

Sunday Formal Opening: Sitting Meditation and Teaching

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So let's see, is it working? Oh, there, now I'm electric. No. I'm electrified.

So welcome to the meditation hall, and welcome, all of you online, to your meditation hall as well. To me, it's become very meaningful that so many people fit into this room. There was a *Mahāyāna Sūtra* where some person has a small little house, a small one-room house, and all these deities and bodhisattvas show up in the house, just bigger and bigger to hold them all. And they just had Zoom back then. That's all it was. And so we've gotten very big, a lot of people here. So thank you for joining us.

And as I said earlier to the people in person here, we're going to do the opening evening differently than we usually do it. Mostly, kind of reverse the order of things somewhat. So it's not that exciting, but it is different. But partly because I want to do something different here as we start. But first, I really want to welcome everyone here. And this is meant to be your meditation home as much as possible.

If there's anything you'd like us to know, or that we can do for you that helps you feel more at ease and connected and belonging here, please let us know, because IRC belongs to the people who practice in here. So the fact that you're here means that IRC is yours, and you're participating and fully part of it.

So I taught a retreat at Green Gulch Zen Center just very recently, and they had a ritual they did every morning, which is, sometimes in English, called a confession ceremony. Though the word confession, with its strong Western religious associations, is not really appropriate in the way that Buddhism talks about it. And in Zen Center they're doing this very common ritual that every day, that they used to do when I was there before the full moon gathering, that there's a full moon ritual, which is a kind of a precept purification time and a bodhisattva vow renewal time. And this goes back to ancient Buddhism and *Theravāda* Buddhism, where

monastics gather together in the full moon and new moon to do this kind of precept-ethics purification process. And I think it's quite a profound thing to gather together and for people to speak to each other, for people to talk about what they've done.

If there's any ways in which people have done what's called wrongdoings, that it is acknowledged. And it's different than a confession where you maybe expect forgiveness. This is just an honest statement about something you've done that was considered a wrongdoing. And recently I was writing about the fifth precept, and I was really struck by how the monastics handle the fifth precept and not drinking alcohol. If a monastic ends up drinking alcohol, it's considered a wrongdoing that requires finding another monastic to tell them what you've done.

It's not quite a confession. You have to be honest about it to someone. And when you're honest to someone about it, then the person you tell doesn't forgive you. There's no place for forgiveness really in Buddhism, or necessity for it, in the way that it's understood in the West, Western religions. What the person who hears the acknowledgement, the truth-telling of the person who's drunk alcohol, the person says is, "In the future, restrain yourself better." That's it. There's no admonition. There's no blame, shame. There's no giving the person a big lecture about, you know, this was terrible and you should do better and I'm going to watch over you.

And it's just like, you've been honest. And the Buddha himself, when people did come and tell him that they had done something that was a wrongdoing, he would tell them, "It is growth in the *Dharma* that you tell me, that you speak about it." So this movement of honesty, this movement of speaking up, this is what I did. I no longer stand behind it. I no longer believe it. But I did it.

And then sometimes in the *Theravāda* monastic system, there is, sometimes it's translated, the person acknowledges what they've done, and then they ask for forgiveness. But the word is not forgiveness. The word in *Pāli* is patience or acceptance. Please be patient with me. And I thought that's a very different request than forgiveness.

And so they do this, you know, every two weeks they do this, and we have a two-week retreat. And I thought that when we did it at Zen Center every morning, at some point that was... I realized, wait a minute, they're so lucky, everyone. It means that every day, once you do this acknowledgement, you don't have to think about your past wrongdoings anymore. It's kind of like you're forgiven, or kind of like there's space, like you're putting it down. And what a great thing. You're trying to be in the present moment, really be well here in a full, honest, complete way.

How nice to just acknowledge something so that you're kind of forgiven, or you're kind of put aside, or you don't have to think about it again. What a great thing to do. And in Zen, they do it in this kind of wonderfully mythic, almost mythic way. They say:

All my ancient twisted karma
from beginningless greed, hate, and delusion,
born through body, speech, and mind,
I now fully avow.

Just to be sure that you know that it goes back a long time. For years I thought avow meant, you know, disown it. I kind of like disapprove of why I did that. But it turns out to me, look, I finally looked it up in the dictionary because I'm kind of slow in English. And it turns out avow means just you acknowledge it, you're honest about it. And so here we go, you know. And so it's a ritual, just, you know, kind of a ritual way of stating that.

In the *Theravāda*, when I was a monk, I had to do this every two weeks. And it was, you had to get down on your, bend down with someone and say, in *Pāli*, for whatever misdeeds I've done, I now acknowledge. I now point them out. And then the person you tell says something like, well, you know, good. Now continue your practice and be more careful in the future. Just like that. Isn't that nice?

So, as we start here, in a few minutes, Diana is going to do the refuges and precepts. And in that spirit of the monastic community, and for centuries now, they've been doing this every two weeks, and in a ritual way acknowledging that you might have done some misdeeds in the past. Some of them might be kind of current for you, so you're carrying them here. And so that you feel like I can kind of put it down and let it kind of be in the past for these two weeks, maybe I can speak these words for all of us.

May it be that any misdeeds, any harm we've caused, any mistakes we've made, may we know what they are? And in knowing them, may we acknowledge them, be honest about them, at least to ourselves, so that we can leave those behind enough so we can really be here at this retreat with a fresh start, that we don't have to carry the burden of those things anymore, because we've now laid it open, acknowledged our ancient twisted karma, acknowledged all the strange things we've done, acknowledge in some way that this is what happened. And in that acknowledgement, we can start the retreat. We can start a retreat where we can continue to be honest with a fresh start. Showing up for ourselves, showing up for our community, showing up here to really try to be the best person we can with as much generosity, kindness, and compassion that holds us and holds our community. Thank you.

Thank you, Gil. I felt that in my heart when you were talking about this. Maybe I'll start by also saying hello to the online community, as well as saying hello to all of you here. And to continue on this movement towards untwisting one's karma, we'll take the precepts. We'll do the refuges second. We'll do the precepts first.

This commitment to non-harming, not harming ourselves, not harming others. This way in which we can let go of those actions that reliably don't lead to peace and freedom, and instead do those actions that do lead to peace and freedom. I think you all know the five precepts: to refrain from taking life, to refrain from taking what is not given, and when we're on retreat, we refrain from sexual activity, refrain from false speech, and refrain from intoxicants that can lead to heedlessness.

So we'll do this call and response, or each of you will have an opportunity to take the precepts. I'll say the whole line in English, and you can respond. Or maybe I'll do a portion of each line.

- For the purpose of training, I refrain from taking life.
- For the purpose of training, I refrain from taking what is not offered.
- For the purpose of training, I refrain from sexual activity.
- For the purpose of training, I refrain from speaking falsehoods.
- For the purpose of training, I refrain from taking intoxicants which can lead to heedlessness.

Thank you. And with that, we've taken the five precepts, which are a support for our practice. Less so commandments, just as Gil was saying, but more something to support us as we practice together.

It's also customary at the beginning of a retreat to take the refuges. There's many ways we can understand this notion of refuge. I'd like to offer one way, is to take refuges to go a certain orientation, a certain direction, as opposed to being lost, but instead turning our hearts and minds and practice towards the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the *Saṅgha*. And this orientation can be subtle, but it can be significant in the same way that the movement of a rudder on a boat, sometimes I think about this, if I were to leave from the Pacific Ocean, not too far from here, and the rudder is one direction, we'll end up in Hawaii. If the rudder is just a little bit different, we'll end up in Japan. These are both lovely places, but they're not the same. Just this one little difference in the direction just repeatedly has an impact.

So taking refuge in the Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Saṅgha*. The Buddha, we could say, represents what's possible, the potential. It's possible to have a radical sense of ease and freedom. Tak-

ing refuge in the Buddha is taking refuge in this potential in all of us.

The *Dharma*, the *Dharma* can be understood in so many different ways and has many different aspects. Today I'd like to just mention one: *ehi passiko*, come and see. This invitation to see for ourselves, to experience for ourselves the teachings and our present-moment experience.

And the *Saṅgha*, taking refuge in the *Saṅgha*, not only is it the community of practitioners here together, in person and online, there's a way in which coming together not only makes it more likely that we will do all the sittings, come to these sittings. It's more difficult to do this on your own. But also others serve as exemplars. Maybe we're inspired by others we see. And not only that, the *Saṅgha* is the recipient of these beautiful inner qualities that get cultivated while we're on retreat, generosity, kindness, compassion.

So we'll chant this together. We'll do *Namo tassa* three times, homage to the Buddha, and then we'll do the refuges, and Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Saṅgha* three times. So please join me in doing the refuges here.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa.

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Dutiyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Dutiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Tatiyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Tatiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Tatiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

And now we'll sit just for a short bit here.

So with that, hopefully willingness and openness to be honest about our past in such a way that we can for now put it behind us for this very important work of the retreat, to have the rudder pointed in this wonderful direction towards freedom and compassion, living in the world with care for all beings, and to live, to train in the precepts, and then to have a period of silent meditation after that. Maybe so that the way the heart listens to you, to the people

you're with, the way the heart needs to be reassured or know what's up: here's these commitments, here's this orientation, appreciates the rarity of a community like this that has a fairly high degree of safety.

And with one more announcement about the retreat, we have two people who are scheduled to arrive tomorrow. One person got stuck in the snow, or blocked by the snow going over the Sierras in her car. There's so much snowing up there right now. So she's expecting, Samatha, Sam, she expects to arrive tomorrow. And the other is Peter, who's been here before, and he has kind of chronic health conditions of different types. He regularly gets small colds, and he had one before. Usually he gets them when he comes here. That's his pattern, but this time he was kind enough to get it before he came. And so he's recovering at home a little bit, and he's planning to come tomorrow unless there's some change in his health.

And so with that, we have now started the retreat. Can you hear me okay? Am I speaking loud enough? I know it's a strange question to ask because the people who need to respond can't hear me. So hopefully it's loud enough in this way of speaking, because I can turn it up some more if necessary.

So with that, we start the retreat. And then I really appreciated Diana pointing out this idea of the direction the rudder points makes a difference. I've been in boats where we stopped holding the rudder, and we were no longer in control of where the boat went. And usually it was okay. We were far out at sea, and we can just let it do what it needed, wanted to do. But, you know, it pointed left and right and turned around, and all kinds of things can happen. In some situations, it wasn't so safe to do that.

And once I lost the rudder. That was also not very good. And it was getting to be dusk. And I was far from land. What do you do? Well, luckily there was a boat that came by and was able to tow us into land. So having a rudder is sometimes really good.

I've been in rivers. There's a wonderful river I went to with my kids once, where you had to go into the water, and it was kind of very rocky, I remember, so it was kind of hard going, getting in there. And then it was cold, kind of. So you had to deal with the cold, and you had to make your way across part of the river. And it wasn't very comfortable. But the promise was if you went far enough across the river, you came to this place where the river was deeper, and there was a strong current there. And we'd go into the current and you'd go on your back, and it carried you so wonderfully down the river until the current kind of somehow faded away and you had to walk back up and do the same thing over and over again.

And so that's a little bit one way of understanding practice. Sometimes we're getting into the

river of the retreat, the river of practice. In the beginning, it's a little bit rough. There's some rough stones and rocks to step on and around and be tender and careful with. Maybe it's cold, and part of the body wants us into it. It's resistant, hesitant to go in and be involved, pulling back. But, you know, we steadily go in deeper and deeper until we come to this place where the *Dharma* current picks us up. And there's a feeling of current that carries us.

And the way that that is kind of, I think, quite beautifully described in the ancient texts is that if the rain falls on the mountainside and all the rain makes the soil wet, then it starts puddling, and the puddles start flowing little teeny little trickling streams. They can flow together and become a little bigger and bigger and become burbling brooks, maybe the gurgling creeks. And they flow into lakes, mountain lakes. And they fill the lakes, and then they spill over the edge again and create a bigger river, going down to fill up the next even bigger lake. And then they spill over the edge of that lake and go bigger than those, a bigger river, and it flows, keeps flowing, the pull of gravity, and it comes down to the great plains of India.

There it's a big, wide river with a very strong current. And as long as a person doesn't grab onto the edge or branches that are leaning over the edge, or as long as some kind of predator creature on the edge of the river doesn't grab you, if you stay in the current, it'll carry you all the way to the ocean. And that's the metaphor for being on the path.

This metaphor of there are these natural conditions that are operating, and those natural conditions are ones that we have a role in. And part of that role is to put ourselves in the river, put ourselves in the river of the present moment. Every moment is a shifting, changing river of change, and to really find a way to relax and settle into this moment in a deep way, and create the conditions to really let that natural process unfold.

One way that's beautifully described in the ancient texts, the naturalness of it, it says that the Buddha said, if you are ethical, if you live with *sīla*, then it's natural to not have any regrets. If you have no regrets, it's natural to feel delight. If there is delight, it's natural to feel joy. If there is joy, it's natural to have tranquility, tranquility of body and mind. If you have tranquility, it's natural to become happy. If you're happy, it's natural to have the gathering together, unification of the mind, *samādhi*. If the mind is unified, it's natural to see things as they are. If you see things as they are, it's natural to become disenchanted with our delusions about reality. If we are disenchanted, it's natural to become, the usual translation is dispassionate, to have the lessening of attachments and clinging. To have the lessening of clinging and attachment, it's natural for the heart to become free. If the heart becomes free, it's natural to know something and what it's like to have a free heart.

It's remarkable that the language is, it's natural, it's natural. And that same pattern of that

kind of flow is in fact described sometimes with the metaphor of the water flowing down, becoming a creek, lakes, rivers, all the way to the ocean. It's a very different model of a spiritual path from the one that was kind of current in my earliest years, when I was 20, the beginning of my time in Buddhism, that spirituality was climbing the mountain. That's a lot of work.

So there was this idea of heroic effort. And there's a lot of effort we have to do, but the effort is to create the conditions that allow something profound to happen. They can put in place the conditions that allow for the flow to happen, for the unfolding to happen. And we have a role to play, and that's to practice. Practice how with a rudder going the right direction, the right support. Practice how to know what is useful to really pay attention to, and pay attention to it well, so that what's natural can arise.

So the teachings of this retreat will focus on what I call liberative dependent arising. It's 12 steps in this process of flowing in the current, in the river. And this one doesn't begin with being ethical, but it begins with suffering. And I love it that so much of the *Dharma* begins with an honest, very human acknowledgment of suffering, the suffering aspect of this life of ours. That it's not trying to avoid it, it's not trying to deny it, it's not trying to make it something different than it is, but a kind of a clear, clear ability to stop and take a deep look at our suffering.

And there's a way of doing that, that as a supporting condition is the thing that allows for the natural unfolding of a next step in this process. And that is faith, confidence, inspiration. And how you get from suffering to inspiration is part of what we're talking about. And then from faith, with that someplace, then there's delight. Delight is a supporting condition for joy. Joy is a supporting condition for tranquility. Tranquility is a supporting condition for happiness. Happiness is a supporting condition for *samādhi*. *Samādhi* is a supporting condition for seeing things as they are. Seeing things as they are is a supporting condition for disenchantment. Disenchantment is a supporting condition of letting go of craving and attachments, lessening, fading away of them. The fading away of these clingings and cravings and grasping is freedom. The supporting condition of freedom is to know something special about what it's like to be free.

So this will be the discussion, and it's considered an unfolding. It's a process. And so much of the *Dharma* is understood as a journey, as an arc, as a sequential process of deepening, of opening, of becoming freer, becoming happier, becoming clear. And one of the reasons I like to talk about many of these lists in Buddhism is not because I like lists, but rather the lists, or so many of the lists, kind of map how this river unfolds, how this stream moves as we go along. And we're already in it, being here the first evening of the retreat.

One of the very powerful conditions that makes a world of difference that we can begin to learn how to do, and maybe the whole process is learning how to do this better and better, it's learning to leave ourselves alone. So suffering, the suffering we experience, the kind of suffering that Buddhism wants to address, comes from how we don't leave ourselves alone. How we react, how we get attached, how we resist, how we have greed, how we have hatred, how we have delusion. And all those are activities, reactivities, that we're engaged in. Not maybe we as our usual conscious self, but our system is engaged in these activities.

And that the idea of leaving ourselves alone means putting down all this reactivity and letting something settle. Maybe the shoulders will relax. Maybe the belly will soften. Maybe your face won't be so pulled in to the skull. Okay. Maybe your heart will feel more open. Maybe your mind will be more at peace, more at ease, slowing down, calmer, calmer mind. So there's all this unfolding that goes on.

So the plan I have, at least tentatively, if I can pull it off, is I want to, as I talk about each of these 12 factors, one talk on each, present each one in terms of a number of levels, like five levels of deepening that we do. Five ways to deepen with suffering. Five ways to deepen with the topic of faith in each of these. So that each of them is themselves a little journey to understand them.

And I think hopefully better than understand them, I'm hoping that the *Dharma* talks are in a sense pointers to something that you can feel or sense within you. Maybe some of it will be with your imagination, but imagination is quite powerful because maybe that opens the door for some new possibility for you to really open to something, open to this stream, this river of *Dharma* that's flowing in you, that's taking you kind of deeper and deeper, or to a deeper and deeper river where the current becomes stronger and stronger and more and more peaceful.

So that's the general orientation of the retreat and the talks. And I hope that it supports you. And for an experienced student retreat, I normally don't give basic instructions. I'm assuming all of you have had basic instructions and have found your own way to the basic idea of how to be mindful, how to be present, how to become concentrated. And so you're welcome to practice in your normal way. Or the instructions I give, that's with the idea of building on what you already know how to do. You might add it to what you do. You might do it instead of what you do. That's your choice to find your way.

And then when we have practice discussions, you can come and tell me what you're doing, how you're doing it. And then I'm very happy to support you and find a way that maybe builds on what you do or enhances it or supports it further.

So first we'll begin, all of us, to get sprinkled with the *Dharma* rain. And may that *Dharma* rain absorb into each of us, fill us and puddle and make creeks, streams, pooling up to wonderful mountain lakes with clear, clear water, filled with lotuses, and become great, peaceful, quiet streams, rivers that are flowing across the lands on their way to the great ocean. May the *Dharma* rain nourish us, support us, and this journey that we'll take for these two weeks.

And that brings us to 8:30. So, the first evening we end at this time. For those of you in the West Coast time zone especially, you can go to sleep, go to bed early if you'd like. If you feel energized and happy to continue meditating, the meditation hall is always open. You can continue here as you wish. But generally, if you want some advice, the advice would be to go to bed. And then we'll see you in the morning.