

Welcome and Intro

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So it's a custom that the retreats I teach have a formal beginning, like we have here now, and to welcome you all. But before I do, I want to tell you a story. This is a story that I read many years ago. My memory was that it was a true story. I don't know if one of the people in the story wrote it or how it was written, but it had to do with someone who I think lived in Arizona.

Okay. And it had concerns of a father and a young girl. Maybe she was 14, 13, or something. And apparently she had an unfortunate haircut, which at that age maybe is hard. And so she was quite distraught, maybe didn't want to go to school.

And so the father said, I said, "Come, I'll take you for a drive." And so they drove into the mountains, in some place where there was a spectacular vista of the mountains and the forests and the natural world. And he said, "Let's just look at this, spend some time looking at this." They sat silently, and she looked. And then he said something like, "Nature, these mountains, these trees, these skies, they accept you as you are, regardless of your haircut."

And apparently that made a big difference for her. So, our societies are often societies where we don't do that for each other. We don't accept each other as we are. The hope, the dream, the aspiration, the attempt is that as we practice, we all become people who can accept people as they are, as nature, accept people's natural way of being, how they are.

We don't even know all their causes and conditions and ways people are and how people have been, you know, formed by all kinds of factors in the world and genetics and everything. And I was kind of... it was really eye-opening for me to raise two children and to see how many types of children there are. I mean, they're just astounding, all the different ways that kids can come into the world and be, and challenges and joys. And it seems like, you know, really all we can really do is love. Love them all.

So the hope is that I want to welcome all of you here. And when I say all of you, it means both the 40, 45 people who are here, but it's also all of who you are, all the different ways that you are. That here is a place where you practice as you are. You're allowed to be as you are. And there might be little details about being in harmony with a group somehow.

But the idea is to really love everyone and care for everyone. And make everyone feel, all of you, that this is your retreat. You know, if anything, I'm a guest here. But I don't see this as my retreat. This is our retreat. This is your retreat.

This belongs to you. You belong in this community. This is your community. And you're contributing to it while you're here. Yeah. So you're all welcome, as you are.

And if for some reason you don't feel that, and you'd like to discuss that, please do. It's a welcome topic. We aspire to be like nature. And we have this wonderful natural world here, which I'll talk more about.

A few logistical things is that... so I'll be meditating in here. Tomorrow morning, for the instructional sitting, I'll give meditation instruction every morning. But tomorrow morning, at the end of it, I'll give instructions for walking meditation. So it's before the first formal walking period. Those of you who need it can stay for that.

And then there's a walking period at 10:45. And at that time, I'll offer posture instruction for meditation and posture. And some of you have never had meditation and posture. And especially, even if you've been meditating for a long time, but you never really received kind of more detailed instructions for meditation posture, I kind of encourage you to stay for it. There's all these little details that sooner or later can be useful for you.

I don't know, kind of too many things happening, too many things happening over my heart. And then we'll start doing practice discussions the day after tomorrow. Those are periods where you can come meet with me and talk about your practice, your meditation practice, your challenges and joys that are somehow related to doing meditation practice. But in this retreat, we'll do that as group practice discussions.

So we'll meet with groups of six or seven of you and me. And Adam's here to be the teacher trainee, and so he'll be attending. So he'll be there to listen and watch and learn about how these things are done. It's a little bit strange because he is already teaching retreats. But even after he started teaching retreats, only then did he start the Spirit Rock teacher training.

So he's kind of doing things in unusual order. That's his natural way of doing things. We'll accept him that too. And so the way we'll... there'll be a sign-up sheet posted tomorrow that

we sign up for with the time so you come and meet with me. And so I'll talk about that in more detail, where and how and when, tomorrow.

And so there's more kind of logistics we could say, but maybe that's enough for now. Some of the things will be announced when it's more of the time for it. So I want to talk a little bit about the theme for the retreat.

So the title of the retreat—most titles we have at IRC don't have titles; they're just a generic insight meditation retreat—and this one's called *The Dharma and Nature, Nature and Dharma*. Same title we had last year. And it seemed appropriate for up here because, as I said earlier, I feel like nature is one of the teachers here, like my co-teacher, or I'm the junior teacher for the big teacher, the nature that's here.

And, um, but to understand the connection, the intimacy, and maybe the oneness, the sameness, of nature and *Dharma* is quite profound. And to begin understanding that what we're looking here is deeply into nature in ourselves, and having a natural world around us here, I think it does something to us. And to start paying attention to the natural world, both to it in itself, but also to the influence it has on you. And some of that influence will go in deeper, register more deeply, if you allow it.

If you pay attention, like, what is going on here? What is... what's... it feels very quiet, or the aspen leaves, that's quite lovely, or the sound of water, or the sky, or the great Sierra Buttes, or whatever it might be here. Is it having an influence on you? And what is that influence? Yes.

Is it useful? Is it a beneficial influence? Are you mostly afraid of the natural world? Maybe. We're designed to be afraid. So, of course, you're in a new place, there's a natural world, there's bears and mountain lions and mice.

So, of course. But maybe there's more here. Maybe there's also something where you have maybe even a deep kinship, a deep relationship—not a relationship where, like, you know, a relatedness, like your relatives—maybe with the trees and the plants and the animals and the birds. And what is this relationship? What would this... how does it come in? How does it register?

And, um, so there are two vast worlds that were... that's part of meditation practice. In some places where you meditate, it's all kind of indoors and all within a building, like at IRC. The vast world can feel like it's inside. In some places you go, and the vast world can seem like it's mostly outside.

And what I'd like to say, what I think the opportunity is here, is the inside and outside are both

vast. And the largeness, the wonderment, if you take time to take in all the kind of feelings of what it's like here. And see it as a little bit, not exactly a mirror, but a different form of what is inside of you. Once you close your eyes, you know, it can feel vast in there.

And who we are as human beings is multitudinous. There's so much that lives in us and moves in us and awakens in us. And there's layers and levels inside of us that we settle into and discover. It's phenomenal. And it's phenomenal what attention can be.

All the different forms and varieties of the ways in which attention... comes into play. And sometimes there's vast consciousness. Sometimes there's a very precise little recognition of a, "Oh, that's a mouse dropping," zero in. That's not particularly inspiring, but there might be some that are inspiring.

But still, this ability to kind of really be precise, and this fluxing and changing of how awareness works, it's like the changing weather. And awareness is not just one thing. And so, and your emotions, and one of the vast things we talk about in this tradition is the immeasurable, unlimited, boundless *brahmavihāras*, love. You close your eyes and suddenly you're the universe, and it's all love. There's no end to it going all out in the vast world.

So we sit here. It turns out we sit here, wherever our awareness is, our attention is, right at the meeting place of a vast world outside and a vast world inside. And to have them in relationship to each other, and have the vast world out there somehow to allow it to come in, allow it to kind of have an effect, have an influence on you. And have the vast world inside allow it to come out so the best of it can have an influence in the world.

We're in this together. We've been shaped by the natural world. Every little piece of who you are, all the different ways that we're shaped as human beings, we've evolved this way. And we've evolved this way because the nature, the natural world that we grew up in, when we were young in Mother Africa, it shaped us, it formed us, got us to walk.

God gave us toes, gave us fingers, gave us all these capacities we have, and inner capacities of attention and thinking and understanding. It's just phenomenal that we evolved out of this natural world, probably because our genes were in conversation with it, finding a way, finding what would match and survive and make work. And so we're back in the natural world here, the very thing that shaped us. A very different world than being on your iPad.

I mean, what would it like, you know, if I sat here and, you know, "Excuse me, I need to check, you know, the news, and there's these wonderful crossword puzzles you can do and games. You know, I almost finished. Let me finish, and then I'll give the *Dharma* talk." And then I get absorbed in that, and then I click and there's another one. "Oh, I'm sorry. No *Dharma* talk

today.”

I mean, it’s kind of... wouldn’t that be sad? I mean, how many people live on these screens? We’re here to live in a different world. And it’s not the world. It’s not a foreign world to our system.

It’s the very world that shaped us, that made us. And we made it. We’re in it together. It’s profound to feel all that and be all that.

And one of the reasons why it’s so important for *Dharma* practice is that the word *Dharma* can mean nature. And *dharmatā*, that makes an abstract noun, so like *dharm*-ness, the great translators like Bhikkabani will translate it as natural. The *dharmatā*, the naturalness, the *dharm*-ness of certain things. And in particular, what he emphasizes as being natural, as being the *dharm*-ness of, is how our inner life grows in the *Dharma*, how it evolved and changes.

And how we wake up, and how we develop concentration, and how we develop happiness and joy and wisdom. These are all... the process of doing that is a natural process within. And so that’s very different than looking for the *Dharma* on an iPad. There are people now trying to convince me that we should have AI offer practice discussion. I’m sure it has some value. I’m not going to say no, but exactly.

But, uh, I think we want to stay close to this phenomenal natural world that we’re part of and that we’re interacting with. AI can understand so much, but it’s not going to resonate. It’s not going to be attuned. It’s not going to have the empathy. It’s not going to have the, this, the living feeling and sense that has to... it’s always interactive.

And so the *Dharma* can be in nature. And the important part of that is that we’re looking, when we sit to practice, to not be the engineers of our practice. We’re looking to be the gardeners of our practice. We’re growing the garden. We’re making it possible for something inside of us to grow and develop.

In my early years of practice, I thought it was all about my own self-conscious, willful effort. And I used to get bored down to get concentrated and get tense. I’m not going to, you know, tie it in... my jaws would lock up. And I was just like, “I’m going to really get concentrated here.” And it never worked.

It never worked. It only worked when I stopped doing it and allowed this natural process to unfold. But the allowing of it is not an easy thing to do. Because our minds might have the equivalent of getting out that iPad. Our minds have stories to tell, conversations to do, arguments to be made, projections of the future to make, commentary.

And we live in that world that's constructed and artificial, made up of stories that take us away from this natural unfolding, this natural awakening, this thing that can... we want to make space for and allow for. So one of the reasons we start quieting the inner conversations is to make room in the field of awareness for something to begin to germinate and to grow. It's nothing different than removing the weeds from a garden bed so the plants can grow.

And so our weeds are these stories and preoccupations and things that we're caught in and attached to and reacting to and resisting. To relax and begin having a trusting awareness. To trust this life. Trust this natural process. Trust what's going on deep inside of us. Trust what wants to come.

So that the natural healing can happen. So that the natural homeostasis can come in. Its natural balances can be established. And so these beautiful *Dharma* qualities can begin germinating and moving and growing and developing within us. These are all natural forces within us.

To be in a natural environment is a reminder that we are nature, and we're learning how to cooperate as good gardeners with this inner natural world to let it bloom. That's one way of understanding *Dharma* practice. Or, since *Dharma* can be nature, one way that we do nature practice. So that's kind of the emphasis that I've tried to have for this retreat. So hopefully that you'll find it interesting and useful, meaningful.

So now we're going to do the formal refuges and precepts. And that's kind of the formal beginning of the retreat. And when we finish those, we can take a couple of minutes to be silent again. And then it's time to go to bed. If you're not sleepy, you're welcome to stay up.

It's often a good idea, first day of the retreat, to go to bed early. So...

Thank you, Gil. That was really beautiful and sets me up nicely. So, as Gil said, we traditionally begin a retreat with refuges and precepts. And the Buddha and the *suttas* called the three refuges and the five precepts the eight streams of merit or eight streams of blessing. And I always was very puzzled over how are these blessings? And hopefully that will become more clear by the end of what I say.

So traditionally, the three refuges—the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the *Saṅgha*—we think of the Buddha as the teacher, that guy back there, the teacher, the Buddha who taught 2,600 years ago and lived 80 years and passed on, but began this wonderful tradition. The *Dharma* as the teachings that he disseminated to his followers, and then the *Saṅgha* as the practitioners of Buddhism. And then we can think of that as sort of an external refuge, which can be

useful, especially for those of us who are more devotional types.

But for me, I like a more kind of internal view of the refuges, and it's really much of what Gil said in his opening book. And so we have the Buddha, the Buddha. And really, the word Buddha means something like awake, awake. And so Buddhism could just as easily be called awake-ism.

We could think of this wakeful quality, not just something that's the Buddha's, but it's something that we all have. Awareness, as Gil was talking about, the various ways we can be aware in our lives. And so sometimes I like to think of this first refuge as taking refuge in awareness, awareness itself. Taking refuge in this capacity that I have to know, to see, to be in the middle of this life.

And the *Dharma*, nature, the path that leads to more awareness, the path that leads to seeing more clearly, the path that leads to this understanding of myself as nature. Just as I walk through the forest and see the animals, I'm no different. It's not me in nature. It's me as nature or of nature. So maybe I can take refuge in this, this path of becoming more aware.

And then the *sangha*, those who are also on this path of recognizing themselves as nature, or of becoming awake or more awake or more aware... this community that is aware of their impact, a community that is trying to create more peace and kindness and care and love in the world, not contributing to suffering. And so these are things that we can really reflect on. It's not simply an act of chanting these at the beginning of retreat and then the retreat begins. It's really something that's this constant reflection on what are these things?

And also, what do I actually take refuge in? We're always taking refuge in something. Where do we spend most of our time? I often take refuge in my thinking. My thinking can solve problems, or in my phone, or in a TV show, or in all of these things that are actually limiting my awareness.

And so what are these things that I can take refuge in that actually expand and grow kindness, grow these qualities of the heart? And so that's one way to think of the refuges. And then also we take these five precepts. And it took me a while to kind of get over these as not being commandments.

In the Judeo-Christian culture, it's difficult to not see, as me being raised as a Christian. It was difficult for me to not see these as something adjacent to, like, the Ten Commandments. But when I read, read about these in the *suttas*, they're not commands that are delivered down by the Buddha that you must obey these particular things or else, you know. It's more like, "How about trying these practices on, you know? What is conducive to awakening? What is

conducive to suffering?”

And there are really ways that we can live more wisely and in a more caring way with one another. And so when I think about the precepts, or when I take them on retreat, or whenever I think about them or practice them, I don't think of them as me taking them necessarily for me, but how do I want to be in the world for others? And so here on retreat, how can we take care of one another? Yeah.

And we might think of ourselves as already ethical or already moral. I don't do any of these things anyway. So what's the point of taking them? But when we take them together, it can actually bring a sense of confidence or safety. It can actually undo some, perhaps some insecurities that exist amongst us in many, many ways.

And so we take these together as agreements, as a community together, of how we're going to live for the next week with one another. And so the first one we take, we, uh... we agree to this training to refrain from killing living beings, this practice of not killing living beings. And so when we're in the world, when we're out in a retreat, in our room, out in nature, how can I be more kind in how I walk upon the earth or I see a bug in my room or something flying across the floor here? Do I just want to get rid of it, or do I want to see it as also an expression of life that I honor and maybe I take care of that life?

And so we just try it on for practice, not as a judgment, not if something accidental happens and I feel bad about it, but what's it like when I start to honor life as sacred, honor living beings as sacred? And the second one, we undertake a training from taking what is not given from... And there's many, many ways to think about this.

One way I like to think about it in this retreat setting is after the session, we go into noble silence. And I like to talk about this in this precept as well, because this is another way we take care of one another. Am I taking someone's silence from them? How I close doors, how I walk through the cabin, how I operate? Am I having secret conversations or whatever it is?

Can I care for the community more? And how I do all things is a practice. It brings more awareness and more care. And then also simple things like when we go through the food line, what do I actually need now? Really getting in contact, you know.

For me, I have this kind of greed, like, “Oh, maybe that's not enough on my plate. I need a little bit more, maybe a little bit more, just so I feel safe.” But what are those feelings really, and how can I work with them? Maybe I hold back a little bit, and I might soon see that maybe I don't need as much. And so it's really taking—not taking what's not given—or accepting what is given.

The third precept, we refrain from intentional sexual activity, so celibacy on retreat. Outside of retreat, we commit to non-harm in our sexuality, and this is really just a way to experiment on retreat. How is my sexual energy used, and can it be channeled more into practice? Can I really look at it and examine it and see how it operates on levels of mind and body and energy?

And so we refrain as a practice here from sexual activity, to look at it as a practice, to see, to become more aware. The fourth one, we undertake the training to refrain from false speech or lying or harsh, harsh talk sometimes. And we're not talking, so we don't have to worry a lot about the external form of this. But...

And there's also this internal speak we have, and this is something that I work with a lot, is how do I talk to myself? Or I could be talking, you know, narrating something about somebody, you know, even when I'm silent. So really paying attention to what's happening internally, silently within my own system, examining that. So it's not just about external audible speech, but really what's happening with them. Yeah.

Another aspect of the third precept that I forgot to mention, the sexual activity, is also sometimes it's talked about as a sensual activity. And so examining, you might become attracted to somebody on this retreat. And sometimes we call this the *Vipassanā* romance, especially as you get into the retreat a little bit more. The yogi mind starts to work, and you might start to be planning your first date and the wedding and, you know, all of these things that start to happen.

And we can really examine that. And the important thing is just not to externalize that on that person. So you might notice yourself looking at that person more or something like that, noticing this and really bringing it back. Like, what's the practice here? What am I becoming more aware of?

There's also a *Vipassanā* vendetta as well. So somebody might be annoying you on purpose, and you're very sure that they're annoying you on purpose, and you have this whole vendetta against them. And so we work with that. That's another way we become more aware.

And then the last one is about refraining from taking intoxicants that cloud the mind. And there's many, many ways we become intoxicated. I do want to say, if you are taking medication for any medical reason, please keep taking that. But we want to refrain from intoxication of all types.

And one of the main types we become intoxicated is that little phone that we have that's very, very intoxicating. It can dictate moods. It can dictate all kinds of things in our system. And so

I would encourage you to turn it off and maybe give it to somebody to hold for you. I'm not sure if we do that here, but...

At least turn it off and see what it's like to practice with not having this intoxicating thing. That's basically another appendage. I can let that go for a week. So these are just some ideas. And these are the eight streams of merit, eight streams of blessing.

We bless one another when we take these precepts, when we take refuge in these things. And so what we'll do is we'll chant these, call and response. We'll chant the refuges. And then we'll actually speak the precepts, but that will also be call and response. But we'll start with an homage to the Buddha.

Namo is typically translated as homage, but one of my teachers likes to think of it as, "I'm returning to." I'm returning to my internal experience. I'm returning to my wakefulness. I'm returning to this awareness. So, you all ready? Okay.

Thanks for doing that. Okay, now from the top. *Namo tassa*. We'll do call and response.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.

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.

Okay, five precepts. We'll do call and response in English.

I undertake the training to refrain from killing living beings.

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

I undertake the training to refrain from intentional sexual activity.

I undertake the training to refrain from false speech.

I undertake the training to refrain from taking intoxicants, which cloud the mind and cause heedlessness.

May this virtue of mine help bring about knowledge of the path and its fruit.

Thank you.