Non-Greed: Dāna

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 54:30

You know those moments Sharon spoke of in her talk on delusion where you suddenly are sitting there and you go, "Where am I? What am I doing here?" I just had one.

Something that I've been reflecting on a lot lately, something that just seems to be coming up in my experience and to my attention, is what I see as one of the great paradoxes of our lives and of this practice. It's how, as we open, as we become more mindful, we open so deeply to such an immensity of suffering. And at the same time, we're opening to such an immensity of beauty, of love, of joy, of appreciation. The paradox is somehow how to hold both of them—not to let one experience deny the other, and yet continue to be open for both.

I've been seeing this come up a lot. Two small examples came to my mind when I was writing this, and you can see it yourself all through the day.

The first: one of these beautiful golden days we've been having, I went out to a reservoir near here and was walking in the woods by myself. It was so exquisitely beautiful—the golden leaves, the light filtering down, the water. Such a sense of sublime peace and rightness with the universe. It was very inspirational, a sense of surrendering completely into that moment, to the rightness of the Dharma, a willingness to surrender my life to whatever service of the Dharma was appropriate. All those feelings arose, and it was a real experience.

And then the next memory in that moment was of a friend's remarking that the leaves are reaching this height of beauty as their dying gesture. All this beauty is the preparation for death of the leaves, of many of the plants in the forest. And that's not necessarily a depressing thought, but both aspects are inherent in the same situation.

The second example comes from the other side. A couple days ago, a friend on staff told me that Terry Anderson—the man who's been a prisoner in Beirut—it's five years now. She'd heard that he was celebrating his fifth anniversary in captivity, and that he spends most of his time in a cave chained to the wall. Just to imagine that, and the thought of trying to open one's heart to what he might be going through, to send some mettā. In the doing of that, feeling the compassion beginning to flow, the sense of unbelievability at what this person's enduring—but out of that came the beauty of compassion and the sense of all of our connectedness. In a way, that isn't happening separate from us. And at the same time, knowing that the same mettā and compassion must also encompass his captors. That they're also suffering. And that's also a part of our existence.

So you see what I mean—it's as if both extremes are encompassed in many of our experiences, even the most simple.

Because the suffering, both our own and others', can so often seem so unbearable, and we spend so much of our lives guarding against feeling the depth of it. Of necessity, we spend a lot of our practice learning to open to suffering, to face it, to acknowledge it, to see the nature of the afflictions in the mind, how they create more suffering when they're not seen and are identified with. And this is necessary. It leads to this opening of the heart, a great depth of wisdom and compassion.

But at times, it seems like we can get almost unbalanced in our focus on looking at the negative qualities, for use of a better word. We see greed, hatred, and delusion so much that we forget that's not actually the intrinsic nature of our mind. It's easy to identify when we come and think about how much grasping we've seen in a day. It's easy to think, "My God, it's hopeless. This is the nature of the mind and my existence." We forget that these qualities are covering, that they're hiding the intrinsic pure nature of our mind and heart.

And so that's what I want to talk about tonight—just a reminder to us that our practice, yes, it's about opening to the unpleasant, to the difficult, to seeing its nature with mindfulness, with equanimity. But it's also about acknowledging the beauty, the other qualities of mind, the nature of the mind when it's not dulled by confusion or grasping or anger. Can we learn to equally acknowledge and experience both aspects—the unbearably painful and also the unbearably sublime?

I want to talk about some of the pure, positive aspects of mind tonight. Classically these are described in rather negative terms: non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. But they're really much more than this kind of passive, neutral quality. They're really very active, growing, outpouring qualities of mind.

Non-greed can also be described as generosity, thoughts and actions of sharing, even of sacrifice. It's also non-attachment, renunciation, simplicity.

Non-hatred—again, it's not just this passive sitting still like a rock where nothing's going to incite my anger. It's also the very positive outpourings of the heart: mettā, loving-kindness, compassion, forgiveness, patience.

And non-delusion is that brightness of mind that we all experience on retreat when the perception is so bright, so clear. And this leads to growth of great insight, equanimity, and understanding.

I'll talk more about these later.

What's important, I think, for us to continue to recognize as we go through our practice here and also in our life is not to see these qualities as some goal out there, but to recognize that on a moment-to-moment basis they are present in our experience. In moments when the unwholesome states of mind aren't present—when we're not clouded by greed or anger or confusion—these positive qualities, various ones of

them, are present. And as our mind purifies more through our mindfulness practice, these qualities shine out even more strongly and more often. I think it's important for us to also recognize and acknowledge them when they're present—not just to acknowledge the difficult. And to know that there are ways to cultivate these qualities, of which of course mindfulness is the most powerful. I'll mention a little about that, but I also want to talk about some broader ways to cultivate these qualities.

First I want to say that often I've found, in my own experience and in talking to other people, that when we discuss the really uplifting qualities of mind—whether it be the possibility of freedom, enlightenment, or the development of a sense of real boundless loving-kindness, of a state of non-attachment—even though it's meant to be inspiring, it often has quite the opposite effect. People will say, "God, just hearing about enlightenment turns me off completely. I mean, that's for somebody else out there. It's not for me." Rather than bringing inspiration and energy to investigate, it brings a sense of, "Well, I can never do it, so what's the point?" A kind of heaviness and listlessness can result. There's always someone better, always someone to compare ourselves to. And so it can serve the opposite purpose. Hopefully that's not my intention.

I want to share an experience that helped me see how this actually could be inspiring. I think one of the reasons that hearing about—I don't want to say goal, I don't even mean goal—but just the possibility in this moment of living with these powerful qualities of heart and mind, one of the reasons it can seem discouraging is this tendency to accent the negative. When we hear about, say, the possibility of cultivating boundless metta, all we see is our boundless anger and hatred. That's all we know. We don't notice the moments when it isn't there.

Think about if you've done something that put yourself out there, and you get feedback from people about something you're unsure about. Ten people tell you it was really nice, it was great. And two people give you really negative feedback. Which ones do you remember? Which ones do you give the most weight to and believe? I know for myself, there are times I'll completely discount the positive feedback. They're crazy, or they're just being nice—anything one wants to say. The negative one believes. It's often like that with our moment-to-moment experiences.

So often when I'd hear about enlightenment, or hear people talk about it—Sayadaw U Pandita mentions it a lot in his talks, he'll often talk about Nibbana—sometimes it's inspiring and sometimes I think, "If he mentions that one more time, I'm going to lose it." Because it's just somewhere else. Somebody else can do it, not me.

This winter I was in Bodh Gaya in India for a few weeks. That's the small village where the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree and came to his full understanding and enlightenment before he started teaching. There's quite a beautiful temple, a big stupa there, and a descendant of the tree that you can go and sit near. People circumambulate the temple, and it's in a little park right in the middle of this village.

I'm not usually very moved or inspired by shrines or temples. It just isn't what moves my heart usually.

But we went and sat down in the midst of all the craziness there, started to sit, and I was so moved I started to cry. As I reflected or just kept sitting, I saw that what it was—it brought what seemed like a myth of this person, the Buddha, some special, unbelievably special person who achieved this miraculous thing—it brought it down to earth. We were sitting in just this place, in this little dirty Indian village, under a tree. And it made the whole thing really human to me, really much more possible. Like, oh yeah, this Buddha—he was a human being with suffering, trying, just like I am, just like all of us are. And maybe it's not some esoteric myth so far away that it has no relationship to my life. Maybe it's something that is really possible.

It was deeply inspiring to me, just in the sense of bringing the whole thing down to earth. And it gave a sense of energy, a sense of real commitment—commitment not to have to go somewhere else and achieve some kind of other state separate from life. Because the other factor of this experience is that this temple is in the middle of the whole show. When you're sitting there, there are hordes of tourists coming through in droves, guides with their microphones, Hindus chattering really loudly, Japanese Zen groups. There were about twenty-five Tibetan monks sitting on the hillside for days, chanting.

Blowing horns. A very mentally disturbed woman who would come running up and scream the whole time you were there, then go away. Starving dogs. Rows of beggars you have to walk through just to get up to the temple in the first place. It's not like you're out in some sublime place.

And I kind of got it. Oh.

The inspiration wasn't a sense of denying or aversion to life, but of being able to embrace the whole without getting lost in it. The inspiration was to be fully present, but to devote one's energy to the development of wisdom—so that one is fully present *knowing* that it's impermanent, that it's insubstantial, that none of the things that happen are going to bring lasting happiness. But for that very reason, one can be even more fully present and participating.

That inspiration comes and goes, but it has stayed with me quite deeply since that time. And since then, I've understood more how talking about the possibility of developing non-greed isn't something to dismiss. It's like—right, this is something that happens in this world. There are many moments of it in my experience right now, if I'm just willing to open and pay attention to those equally.

Sometimes I also feel as if we're almost afraid to open to the power of these positive qualities of our experience. A moment of what feels like really pure love, or forgiveness, or compassion. Generosity—a sense of selfless generosity. Or an upliftment of joy just at the way the foot feels when it lifts off the floor. It doesn't have to be about something sublime.

And sometimes it almost seems harder to open to that fully than to the pain. Some people have said things as if they don't trust that it's real. Again, it's back to the self-negative: "Well, I'm just such a blind, dumb person. I couldn't experience this level of joy or this level of peace. So it must not be a valid experience."

We find ways to discount it. So be aware of that. Trust your experience.

The thing I find in myself strongly is that sometimes it seems hard to fully take in these moments of non-greed or non-hatred, of clarity, because there's such a poignancy in them. They're so deep and powerful, but there's also a knowing right away of their impermanence. And that even grasping at this—you know, as soon as the grasping comes in, it's gone. In fact, the grasping actually destroys it. And sometimes it's as if, "Well, if I really open, it's just going to go away. I'm going to grasp, I'm going to suffer more, so forget it."

Let's just be aware of this when it happens. Learn to trust our experience. Really open. Experiment with opening to it, and so grasping comes along—fine. That's the next experience. But we don't have to shrink away from opening to the power and beauty of these experiences.

And in fact, the more we do this, we find that we don't have to be so afraid of grasping. It comes or it doesn't. It's another experience. But in the moment, when we learn to say—in an experience of joy or appreciation—to open to it even more fully, we appreciate it even more deeply *because* we know that it's impermanent, that clinging and grasping is beside the point. And so there's a huge energy, a total vitality of presence, just to experience it as it is. And when it goes, it's gone. That's okay.

So what are these qualities of heart and mind that I'm talking about, more specifically? My intention had been to talk about all three, but I see I'm not going to get past non-greed tonight. So we'll talk about that.

As I said, non-greed is a state of non-attachment, of generosity. It's not at all a neutral, passive state. It's more the state of generosity. It begins with non-attachment—the dissolving of attachments, small attachments in the moment, larger attachments. But it turns into something more like a giving out, a spilling out of that energy into the world, out to other people, other situations. It's no longer just being enclosed in on ourselves.

One way of thinking about the state of attachment is as a state of mind where we compulsively refer everything back to ourselves. What do I want? What don't I want? This is in my way. This is nice. What do people think about me?

How do I look? We refer everything back to ourselves—a state of attachment.

As detachment grows, as non-attachment develops, not only are we free of this exhausting pattern, but the energy that was going into that clinging, into that constant referring back, becomes accessible. It can move outward into a much more generous, open quality of energy, a movement of the heart. Naturally generous impulses, expressions of love, of sharing, of service—these come to be the natural expression of the force of non-attachment or non-greed in the mind.

Now this force arises often and strengthens naturally through our mindfulness practice, which works on quite a subtle level—the level of moment-to-moment arising and passing of our experience. In this level of

seeing things arise, seeing the attachment arise and turning our mindfulness to it, often in that very moment the mindfulness itself helps to dissolve the attachment. At any rate, in the moment that we're mindful, the attachment is not being strengthened; the mind is being purified. So mindfulness itself is a very powerful force for the further cultivation of non-greed, for the strengthening of the outflowing of unselfishness, of service. Mindfulness is one way, and maybe the most powerful way, to cultivate this.

I'd also like to talk about another way to strengthen this quality of mind. And again, it's important to notice it when it's present. But by the actual practice of generosity itself, as a practice, it strengthens even more this quality of non-greed in the mind. The practice of generosity is a very powerful practice. In Pali, the word for generosity is *dāna*, which we tend to use a lot, throw around a lot. It encompasses more, in a way, than just the word generosity. It's a practice in itself that can actually be used as a path to freedom from suffering if we're working with it in that way. It can be used as a path to purify the mind, and it's a very powerful adjunct to our mindfulness practice.

In the scriptures, the three trainings of the mind often talked about are *dāna*, the practice of generosity; *sīl a*, the practice of morality; and *bhāvanā*, the practice of mental development or meditation. *Dāna* is given a very important place in our path to freedom. It has many aspects, of course—any thought of giving, plus actual giving of resources or money or time, energy, a sense of unselfishness, working with renunciation, simplicity of life and desires. Even our meditation practice itself can be a form of *dāna*.

When we're working with it as a path, it's very important to recognize, as with all our actions, that it's not just the outer action itself that's purifying, that strengthens the non-attachment, but it's our inner intention—the motivation that engenders the action and that follows through with it, the attention we give it. This is a very important point, and of course our mindfulness practice is what enables us to really tune in so well to the intention.

I learned an immense amount about the practice of *dāna* as a practice when I was in Thailand. Somehow my own perception is that in our culture, generosity as a path isn't given as much weight or thought about so much. I mean, generosity is a good thing, and we all kind of applaud it, but to really use it as a way to develop one's mind and heart, to come to freedom—that isn't so much looked at.

In Thailand, it's a very powerful part of the culture. I was there for a year as a nun, and from the moment—even before I ordained—from the moment I set foot in a temple and started to stay there, this outpouring of generosity and support was just overwhelming. And it never stopped. I have endless examples. What struck me the most about all of it is that it was done with such a spirit of joy, of appreciation. I was literally made to feel that I was doing all these people a favor by letting them give me food, or give me robes, or give me a place to stay, or take me to the train station—just an endless series of little things.

And it wasn't just for me. Being a foreign nun, you do get special attention, that's true. But it wasn't just for me. I was staying at a small temple in the north. There were only about five *kutis*, little huts, for the nuns,

and it was a practice situation, so all the nuns were practicing. In temples, you never know who's going to come. People just show up. And if twenty people show up, they'll find places to stay for twenty people—joyfully—and food to eat.

Very often a group of nuns would just arrive, and the head nun there, who had been there for some years and was the main teaching nun, would with great joy—and I'm not exaggerating—move out of her hut up into this little cave high above the rocks so that the visitors could have her hut. And because I was a special foreigner, they would never discomfort me by putting someone else in my hut or asking me to move. They would all move out of their huts, all clumped together.

And I would sit there and think, "Gosh, I had just come from—well, no, it had been a few years, but I had been on staff here before that—and boy, find one of us moving out of our room for a yogi!" You know? "We think we're going to double up for a night? Forget it."

And when we're doing real service – it's not like we weren't serving at all. But I thought, whoa, we don't know the first thing about real generosity of heart.

And again, I want to emphasize, it's really the working with it as a path that gives it so much power. It wasn't personal. People weren't being nice because they liked me or they liked these nuns. It was a path for these people – a path of growth in their spiritual life, of opening the heart, growth in non-attachment, and also an expression of their pure love of the Dharma. And it was the rule, not the exception. Very rare to meet with anything else.

In observing this over and over, I really came to see how, as a practice, you can't act with this generous spirit repeatedly and do it out of resentment or anger. You just can't keep doing it that way. You can do it a few times, but as you continue to act from generosity – even if sometimes it's a little forced – and you're really paying attention to your motivations, you find that you just can't keep the resentment and the anger or sense of being put out going. Because generosity, the actual action of it, works to help drive away the unwholesome qualities of mind, the afflictions. As you continue to act in a more generous way, the unwholesome mind states arise less frequently. They're simply not so present.

And this is true even without what we might consider perfectly pure motivation. It doesn't always have to be, "I must have incredibly pure motivation of giving or else it's no good, I'm just pretending." We can observe this in ourselves even with what they call beggarly giving. They describe three categories of giving, and the first one is beggarly giving – where you give something but you don't really want it anyway, and maybe this person could use it, and then maybe they'll like me. The motives are mixed. But there is a force in that giving. The attachment to that item has been dissolved somewhat, or you couldn't give it. There's some sense of kindness, some sense of affection. We start where we are.

And in doing that, we see that not only can you not really give with a lot of unwholesome qualities in the mind, but the act of giving also drives away the unwholesome while serving to strengthen the wholesome

qualities – the qualities of non-attachment, of interrelatedness. To give something, you do have to let go, and to some extent the attachment to that object isn't strong; it has been dissolved, or you couldn't really give it. In the moment of giving, the clinging releases. It might come back later and you'd wish you hadn't given it, but that's another thing. In the moment of giving, it's been dissolved somewhat.

And it's hard to give without some affectionate, loving, caring feeling. You can't just go and throw something at someone – that hardly counts. But with any kind of sincere looking at our motivation, doing it as a practice, being really honest with yourself, if you're feeling, "I hate this person's guts, I do not want them to be happy, forget it, I'm not giving them this" – no, you can't really do it if you're paying attention. So when you give something, even if it's something you don't want much, there's some affectionate, caring, connected feeling going with it. Some non-attachment in the mind.

The act of giving itself strengthens our understanding, our experience of the sense of unity between one another. It's a very connecting act. It also possibly gives rise to metta, to compassion. Often we're giving out of a sense of compassion for somebody else's need. And so we find that giving does, as a practice, help to cultivate these positive, wholesome qualities of mind. You might find that they arise more easily when you're giving in some way, working with generosity, even if they seem difficult or not so accessible at other times.

The very act of generosity, when we're giving with as clear an intention as possible, engenders a happy feeling in the mind, a sense of lightness. It engenders non-attachment and non-hatred, a sense of connectedness, a sense of caring, a sense of clarity. So it's really a lovely practice.

I want to emphasize again that the act of generosity truly strengthens and brings a great sense of unity between individuals, or between people in general. It takes one out of one's self-absorbed, cut-off, little sense of the world – me, me, me. That referring back to me at that moment isn't happening. The energy is pouring out, connecting with another.

I could see this effect that working with generosity over time has in some of my Thai friends. I think of one woman in particular who once, when I was sick, took me into her apartment for a month. She would get up at five and cook me breakfast. She'd come home from work and cook me lunch because I couldn't eat in the afternoon. We spent a lot of time together, and she was just giving, giving with this huge joy. And it wasn't because we had known each other before. She didn't know me from anyone.

She was giving to the Dharma, to support the Dharma. And you could see in her a growing real strength and peacefulness, an easy willingness to give—not just giving things you don't need, but giving where it's appropriate, where there's genuine need. Such a lovely presence, such strength and peace there was about this woman. And her main practice was this.

So in using generosity, *dāna*, as a path, I want to emphasize again that attention to our volition, to our intentions in the giving, is a very important part of this. Because it's possible, as we all know, to be

outwardly very generous while inwardly doing it for some totally self-serving motivation—like some really rich person who gives a huge amount of money to something but just wants their name all over it because it will help their business. This isn't what we're talking about in working with generosity as a practice.

But paying attention to our motivation, it won't always be pure. This is where the mindfulness practice is so helpful. We're not looking at the intention to judge ourselves, but just to notice. And in bringing mindfulness to it continually, we'll find that our intentions will purify of themselves.

So some things to work with in an actual act of giving—and when I talk about giving, I also include the sense of service, giving one's energy, giving one's time. The first, as I said, is mindfulness to the volition. Really paying attention to it, allowing it to purify as much as possible before actually giving.

This way of thinking about it inspires me a lot: a way of describing the generous act of the bodhisattvas, who have dedicated their lives to serving all beings. In the giving, to have the understanding that with this act, may all beings be free from suffering—including myself. That gives huge power to the act of giving, whether you're giving a cookie or a year of your life. Doing it with the pure intention: may all beings, including myself, be freed from suffering with the purity of this act.

The next is to see the clinging that we might have to the object, to our time, to whatever it is that we're giving—to see that clinging. And in the seeing, as much as possible, to abandon it. Again, not by forcing or judgment, but just through the power of mindfulness, through the power of seeing.

If it's possible to do so, it is sometimes advised—if it's an object—to actually give it hand to hand. When I first heard this, I thought, well, that's kind of nice. But I had an experience after I sat for two months this summer with Sayadaw U Pandita. Actually, it was from the translator, U Nyanapannika, who said this: you should give hand to hand.

I had given Sayadaw a book while I was sitting, and he asked me to sign it. So I signed it and just kind of put it down. And he said, "No, come over here. Hand it to me." He made me hand it to him. The power of that giving—it was as if it increased twenty times, because there was this real, direct person-to-person contact. Looking in his eyes, it actually made me acknowledge with my whole being that I was giving this to him as an act of generosity, as a movement of appreciation. It was like taking full responsibility for the act.

Very powerful, much more than just giving and putting something down. Having real confidence, real faith in the power of the motivation, the intention of generosity. It's not about saying, "Oh, this book is so wonderful"—it's the actual intention, and really being fully present in it, not doing it half-heartedly. And the *mettā* that flowed between us, back and forth, was very powerful. It was very interesting and very instructive.

So I understand now why giving hand to hand, or in a way that really acknowledges what you're

doing—not because you want something back from the person, but for your own being to be acknowledging fully: yes, this is what I'm doing as an expression of generosity.

But please, while you're on retreat here, forget this one. I don't want you knocking on each other's doors saying, "I want to give you this cookie hand to hand!" There's appropriateness to the situation.

Give with your mind totally focused on the giving. Again, this is just pure mindfulness—doing what we're doing with full attention. Afterwards, being aware of our intention again, of any changes in it, as often it will change. Just being aware of that. The whole working with the purification of our mind and heart through intention is not over as soon as the gift is given. It's really being carefully observant after that.

I'd also like to add that another very important part of *dāna*, generosity, which I've been learning, is to apply these same concepts, these same ways of working, if you're the recipient. Because sometimes allowing generosity to flow, being a really fully present, open recipient, is just as much an act of honor or generosity as the giving. And sometimes it's much harder.

So back to even just taking a compliment. How hard is it to really open and just say, "Thank you very much. I appreciate that." To really let that in. And when we can't—when someone tries to give us something and we say, "Oh no, no, I don't deserve that. You shouldn't give it to me"—

On and on it goes. And what's the effect of that? In that moment, in our own heart, what's the effect? We're blocking off a sense of connectedness. We're shutting the door on that outflowing unity of a heart of generosity, just saying, "No, no," actually referring everything back to me—I'm not good enough, I don't deserve it. Separation.

So I've been finding that working with learning to receive—with the same sense of non-attachment and the same full power of presence—is a very wonderful and difficult practice. And it also engenders a power of non-attachment and connectedness in the mind.

One other aspect I want to mention of working with generosity or *dāna* is the aspect of service. Again, it's the same motivation, the same outpouring of the heart, the same non-attachment. What comes to my mind when I'm contemplating a sense of service as a practice of non-attachment, of growth and compassion—some of the aspects are joy, but also a great simplicity, a humbleness.

Again, coming back to the key: it's our motivation. It's not what we do. Often we tend to think that if we're really going to be doing service and have it count as a practice, it's got to be something really special. When I was a kid, somehow I got into reading these books by Dr. Tom Dooley, who ran these hospitals in Vietnam in the fifties. And I would be incredibly inspired—that's what I've got to do! I've got to go off into the jungle somewhere and run a hospital in these really extreme conditions. We tend to think it has to be something that makes a difference, that really makes an impact. But that's not what it's about at all. As a path, it's about our intention, our motivation. And it can be very simple, very humble.

A great inspiration to me in this way is the Dalai Lama. A few weeks ago I was out in California for a couple of days to attend a two-day teaching he was giving. And even though he's such a great man—he just won the Nobel Prize, incredibly developed, very learned—when he speaks, the overwhelming sense one gets is of such simplicity and down-to-earthness, just basic kindness. Nothing so special. One of the things he said when he won the Nobel Prize, when people were heaping up all these praises, was, "You know, I'm just a simple Buddhist monk, no more and no less." And the thing about him is you know that he really means that. It's not just posturing to look that way.

Even though the idea of who he is might suggest someone who has this incredible life and is so special, the reality of being in his presence brings the whole thing down to earth again. Here's a person who lives a life that seems, from what one can tell from the outside, to be completely dedicated to service—the service of all beings, without exception. And the qualities one encounters are just this simplicity, kindness, and down-to-earthness. Nothing so special. Nothing so out of our experience or out of our reach.

We don't have to be Mother Teresa to work with using service as a path of generosity. It's just little acts in the moment.

One story I heard when I was in India really struck me—just somebody off on their own that no one ever heard of, devoting their life to service, even if it's something that seems crazy to us. It was a person who was a devotee of Neem Karoli Baba. He had a house somewhere, and he was just devoting his life to feeding anybody who came by. Now, in India that could be a lot of people. But they said—the person telling the story said—when he sees cows coming, he calls for chapatis. Chapatis are these flat pancakes. And he has twelve people cleaning his house, when two could quite easily clean it. But he'd say, "Well, then I could only feed two. This way I get to feed twelve." Nothing so special, but really inspiring to me. It can be quite simple.

This is from Robert Aitken: "Our task, too, is to respond generously to others. We can take as our models not only Shakyamuni the hermit and our other great Dharma ancestors, but also such humble beings as bushes and grasses. With every fiber, beings of the plant world are guiding others, conveying their vitality to the soil, water, air, insects, animals, and people. This is the harmony of universal symbiosis, and it is also our own way of realizing and actualizing that unity. How do we actualize the oneness of all beings? Through responsibility, meaning the ability to respond, like that of the clover. When clover is cut, its roots die and release their nitrogen, and the soil is enriched."

New seeds fall, take root, mature, and feed other organisms. Clover doesn't think about responsibility. And neither did Shakyamuni. He simply arose from his seat and went looking for his friends to teach them. The clover simply puts down its roots and puts up its leaves and flowers.

And so sometimes I feel like that's one of the aspects of what our path of mindfulness, of generosity, is about. It's not to change into something grand, something special, something else. In some ways we become more ourselves than ever. It's much more about allowing the peace, the truth that's already here

in our experience, to emerge.

As Aitken writes, the human being does not become an angel, but rather finds affinity with the silent clover.

So it really can be very simple. We don't have to make it into something grand and unattainable to work with these positive qualities of mind, this state of generosity as a path to our own opening and understanding.

Even our practice itself can become an aspect of service when we're working with intention, with our motivation. Even though often it seems like in practice we're sitting here completely self-centered, just wanting the next pleasant state to come, or wanting please God to be free from this particular suffering that's happening right now—meditation practice can also become a very powerful expression of the sense of dana, and also a great cultivation of it. Because the more we practice, our intention purifies of itself when we're practicing mindfulness with sincerity. We can't help but begin to see that we're not separate from society. As Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, when we come in here to sit, we're bringing all of society with us.

And as the Dalai Lama says—I'm paraphrasing—to bring peace, real peace, into the world, it's about finding what real peace is. And that's about developing it in ourselves and from there bringing it out into the world.

When we're practicing with this understanding, which comes and goes but which we're developing, being aware when it is there, our practice itself can become one of the most powerful expressions of interconnectedness, of non-attachment, of generosity that there is. As the Dalai Lama expressed it, talking about the development of the heart and mind of wisdom, one practices for the benefit of all, saying to oneself: "For the benefit of all sentient beings, I will aspire to achieve complete enlightenment."

And that's really powerful—when we feel that we're practicing for all sentient beings, and that includes ourselves. I find it gives such strength, such power to our practice. We become so much more able to be with whatever comes. Because it's not about getting rid of this state so I can have some other state. But yes, even in this moment, as difficult as this moment is, as much as it's not what I would wish to be happening, I'm cultivating a sense of non-attachment, a sense of service, of generosity. And this understanding contributes to the release of suffering of all sentient beings.

It's a very powerful way to practice. It makes it much more rich—as if it could be more rich.

Let's sit for a little bit.

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