

Opening session & precepts

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That we start with the five precepts and taking refuge in *Buddha, Dharma*, and *Saṅgha*. If I could just ask, is that the first time some of you humans have heard that? Or are you all familiar with it? Yeah, thank you. So don't kill, don't steal, refrain from sexual misconduct, don't lie, and don't intoxicate. Maybe we should just chant it.

You know, there's something about verbalizing in a way that we can hear and we can feel. So maybe I could say them and you could repeat them. I vow not to kill. I vow not to steal. I vow not to get caught up in misuse of sexuality. I vow not to lie. I vow not to intoxicate.

Maybe just take a few moments. And how can you recognize that we take the precepts to help something within us, to be at ease, to flourish, and to not be harmed? And these are wonderful things that support our humanness. And as we reflect on these precepts, we can start to feel the extension of the precept. I vow not to kill, but to help life flourish. I vow not to steal, but to take what is freely offered.

I vow not to get entangled with the allure of sexuality, but rather to let that energy flow forth with a different kind of love, with agape, extending to everyone and all beings. I vow not to lie, but to carry forth a noble silence that allows and invites my mind to settle. I vow not to intoxicate. I vow not to be intoxicated by emotions. I vow not to be intoxicated by becoming greedy in what I want to have happen.

And then can we take the refuges in a way that, and remind ourselves this is how we help ourselves and all other human beings and beyond to flourish. That as we engage in the heart of practice, we can see that it's opening our being. And within this being is *Buddha, Dharma*, and *Saṅgha*. I take refuge in *Buddha*. I take refuge in *Dharma*. I take refuge in *Saṅgha*.

Okay. Thank you, Paul, for beginning us this way. And taking refuge in *Saṅgha* is kind of a wonderful segue to talking about the theme of the retreat. The simple way of describing

the theme is the mindfulness of breathing, and a little bit more complicated is to use the *Pāli*, the ancient language, to call it *Ānāpānasati*. Because it associates it more closely to a set of instructions the Buddha gave, of a sequence of 16 practices or steps or unfoldings or deepenings of our experience of breathing.

And so both Paul and I have a wonderful inspired relationship with mindfulness of breathing and practicing that. Now, you know, as I said collectively, we've done it for 100 years or more. And for me, I never get tired of it. It just seems to be ever expanding and deepening and wondrous to practice this way. And so the classic instructions are these 16 steps of *Ānāpānasati*. *Ānāpāna* means breathing in and out.

Mindfulness of breathing in and out comes from a discourse called *The Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing*. And this is where there's just a connection to Paul ending with taking refuge in *Saṅgha*. This discourse has two halves. The second half is the instruction. The first half sets the stage. That's the context in which instructions are going to be given.

It's one of the longest settings of the context in the whole canon. And it's about three pages long, but it describes an idyllic scene. And it's an idyllic scene that the whole context is describing how Buddhist practitioners can be very different from each other. But they come together in unity, the forming of unification, coming together in a shared kind of purpose. And so what's happening is it's the rains retreat, and all these monastics of the time of the Buddha have gathered to spend three months together on retreat in the wilderness, in the woods, practicing.

And there kind of, the scene is kind of like at the edge of the woods, and there's a big kind of meadow area around. And it says that over there is a group. There are ten different groupings of the monastics, each of them around one of the most senior disciples of the Buddha. There's Mahā-Sāriputta and Moggallāna and Mahā-Kassapa and Mahā-Kaccāna and Anuruddha and Ānanda, all these senior Buddhist disciples, each of them with a group of students. And they're all getting instructions, and practicing together for this time with each other.

And the Buddha comes into the scene. It's the end of the three months. It's a full moon night. And a full moon night, you know, in certain times of the year, it's in India, just a beautiful clear night. The temperature is very nice. It's kind of an idyllic scene of peace.

And they're all sitting there, and the Buddha is going to teach them. And the Buddha does something that's very unusual in the suttas. He praises them. He says, everyone here is practicing sincerely, everyone here is pure and engaged wonderfully, and I'm really pleased with how well you're all practicing. And he says, let's continue for another month. Let's not end

the retreat after three months.

And so they do. And a month later, in the next full moon, the Buddha gathers the same people. They're all practicing. Imagine these, you know, they're all engaged, each of them differently. Each of the disciples of the Buddha has a little different teachings to teach and way to teach. So it's all getting a little bit different, but they're all engaged.

And the Buddha gathers them together and says the same thing. This is a wondrous group. This is fantastic. The sincerity, the purity, the engagement here, this is a really worthwhile group to support and to guide. And he just kind of praises them for how well they're practicing.

And it goes on to say, and some of them that are in here are people who have practiced all the way to becoming an arahant, fully awakened. Some people here have gone all the way to becoming a non-returner, a once-returner, *sotāpanna*, stream-enterers. And here in this group are people who are practicing the four foundations of mindfulness. Here there are people practicing the five faculties. Here there are people practicing the four bases of power.

Here are the seven factors of awakening. Here are people practicing the *Eightfold Path*. Here are people practicing loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, equanimity. Here there are people practicing observing impermanence and change. And here there are people practicing mindfulness of breathing.

And then the Buddha apparently likes this, because then he gives them detailed instructions in mindfulness of breathing. And he starts off by saying practicing mindfulness of breathing brings great fruit, great benefit. And if you practice mindfulness of breathing, you will develop the four foundations of mindfulness that just follow and grow from it. Practice the mindfulness of breathing and the seven factors of awakening will grow out of that, which is kind of a byproduct, a consequence of really giving yourself over to mindfulness of breathing. And then he starts giving instructions for how to practice it.

And before this begins, the 16-step kind of process, the Buddha says a practitioner goes into the forest, sits at the foot of a tree, in an empty building, sits down, crosses their legs with an erect body, establishes awareness to the forefront, establishes themselves in the field of awareness. And that's how it begins. And then with being aware, being mindful, one breathes in with awareness, one breathes out with awareness. So that's the foundation.

So the whole context of this is describing a time of peace, of harmony, of unification, the *Saṅgha* rather than their divisions. And some people are practicing the right way, and there are other people the wrong way, and this is what you should be doing. All of these different

parts of Buddhism, all the disciples, all the different practices that were developed at that time, were all being held and seen with respect and care. They all have a time and place, and everything is, there's no argument, there's no conflict, no division.

And then he comes and talks about how mindfulness of breathing is one of those great unifiers. It brings together the four foundations of mindfulness as we become whole. It brings in the seven factors of awakening in this movement towards wholeness and fullness and cultivation, development as a kind of a byproduct, as a natural growth of it all. And it begins by a very, very simple thing. Sitting erect and establishing awareness.

We're always aware, but it's impossible not to be aware unless you're maybe in a coma or something. And to establish awareness means place yourself in the middle of your awareness. It's not exactly a practice that you do. Nowhere does the Buddha say practice awareness, practice mindfulness. He says place yourself in it, take a stand in it.

The word for foundation can also mean a place where you're going to stand, a place where you're going to be close to. Be here in the midst of being aware. And awareness is not a completely 100% exact thing. Being aware is kind of the collective operation, in a very unique individual personal way, of how our attentional faculties work. Sometimes attentional faculties as we see, sometimes we hear.

We can hear without making a practice of listening. There's just hearing. We can see without the practice of intentionally looking. Seeing happens. We can sense the body without it being an active practice of sensing, just being receptive and open to the sensations that arise that are here.

The mind's eye can observe something about the mind, can kind of track or kind of see what's going on in such a way that we don't interfere with it, just like the eyes don't interfere with something we look at. So the mind's eye can be present for breathing, for the emotions, for the sensations, and just observe it in a very relaxed and non-interfering way. Part of attentional faculty is to recognize what the experience is. And knowing, oh, that's an itch. That's a sound. That's a bird.

That's the rustling of the wind. That's someone blowing their nose. That's the bell. And there's a very, you know, some of this knowing capacity we have operates almost subliminally. We don't even know how much we're knowing all the time. But there's a constant recognition that that's a door, that's a door handle, there's the steps.

You guys know it's a step. So you don't have to think about it. But something knows that that's a step you walk down or walk up. But this capacity to know is a natural human capacity

that a lot of it can operate without you practicing it or working at it. It's just there.

So, you know, for the Buddha, a very important part of the attentional faculty is the whole, as I talked about, the whole capacity to sensory, to sensation-wise, to experience what's happening. The sensing, the receiving through the senses of what our experience is. It's a different attentional capacity than recognition and knowing, than seeing, than hearing. And all these operate in all kinds of ways, and there's other attentional faculties we have.

And the natural way in which they occur will be different for each of you, different at different times and different situations. If there's a really, really tasty food for lunch, you might be overwhelmed by just the receptivity of the taste. That's the attentional faculty that takes it in. If there is a pain in your knee, there might be simply the sensations of pain. There might be the knowing of the pain. There might be the way that reactivity kicks in and you know you're being reactive.

And so these things are operating all the time. So when the Buddha says sit up, sit up in an upright way, in a dignified way, in an intentional way, and place yourself in this field of awareness, in this field of how your attentional faculties are working. And what I suggest is to think about it not so much initially of what you do, but what is like a practice you have, the technique that you have to do, but rather be curious. What is the natural way? What is the unintentional way?

What is this? What way is your whole system of attention operating right now in the present moment? How does it register the present moment? What's the intentional door for being aware of here and now? If there's a car outside, it's the ear door. If there's a thought in the mind, it's the mind's eye or the mind's hearing.

Oh, there's a thought, recognizing that was a really good thought. Let me try to have more of them. How are they involved? But how does this happen in a natural way? And that is the beginning of the instructions of *Ānāpānasati*, before the Buddha starts talking about a variety of things that look like he's telling you what to do. But he's building on this very simple natural capacity to be aware, which even if you don't want to, you're doing it right now.

Some of you might be tired. Maybe you're straining to hear my voice and see what's going on. But relax for a few moments and just take in here and now. If you open your eyes using the eye door, and let your eyes and head kind of roam around the room, taking in the ceiling and the colors, and very soft and gentle without trying to look at anything, just letting seeing happen by itself as you float around the room with your eyes. Being aware of what it feels like to do this in the present moment, seeing is always a present moment experience.

The eyes are helping you to be here now. Then if you close your eyes and allow yourself to hear, where you're not actively listening, straining to listen, but content for whatever sound comes. Sound and hearing also only occur in the present moment. And then if you come in closer to sense, it opens something up in your body so that the sensations in your body reveal themselves to you. Don't go looking for them.

It can be available for the body to show itself as sensations. And sensations are always in the present moment, always here now. And in a very relaxed way, maybe almost like your attention is floating through your body, let the body receive the sensations of the body. And then within the body, as part of the bodily experience, without it being a practice, naturally feel the sensations that are associated with breathing.

If you open a window, you might feel the breeze coming in from outside. If you open the window to your breathing, like you're allowing the breeze, the sensations of breathing in and breathing out, whatever way they appear, allowing them to show themselves, then sensations of breathing only occur in the present moment. To feel breathing, to feel the present moment. Not as a practice, but as a respectful curiosity. In what way are you aware of the present moment breathing?

That's your way at this particular time. The sensations of breathing are always here and now. There can be something very reassuring about breathing if you appreciate how it's an invitation for simple awareness, almost an awareness that's born every moment. That we feel sensations of breathing.

And to be aware of breathing, not as a technique, not as a way to get concentrated or bore down on the experience of breathing, but rather to discover how breathing, sensations, the experience of breathing supports a natural awareness about the present moment. Like a gentle breeze that keeps embers burning, a gentle breathing keeps the warmth of attention here. Just let that softness, that simplicity, let it carry your body and your mind as you go back to your room.

Just reminding yourself by your disposition and by how you're relating to the thoughts and feelings that are arising for you, reminding yourself there isn't really a reason to agitate, there isn't really a reason to contract, to feel like there's something that needs to be controlled or diminished. There's a kind of effortless effort that we can carry forth, just this simplicity of awareness. Thank you.