in the foyer, whatever supports you may need to find your body in a posture that works for you.

And there's a few things. So the chairs are available. We have some chairs that are indicated for occasional use, so not to claim those particular chairs. And those of you on the floor, you're welcome to move, but move back and forth to those chairs if you wish. And if you find that the chairs in this room are not suitable for your body, you're welcome to swap them out for either one of the black folding chairs, if that's more comfortable for your body, or perhaps one of the turquoise chairs in the community room.

We want you to find a way to support your body. And those of you who are sitting in chairs, these foot pads are a nice way to get your legs at the right height. If your legs are a little bit shorter like mine are, it's nice to have that support. I also find these are really good for standing meditation. If you do standing meditation, it's a nice support for standing meditation.

And in terms of the sound, how is the sound here in the room? Everybody's okay in the room and online, or is the sound okay online? I've got some thumbs up online. Okay, great. If you

do find that you're having trouble hearing, there are spots in the room that are easier to hear in. And you can see where the speakers are.

You know, this spot over here is particularly a dead zone because there's not speakers there. So if you find you have trouble hearing, you might shift to another spot in the room. Yeah. And then there are the hearing assistive devices that you're welcome to use. They're in the foyer. And if you use them, do clip them.

There's a little hook here on the side of the chair. You could clip them there so that they don't fall off onto the floor. And then one last logistical piece. We do have the, I think you got the training in the bell ringing and the practice leader is the practice leader. Some of you will be ringing the bell to bring people to the sitting and then sitting up here. If you want to sit in a chair, you can sit here in this spot.

And if you want to sit on a zabuton, you can sit in the spot that Gil is sitting in during the sitting. And then you'll ring the bell at the end of the sitting. And so we ask that you check the schedule. There's a schedule right in front of the podium here for the time that the sitting ends, because not all the sittings are the same length. The first sitting in the morning before breakfast is 40 minutes.

The sitting right before the Dharma talk, I think, is 35 minutes. So check the length of, they're not all the same length. So check when the sitting ends so you know the appropriate time to ring the bell for the sitting that you're leading. And then when you ring the bell, this bell is, I love this bell. It's one of the, it makes one of the most beautiful bell sounds.

And it's quite easy to make it sound beautifully if you hit it softly. And it really is a very, very sensitive bell. So you can take the smallest like tap here. And it carries pretty far. And it should be mic'd.

I think those of you on Zoom can hear the bell. Yes? Okay. Yes. So we do have the mic turned on for the bell.

So when you're ringing the bell here, you're also ringing it for the people at home. And so, you know, just don't give it a big whack, especially the first time you ring it, because you can't undo that one. You can always go a little bit harder, a little bit louder, the second or third bell. And there's different ways to do it. I like to do a strike and pull back quickly.

Some people prefer to do it from the inside. So you can play with it and see which way it makes, easiest for you to hit it, but do start quietly the first, you know, with a soft touch the first time you do it. And for those of you here also, just wanting to check in, do you have

everything you need in your room? Should you find how to get settled in? Any questions about being here or the logistics of being here?

Okay. Okay. Is there a question over there? For me. A question for you?

No. Introduce Lissa, the people online. They never had a chance to meet her. Alyssa was in the opening circle. Downstairs, but not for the people up there.

These people. The four o'clock opening circle? Oh, that's right there. So I've already... Yeah, so... I think that's it in terms of logistics.

And now Gil is going to offer a overview of our theme for the week. We'll just want to make it clear to all of you here that our community is about twice, three times as big as what we have here in the hall because of all the participants online, on hybrid. And if you haven't seen it, there's a camera on the wall up there. That's when, that's how they see us here. And it means that the people who are kind of sitting in front here, they'll see the back of your head.

And if you walk in front, you know, they'll see it. And the meditation hall in the Zoom room is open all the time. So there are people either here or online who come and sit all times of the day and night. So generally there's someone here in one of the two communities. And that important part of the teaching faculty for this retreat is Liz Powell, who is the teacher for the meeting with the members who are online.

So I very much appreciate having these hybrid retreats and the sense of support and inspiration I get from the online practitioner. So it really makes a difference for me sitting here and participating here. I think it enriches the whole experience. So just let you know that's why we keep looking on this tablet here, because there's little tiles. You can see we scroll through to look at people.

So, okay. So to introduce the theme of the retreat, can you hear me? Am I loud enough? Yeah, but that's a strange question to ask, because the people who need to answer can't hear me. So I trust everyone can hear.

So, when I was in India, in Asia practicing *Vipassanā*, I met a wonderful Indian *Vipassanā* teacher named Manindraji, the teacher of Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg and others. And he had a, he liked to say, if it's not simple, it's not *Vipassanā*. And so I wanted to kind of introduce that as a beginning here. If it's not simple, it's not insight practice. I'd like to add, I don't think he ever said this, but if it's not simple, it's not awakening.

It's not enlightenment. And there's this wonderful way that the practice of simplicity grows into the simplicity of freedom. And that the simplicity of awakening, freedom, liberation,

enlightenment is what we're practicing from the very beginning by being simple. Having a simple approach to the practice. And one of the fascinating areas of simplicity is to understand something about the fundamental building blocks of our experience.

All human experience is built on what we take in through our senses. And one way or the other, we have some kind of sense apparatus operating. Some people can see, some people can hear, some people can taste, some people can smell, some people can have tactile experiences. Right. And some people have the ability to be aware, to cognize or sense, know what goes on in their mind.

So in Buddhism, there's these six senses that are listed. As nowadays in modern science, we understand that we have a lot more senses than those six. But in any case, all the ones we were discovering can be subsumed under these, somehow or other, between these six. And so we take in a sight, we take in a sound, we take everything in, we hear sounds, we hear someone speaking, we learn to speak, we see and we see words on a page, and we take them in and we interpret them into meaning and purpose and all kinds of things. But it all begins with this very simple sense contact.

And the sense contact in its essence is a very simple phenomenon. And it's very simple in the sense that if you have the appropriate sense organ operating, it kind of operates without any effort on your part. If you open your eyes, you'll see. If you open your ears, you'll hear. You can listen actively, you can look actively, but there's also the way these things just are very simple, they're occurring.

And to begin appreciating that simplicity of sense experience is the beginning of understanding how simple insight practice can be, and more importantly perhaps, how quickly we make it more complicated. Because we can't really operate in this world just being aware of sight, sound, smells, at the raw, most fundamental building block of experience. We do interpret, we do overlay meaning and purpose and understanding of what something else is. I'm quite capable of looking at this bell. I look at this bell often sitting up here.

And there's times when I open my eyes and sitting and look at it, I don't see a bell. I see shape, color, different things. And then I see my mind remember or overlay, project, oh, that's the bell. That's the meditation hall bell. You know, I'm two minutes late needing it.

I better do it quickly. Bell is important for everyone. So there's layers of meaning and purpose and understanding that I add on top of the simple round shape, color, shining, you know. The basic raw simplest kind of sense experience of the bell is very different from the layers of projection, meaning, association, identification that's partly culturally learned, societal

learned. There are people in the world at a time they never would have known what a bell was.

And that was, they never was a bell, you know, 10,000 years ago or however long ago. And they would have thought maybe it was, I don't know what they would have thought. Maybe it was for cooking, you know, a cooking pot. And... So why that's interesting is these layers and layers of projected meaning, projected assumptions, interpretations, is the source material for a lot of our suffering.

And we don't leave things at their simplest form or in simple form. We're adding layers and layers and layers of complications on top of it. And part of the purpose of this practice is to learn how to see how we unduly complicate our experience. That I go down to have a meal, I serve myself at the table, I have a plate full of food, and then I see, oh, I know what that is. I have soup for... That's a spoon.

A spoon, soup go together. And so I'm concerned, oh, that's good. They have spoons here. And then I think, well, I'm standing in line, and there's all these people watching me pull out the spoon. As a good insight teacher, I better really show them how mindfully and careful and perfectly I can pull a spoon out of that spoon container because my reputation as a teacher is at stake here.

And then I pull out three of them at once and the whole thing falls on the floor. And now, you know, Andrea's here and watching and now I'm embarrassed to the *Vipassanā* world. And so I've added these layers and layers and layers of meaning. There was once here where I dropped my plate on the floor. I did not do all those things.

That was a remarkable thing. I said, oh, look. Well, I guess I'm going to have to clean it up. And then before I could even do anything, people came to clean it up for me. But I had no embarrassment.

I was not embarrassment to the Buddhist world. It was just, there was, this food fell, the plate fell on the floor. It made a lot of noise. It needed to be cleaned up. It was a very matter-of-fact, simple event.

So this idea of the senses, coming back into our senses and beginning to appreciate how simple things can be, can do a few things. It can reveal how we complicate them unduly. And that's hugely important to see, because then maybe we can trust being simple. We can learn how the joy and the wisdom and the deep insight that can come with simplicity. And we can learn the freedom that comes from staying very simple and not being caught up in the stories we make.

And we begin appreciating that the simplicity of practice maybe is almost as good as awakening. Because maybe when it's fully mature, that simplicity, it becomes the same as awakening. So to keep this idea of simplicity, being simple, staying simple, staying close to the simplicity of how we sense, see, feel, know in the present moment, in our lived experience of now. And then you're well on your way in this practice of mindfulness. So that's somewhat the introduction to the theme on the six senses, six sense bases.

And we'll be talking about in different ways during the course of the retreat. So thank you. And now as a way, the formal beginning of a retreat is the refuges and the precepts. And Alyssa will talk about them a little bit and lead the chant. Hello everyone.

Is the volume okay? Great. So I'll share a bit about the refuges and precepts and then we can take them together. So the refuges are such a beautiful opportunity to really fill into what supports us with our practice, filling into connecting with the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, the *Saṅgha*.

When we take refuge in the Buddha, we're really trusting all the resources that support us with awakening and that they're right here in the heart. And when I say awaken, we're really filling into this gradual relinquishment of greed, hatred and delusion, which hinder us from being able to be present, which keep us from being able to be present. Freedom, liberation from suffering. And when we take refuge in the *Dhamma*, ah, this is pointing us towards refuge in the whole collective body of the teachings, developed, offered, and practiced for thousands of years. And taking refuge in these teachings supports us in better understanding the causes of suffering and what supports the ending of suffering.

And in taking refuge in *Saṅgha*, this dear community of practitioners, lineage holders, Dharma ancestors, teachers, all who are currently or have been on this journey, navigating this path together. And so we can take refuge in all three, taking refuge in the richness and fullness of practice that connects us together. As we navigate the Vaisisattva-situ, the ups and downs with Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Saṅgha*, there for us every moment along the way. And so in saying a little bit about the precepts, the precepts also serve as a way to support us. With our practice, they support holding the container of the retreat.

There are really a commitment to practicing in a wholesome way that supports uplifting, non-harming. Every moment that we're able to, I found practicing with the precepts, this is a guide to support ease and contentment, a warm, kind presence. And so I'll say a little bit about each of the five precepts, and then we can chant the refuges and precepts together. So the first precept is, for the sake of our practice together, I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from taking life. So we're feeling into this quality of non-harming towards every be-

ing, all sentient beings we come across, from the tiniest little being to all of our dear *Saṅgha* friends.

And then the second precept. For the sake of our practice together, I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from taking that which isn't given. And so with this guideline, we're able to feel into only taking what is given. We're able to practice with a quality of simplicity, right, which Gil pointed to being so connected with liberation. And we're able to feel into practice with this quality of generosity that this precept supports.

And then for the third precept, for the sake of our practice together, I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from sexual activity on this retreat. So with this precept, we're able to be mindful of any romantic or sexual energy that arises, being careful to tend to this skillfully. So as not to impose this energy on others. And we can really notice any urge to sit near or walk near a particular yogi that's captured our attention, really, and set that down. We're able to support each retreatant to have their own space, their own retreat.

And for the fourth precept, for the sake of our practice together, I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from false speech. We're able to uphold noble silence, not writing notes to yogis and really minimizing speech, you know, outside of designated periods, like for example, our work meditation or practice meetings. We're able to soften seeking out eye contact and we're able to be aware of the ways we communicate with our gestures or notice the way we speak to ourselves, perhaps offering space for kindness to really be embodied. And in general, we generally avoid reading, journaling, because they engage the thinking mind, they can keep us from settling. And so for the fifth precept, for the sake of our practice together, I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from the use of drugs and intoxicants.

We're able to uphold restraining from taking substances that alter our heart minds. We can continue to take any prescription medicine, of course. And we're able to explore the impact of abstaining from recreational substances. We can include our devices as well as having a kind of mind-altering impact. And we can notice what's it like to have more space for clarity and presence with each present moment without the influence of intoxication.

And so, yeah, we'll take some time to chant the refuges and precepts together. So the refuges we'll chant in *Pāli*, and for the refuges we'll do three rounds. So for the first round, *Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*, to the Buddha I go for refuge. *Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*, to the Dhamma I go for refuge. *Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*, to the Saṅgha I go for refuge.

And then the next round we'll add *dutiyampi* for each round, and that's just for the second time. And then *tatiyampi* for the third time, we'll add that for the third round. And so we'll

chant those together, call and response, and then we'll move into the precepts, call and response in English. So we'll prepare ourselves to begin.

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, tatiyaṃpi, dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, tatiyaṃpi, saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Wonderful, and thanks for flowing with us. It changed from call and response. But for the precepts, we'll keep it call and response since you all don't have the words in front of you.

For the sake of our practice together,

For the sake of our practice together,

I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from taking life.

I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from taking life.

For the sake of our practice together.

For the sake of our practice together.

I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from taking that which isn't given.

I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from taking that which isn't given.

For the sake of our practice together, I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from sexual activity on this retreat.

I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from sexual activity on this retreat.

For the sake of our practice together, I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from false speech on this retreat.

I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from false speech on this retreat.

For the sake of our practice together, I undertake the mindfulness training to abstain from the use of drugs and intoxicants on this retreat.

And then if you feel so moved, I'll offer this aspiration that we can feel in together that the precepts support. May our ethical integrity lead to the deepest peace and freedom of heart and mind. May our ethical integrity lead to the deepest peace and freedom of heart and mind. Thank you, everyone.

So thank you all for being here, for committing a week of your life to deeply and fully practicing the Dharma. In this container of the refuges and the precepts, we have a sense that we're practicing together and supporting each other in practice. It's really a beautiful thing to practice in community, whether in community in person, in community online. We feel the support of shared intention, of shared commitment to opening the heart, to non-harming, to cultivating the wholesome qualities, moving towards simplicity. It's said to be a rare thing to meet the Dharma, rarer still to have the inspiration to practice, and even rarer to commit to something like a retreat.

And so appreciating your own goodness here, appreciating that you are here, that you have the aspiration to cultivate your heart and mind. And while often we do explore cultivating our heart and mind for the sake of our own freedom and release from suffering, there's no way to practice and no way to cultivate those qualities without affecting others. And so your practice does ripple out. It does touch others. Even here on retreat in a container like this, there are people you know who know you're here and are inspired by your being here.

And the practice ripples out as we complete the retreat and head home. We are transformed and maybe in small ways, sometimes maybe in bigger ways. But the practice that changes our hearts and minds can't help but also touch others. Our world needs this practice. So thank you for being in it, for being here with us.

And many of you are probably kind of tired from getting here, preparing, packing, unpacking, arriving. And even those of you at home also may be maybe ready for some rest. And so we'll finish the evening here at this point. And there'll be a little bit more time for rest this evening. If you do have the energy, however, you're welcome to stay up.

You're welcome to... The hall is always open. The Zoom hall is always open. So you're welcome to be here. There may be a time where the Zoom hall goes down briefly and comes back up.

I think it's at 6:40 in the morning? Yeah. 6:40 in the morning. The Zoom Hall goes down briefly and then comes back up. But it's always here to come to...

And so you're welcome to continue practicing this evening if you have the energy. And you're also welcome to take some rest and explore, you know, the possibility of doing that with

some degree of simplicity, the ease and awareness. So thank you. Thank you for being here.