

Formal Opening

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March 25, 2026

Keywords: mindfulness, clear comprehension, ardency, three refuges, five precepts, Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha, noble silence, Pāḷi

So we now begin the formal opening of this retreat. I'm going to give a short talk at our Met, introducing the theme of the retreat. And then Shelly will guide us through the refuges and precepts. And just want to say a couple of things first. Noble silence, it's very supportive in retreat practice to keep what we call noble silence during most of the retreat, to speak only when needed, keeping the attention internal, staying close to ourselves. And one of the things, as we said before, you know, may not always be possible for some of you, but it's helpful also not to read, but to stay internal.

Sometimes, you know, we say, oh, I'll read a Dharma book, or, you know, but really notice any intention of why we might want to do that. And for those of you who are newer to retreat, I'd like to suggest that you be gentle with your body, especially on the first full day of retreat. Most people aren't used to sitting this many hours without moving, and it takes time for the body to adapt. So just go very gradual. Don't force your body. It's okay to be a little bit uncomfortable, but don't force it.

And we'll be giving some posture instruction tomorrow. It's on the schedule. And before we start, are there any logistical questions about the retreat at this time? And if you have one, just raise your Zoom hand. If you don't know how to do that, if you raise your hand, I'll probably see it anyways. Okay, so hopefully everything's clear and you know what to do and how to get around the website.

So as we're entering the silence of the retreat now, we can... Oh, there's a question. Kumi, go ahead, unmute. Okay. Ines, somehow your microphone is quieter than Shelly's or everybody else's. I don't know why that is. I don't know if everybody experiences that, but I do. Shelley, could you give me feedback on that? Or Fred?

Okay, Shelley. I think your audio is coming through fine, Ines. Yeah, it sounds the same as my voice sounds to me right now. You might want to check one of your settings, Kumi, on your volume. Well, it's as loud as it gets. It says, you know, 100%. But I experienced that earlier, too. I just didn't say anything. Zoom has its own audio setting. So if you go to the Zoom settings audio, check and see if your volume is all the way up there. Okay. Thank you. You're welcome.

So... And anything else just in case? Okay. So we're entering the silence of the retreat now. And, you know, we can begin to slow down, to stay internal, and to keep the attention on ourselves, on the breath, or on this body, which is always here. And so the theme for this retreat is clear comprehension.

So when we meditate, when we practice, we attend to the breath, we attend to the body, the feelings, the thoughts, to all the many experiences that arise in awareness. These are the objects of the mind, the things that show up when we pay attention. How we relate to our experience matters as much as simply being aware of it. The teachings say that for the practice to deepen, you need three mental qualities. And the first one is mindfulness, the second is clear comprehension, and the third is ardency.

So mindfulness is often described as just simple remembering to be present, a steady awareness of what's happening in this moment. Staying connected with our experience as it unfolds moment by moment. Now, clear comprehension is another essential function of the mind. It's the capacity to actually understand what's happening. A simple way to understand the difference is that mindfulness is knowing your experience and clear comprehension is understanding it, seeing it more fully and more clearly.

For instance, we might be paying attention to the breath and be very mindful of the breath, of the sensations of it going in and out, but we might be kind of oblivious to the larger picture that we're doing so, and our shoulders are really tense and up by our ears. So it's clear comprehension that orients us to this larger picture, that we've been watching the breath in a, you know, in a tense manner. And it allows us to see a little bit bigger picture, which allows us to make a wise decision to relax the shoulders. It brings discernment and meaning to our awareness. It actually supports the practice and makes it come alive. Clear comprehension illuminates the moment instead of letting the practice be mechanical.

But it's not a quality that requires a lot of thinking. It's more like if we walk into a dim furnished room, you know, kind of see the shapes there. We see what's there. Yep, there's a room, there's furniture, being mindful of it all. But if we turned on a bright light, then we see everything much more clearly and see things we would have missed in the dim lighting. You

know, maybe missed the furniture we might have bumped into or tripped over.

So it just brings the clarity into the moment, brings it into focus. And so the third quality we need to be in this practice is ardency. And that's energy, you know, skillful energy, which is not just an energy we bring, but the sincerity with which we practice. How sincere are we, how willing are we to be, to engage wholeheartedly in the practice, wholeheartedly in the moment? It may not be a moment we like. Can we wholeheartedly be with it?

Mindfulness keeps us present with what's happening. Clear comprehension helps us understand how to relate skillfully to what we encounter. So there's an experiment that they did. It's called the... where researchers showed people a short video of people passing basketballs and asked them to count the number of passes made by one team. And maybe some of you saw this, you know, it kind of made the rounds.

Now, because people were concentrating so intently on counting, most people completely failed to notice that halfway through the video, a person in a gorilla suit walked in the middle of the scene, stopped, beat their chest, and walked out. You know, afterwards, people were shocked. They were sure they'd been paying close attention. And it's the reason that sometimes if mindfulness is present without clear comprehension, teachers have sometimes referred to it as dumb mindfulness. You know, it can be very attentive to one object, counting the passes, and still miss the obvious in the wider field of experience.

So clear comprehension is what brings wisdom to the moment, what we can call the intelligence of practice, the context. It keeps mindfulness from becoming mechanical and gives us a situational awareness. It's yes, this breath, but in this larger context. In the next few days Shelly and I will be exploring the four dimensions of clear comprehension, and you don't have to remember them all, you know, we'll go through them. But just to touch on them very lightly, the first one is clear comprehension of purpose, which is understanding why we're doing something.

And so an example might be, you know, when we're meditating, we might need to remind ourselves sometimes that the purpose of sitting is to develop stability and sensitivity, not to solve problems. Now, I'm sure some of you, all of you who have meditated before, you may have occasionally spent time trying to solve a problem, right? So we've lost track of why we're meditating. The second dimension of clear comprehension is of suitability, of what's appropriate in the situation. Different conditions call for different responses. You know, sometimes if we're really tired, the skillful response might be a little more effort. Sometimes if we're particularly tense, a little more relaxation.

So those are most appropriate. They're suitable. The third form is domain. You know, we understand where the mind is dwelling. Is it the body, the feelings, the mind, you know, is it in the mind, is it trying to fix a problem or lost in a fantasy? The domain of practice is in this body, these feelings, this mind state. This is the domain of practice. If we leave that domain, we're no longer seeing clearly when we're doing this practice.

And the fourth one is non-delusion, clear comprehension of non-delusion. This is like the deeper understanding that recognizes that all the objects of the mind, everything we think, everything we feel, everything passes. It all comes and goes. And to see it without taking ourselves to be solid, here I am, or permanent who we are. And it's a deeper aspect of practice that can free the heart.

And these four qualities, these teachings on these four qualities, isn't meant to make the practice more complex, but just to broaden our sensitivity. We're not going to be doing purpose, suitability, domain. It's not that. We're just shining a light on those parts, on those qualities, so as to make us more aware of them. And although we might describe the three qualities as different functions of the mind, in practice, they're not separate compartments. They overlap and support one another.

You know, mindfulness just steadies the awareness. Clear comprehension brings understanding and ardency energizes the heart of practice. Yet in the lived experience they tend to blend together. The invitation is to allow the full richness of all three to be present. As awareness becomes steady, understanding can deepen. As understanding deepens, energy and sincerity are strengthened.

In this way, the qualities interweave and the practice becomes more alive and responsive. We can allow the practice to really come alive for us, really be here with our full hearts. It's an embodied practice in this body, and we can practice it full-heartedly. So thank you. Shelley?

Thanks, Inez. I'm looking forward to exploring this topic these next days. So as we enter into the formal container of retreat, we want to create a sense of seclusion, a sense of safety, a place where we feel comfortable becoming intimate with our inner experience, our inner lives. And traditionally, the way that we do that is by taking what we call the three refuges and the five ethical precepts. So we'll be doing that in a bit. And I'll just say a few words about each of those before we do them.

And something that I often say, and some of you may have heard me say it before, is that we're always taking refuge in something. Often it's our plans, our views, our opinions, our habits

and mental tendencies. And we tend to rely on those often unconsciously. But a refuge is meant to be a place of shelter, a place of rest, a dependable place. And none of those really fits the bill.

In the Buddhist world, what is considered dependable, what we traditionally take refuge in, is what we call the three jewels or the triple gem, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha. And then the five ethical precepts, there are five ways that we can promise not to create harm for each other or for ourselves as we go through the days. Five ways that we create a sense of safety. We give a gift of safety to those we're practicing with and those we're living with as well in this retreat, whether we're practicing at home or wherever we're practicing. So first we'll do the refuges, and I'll say a little bit more about them. The refuges in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha.

And taking refuge in the Buddha, for me, it means taking refuge in the possibility of awakening, of fully awakening, in the example that the Buddha is himself, you know, was himself, still is himself. A human being like us who practiced really diligently with ardency, with clear comprehension, with mindfulness, and discovered a path that led from clinging and suffering to complete freedom of mind and heart. That's quite a model. And I also take refuge in the, you know, in the generosity and the compassion of the Buddha, who then, after he'd reached, you know, full awakening himself, then he taught the Dharma, the way that he'd found, for the rest of his life for about 45 years. He just walked barefoot around northern India, sleeping mostly outdoors and teaching whoever came to listen.

Even though he knew that what he was teaching went against the stream of the culture and the social conditioning present, just like today, even though he knew it would be frustrating and unpleasant at times. So that example of his diligence, his confidence, even though he knew it was going to be challenging, that really inspires me. I believe in the possibility of awakening. I really believe in that. The Buddha said he wouldn't teach it, he wouldn't teach about liberation, if it wasn't possible. That's the first refuge, refuge in the Buddha. We all have different ways of approaching that.

The second of the three that we take refuge in is the Dharma. And Dharma has, it has several meanings, and what usually is meant by it when we're in the Buddha's context is the teachings that the Buddha offered, the Buddha Dharma. And then another definition is more general, the truth, truth with a capital T. And a third, which is kind of related to both of the other meanings, is simply phenomena, things that exist due to causes and conditions, things that arise and pass away. And so for me, taking refuge in the Dharma is taking refuge in the promise that's inherent in the teachings, which is that possibility of liberation. And that in-

volves taking refuge in things as they are, becoming comfortable with the fact that all phenomena, all dharmas, they come and go according to causes and conditions. That's truth with a big T, I think.

So taking refuge in the Dharma is, in a sense, it's taking refuge in the potential of finding balance and stability, you know, in the middle of all the strong currents in the river of life, recognizing the truth. And the third refuge is the Saṅgha, the community of practitioners. And traditionally, the Saṅgha has referred to those who have had a little bit of a taste of freedom and also to the ordained Saṅgha, the monastics who've been practicing and teaching the Dharma through the generations for 2600 years. But in our times and in our tradition, we usually speak of the Saṅgha as referring to the community of people practicing together, to us, us here together in this room, this Zoom room. We support each other with our own practice and with our care for each other as we go through the days. So on this retreat, we are the Saṅgha and we can take refuge in that as well.

So I think we're going to do the refuges in *Pāḷi*, the language of the texts, the original texts in the Buddhist tradition. And I believe we're going to, someone, Fred, is going to show you. I'll share it. I'll share this. Great. Great. Thank you. So we'll have the text on the screen so you can read it. I hope you can read it. It looks kind of small to me, but. I got my glasses on now.

And so we'll do it call and response. So I'll lead in beginning. And I excuse my hoarse voice. It's a condition that I work with. And the refuges begin with offering a kind of homage to the Buddha, that *Namu Tasa* at the top of the screen. And we'll repeat that three times. And then we go through refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha, repeating in *Pāḷi*, I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Saṅgha three times. So let's begin.

Namutasa, Bhagavatam, Arahato, Samasambudasa, Namutasa, Bhagavatam, Arahato, Samasambudasa, Namutasa, Bhagavatam, Arahato, Samma, Sam Buddha, Sam Buddha, Saranam Gachami, Dhamam, Sarnam, Gachami, Sangam, Sarnam, Gachami, Duttiampi, Buddha, Sarnam, Gachami, Duttiam Pidhamam Sarnam Gachami Duttiam Pidham Sarnam Gachami Tatyam Pidham Pidham Sarnam Gacham Tatyam Pidhamam Sarnam Gachami Tatyam Pidham Pidham

I couldn't hear any of you. I could only hear myself, so I hope you were able to chant along. Many people who practice on the Buddhist path commit themselves to these five precepts that we'll be taking as well. There are five ways of avoiding doing harm and... on the other

side, creating safety every day. Or some people take them every day. Some people will take them every couple of weeks on the full moon and the dark moon days.

Or other times when they're beginning an intensive practice process, a time like we are tonight, or just any time that they feel they need to, like formally state their intention to be ethical in their behavior, to be taking care of living beings in a sense. At the beginning of a formal practice session, like we're doing now, a retreat, making these promises to ourselves is a way of giving everyone who we come in contact with, including ourselves, our own inner selves, the gift of knowing that we will not harm them, that we're safe to be around, safe to be close to. So the precepts address the five most common ways that people harm each other or harm other beings in our lives. They're training precepts. They're not commandments. They're ways of cultivating a caring and careful relationship to all life.

And they're all worded in the negative as actions that we refrain from. And that's kind of typical of a lot of the teachings in the Buddhist Dharma. But we can think of them in a positive way as well. When we're refraining from harming, we're also cultivating caring. So the first precept is to refrain from killing living beings. And that includes any living being, all living beings, even the smallest creatures that we come upon.

All beings that we encounter can know that we won't harm them. And the second is usually phrased as refraining from taking that which is not given or has not been offered. And usually we interpret that to mean not stealing. But it can also be understood more broadly to include not being greedy, not taking more than our share of what's offered, what's offered by the world, showing restraint. All beings we encounter, they can know that we aren't going to take anything from them that they aren't already offering us. And by showing restraint, we give ourselves the gift of renunciation, the gift of simplicity, which is a kind of freedom, really.

The third precept is to refrain from sexual activity that causes harm. And on retreat, we kind of expand that to refraining from any kind of sexual activity. And in that way, we offer others the gift of not inserting any kind of sexual energy into our interactions with them. And we offer ourselves a more simple way of relating to life. The fourth precept is about speech. And it's to refrain from speaking untruth, from telling lies. And in the context of our retreat, this is also extended into that practice of practicing noble silence.

And ideally, we don't speak at all, except in our practice discussions with the teachers or the Q&A. But, of course, as we mentioned in the opening circle, when we're practicing at home and there are family members or roommates who aren't practicing along with us, there might be a need for functional speech. And it's great, you know, if you can let people know beforehand that you want to be silent for these days or how much speech, you know, you think is

going to be appropriate. And it'll be different for everyone. But just having the intention of not speaking more than is necessary is really useful. The silence of retreat, this noble silence that we keep, it's a really great support for becoming more and more intimate with our inner experience, our inner life.

And so honoring it, honoring the silence, is a gift that we give ourselves. The fifth precept is to refrain from intoxicants that cloud the mind and lead to heedlessness. And this is usually meant to refer to drugs and alcohol, but there is something else which is definitely an intoxicant in most lives these days, these modern days, and that's our electronic devices. And when we signed up for this retreat, you know, maybe you don't remember, but everybody agreed to not use the devices except for access to the retreat. We know it can be tempting, you know, especially when we're using them in order to be here. They're already on, turned on. But please do refrain. And if you find it really difficult, you know, let us know, let Ines and I know, and we can support you.

So letting go of intoxicants. So we're going to repeat the precepts in a call and response fashion in English. So I'll repeat them a phrase at a time, and you can repeat them. And I won't be able to hear you, so I'll just have to guess when you're done.

I undertake the training to refrain from taking life.

I undertake the training to refrain from taking what is not offered.

I undertake the training to refrain from sexual activity.

I undertake the training to refrain from lying and to practice noble silence.

I undertake the training to refrain from what intoxicates the mind and leads to heedlessness.

I undertake the training to refrain from what intoxicates the mind and leads to heedlessness.

Okay. So we have formally entered our retreat. We're in noble silence now. So it's a, you know, I'd like to think of a retreat as a time that it's like a Sabbath in a sense. It's a time set aside from ordinary life to, you know, to dedicate to our spiritual path, our spiritual cultivation. And it's a lovely thing to do.

We've been sitting for, oh, just about 50 minutes or so. And we have time for a period of walking meditation now. We'll... You have about 40 minutes, I think, for walking. We'll come back at 8 o'clock and have a period of seated meditation, just lightly guided, mostly silent,

to end the formal part of our day. But at this time, I assume most of you have done walking practice before.

We'll have some guidance about walking tomorrow morning after the instructional sit, but at this point, if you haven't done walking practice before, I invite you to walk mindfully back and forth as Inez described herself doing earlier in the day when we were in the opening circle, the sharing circle. About 20 paces in each direction, really being mindful of what's arising in your body, in your feet, in your legs as you move through this space. And we'll see you back at 8 o'clock for a meditation session. Thank you.