Rightening The Mind And Heart

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:05:32

Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it. This unlearned people do not really understand, and so do not cultivate the mind. Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way really understands. So for them, there is cultivation of the mind.

This luminous reality of the mind, how things are, is often in practice quite naturally accessible. It's not something foreign to us or hard to come by. In times when mindfulness is steady or strong, when concentration is quite steady, when practicing metta, this luminous quality, this luminous nature of mind may be quite readily known. We just know it as part of what we are. We may not even be thinking about it, may not be noting, "Oh yes, there's the luminous nature of mind." It's just so essentially true.

But the interesting part of this passage that I want to talk about tonight is the understanding that sometimes—often, actually—this luminous quality is colored over, hidden by the attachments, by the habits of mind that visit it. And when we don't understand that these are just passing conditioned experiences, habits of mind, that's when we tend to give up. "I lost it. I'm just slogging through. It's over. I can't get it back." And that's when cultivation ceases.

But knowing that the luminous nature of our mind cannot be truly touched—no matter what may be visiting, how long it may be staying, how completely identified we are with our visitor—knowing that the true nature, the luminosity, is not touched: that's what gives us the inspiration, the motivation to cultivate our mind, to develop our mind, to really purify the mind.

What I want to talk about tonight is this essential aspect of our path, what I've been calling in my own mind lately "purifying our inner landscape." Sometimes it may feel like we've been an awfully long time slogging through, trying to purify this inner landscape. A sense of the luminous nature, the freedom of mind and heart, may seem not even a remote memory but some unattainable, imagined experience.

In practice it happens that we can be visited quite strongly by aspects of our mental habits, the particular patterns of our inner psyche, our particular karmic knots. Sometimes we get so lost in them, or so familiar with them, that we get really bogged down. Sati, mindfulness practice, doesn't—for that moment, not forever, but for that moment or some little while—seem to be quite buoying us up enough. We can get really contracted, bogged down, lost, losing our motivation. This quality of brightness of heart and mind, brightness of citta—the same word means both heart and mind—can seem really far away. Even though we're practicing our meditation very sincerely and steadily, it's like we just get more and more contracted, farther and farther away, and it gets harder to practice.

So what I want to talk about tonight is really a reminder. This is nothing any of you don't know—stuff that we all know very well. But remember that cultivation of mind, bhavana, or meditation practices, whether mindfulness practice or samadhi practice or metta practice, is embedded in a whole path that the Buddha taught. It doesn't stand alone. It can't stand alone. And there are times, even deep in a meditation retreat as well as in our daily life, when it can be very useful to actively, consciously call in some other aspects of the path in the specific service of brightening our mind and heart, of lightening it, of bringing back the inspiration, the access to the luminous nature.

Sometimes in retreats particularly, we can get so focused—really sincerely—on our mindfulness that we get incredibly grim. "I missed three steps. I have to go back and do it again. I'm missing so much." It's like you're about to explode. And somehow the incandescent, luminous, empty nature is a little bit missing in that moment. In a very light way, we can consciously call in some of the other aspects of the path.

This purifying of our inner landscape, coming face to face with our psychic patterns and karmic knots, is a huge and very profound work of the path. Tsoknyi Rinpoche once wrote about our particular psychic patterns or knots: "It's the cage we have created for ourselves out of our emotions and our reaction habits, out of our sense of me and other. And in this cage here, we sit day in and day out."

On retreat, it can really feel like that, can't it? Just sitting in some cage of wanting, some cage of judging, some cage of fear. It can literally feel like here we sit, day in and day out—until sometimes you just want to go screaming down the driveway.

This is normal and an important aspect of practice. It may take the form of really particular habits of mind that you recognize from your life—patterns that may come together with memories, with recognizing that how you're relating to something happening here is very much a pattern you've carried with you through life and not seen so clearly before.

It may be something like self-judgment. It may be the reemergence of past traumas triggered by the silence or by something that happens here. It may be habits of anger. It may be something that isn't so obviously a story from your life, but a pattern we never quite recognize.

For example, fear is a very common experience to arise deep in retreat, and sometimes in very subtle ways. I mean, it doesn't feel subtle, and it's not like a huge panic, but it's fear arising at everything, at nothing. Fear to take a step, fear to take a bite, fear to do something wrong—just fear in relationship to nothing. That doesn't feel subtle, but actually it isn't a story from our life. It's just very, very deep patterns beginning to open up.

Sometimes it may be guilt and sorrow over past actions. Sometimes we don't even notice it arising as a psychic knot, we'd say, or a karmic pattern. But it's really expressing itself in the way we're relating to the practice. Striving, for example, is a good example of that—always trying to get things a little bit clearer, a little bit slower, trying to get concentration a little bit stiller, or clinging ever so subtly to pleasant states

and just not noticing it.

You get the point. That these things arise is not a problem in the present moment. I know it may feel like a problem, but that arising is really arising as a present moment result of previous karma, of previous actions, of the previous habits—the ruts we've worn, the grooves we've worn in the mind.

Take self-judging, for example. If that's the way our mind has related to much of our experience in life, of course it's going to come up very strongly here. And of course it will come up when we're not so happy with what's happening. It doesn't come up when we're somehow feeling things are going great. Or maybe it can, because then you say, "Well, now I'm being proud. I shouldn't be proud." It can be endless.

That arising is due to past karma. What's purifying about it? That, of course, is all about how this pattern, this moment of mind, this moment of mental experience, is met in the present moment.

And this, again, is obvious. This isn't something new. But in our normal life, or even here, if we're not mindful—if we're kind of caught unawares by fear, by greed, by remorse over past actions, whatever—if we're caught unaware, then our response will tend to be whatever the habit pattern has been in our daily life.

So if you don't like what's happening and your usual response is self-judgment, aversion, and you don't notice that, you heap more aversion on top of it and you dig yourself into a really deep hole and then you get filled with aversion to everything. That could be our normal response. Or we ignore it altogether. We don't even know it's happening. Or we get really aversive to the pattern itself: "I'm sick of this fear. I refuse to be fearful anymore. I will stop being greedy. As of this moment, I am letting go of all desire." Have you tried that one?

In either of these—we don't see it, we run with it, or we're really aversive to it—well, we're still doing what Soknyi Rinpoche said: sitting in our cage. Basically, the pattern is driving the bus.

Once when I was doing some therapy, the therapist was talking about different patterns just like this. She said, "You have a pattern of really being negative to yourself. You need to recognize it with mindfulness. But you don't want to let the three-year-old drive the bus." And I thought, "Oh, yeah, that makes sense." You welcome the three-year-old in. You don't hit it in the face. But you don't let it run the show.

So of course, when we're being mindful—when you simply meet the arising of fear, the arising of aversion, the arising of clinging, for the ten millionth time or the first time—it doesn't matter. That moment of meeting it with mindfulness, with mettā attitude, or with concentration where you notice, say, the hindrance of wanting, don't give it energy, just come back to the breath and it goes. All of those are shifting the pattern. You could say purifying the inner landscape, purifying the intention of mind, changing the groove really, redirecting the habit.

And so in that way, if you can trust that, it doesn't matter if this habit comes up ten million times. Each

time it arises and it's met with mindfulness—great. It's changing. It's purifying. It's not further inculcating the same habit, if you don't take it personally.

So mindfulness is really always our first strategy. And when it's accessible, no matter how painful the pattern may be, no matter how familiar or how new and shocking, when that attention is able to just meet the experience kindly, steadily, without judging, without taking it so personally—oh, yeah, fear is like this. Watch it arise. Feel how it manifests here and now. Notice that it passes. Just like the weather, conditions come together. Fear manifests. Greed manifests. Memories of the past and grief manifest. Kind, loving attention holds it in the present moment. The conditions change. It goes away again.

And then the wisdom of impermanence, of not-self, of the unreliable nature of all of this arises naturally. And with it, again, the accessibility of knowing the luminous, untouched nature of mind. The greed, the anger, the fear never touched that luminous nature. Never can. We never have to be afraid of losing that. And when mindfulness is accessible to us, when energy is accessible, we know that. That's what keeps us going.

But—and this is all the prelude; now the rest is the *but*—for most of us, there are times when this brightness, this energy, this inspiration doesn't seem so accessible. We may really be very sincerely calling up mindfulness moment after moment, but there's no brightness, there's no lightness in the mind, in the heart. And I don't mean just for a moment or two; of course that's going to happen. But there are times when we get so absorbed, really, so focused on the dukkha, the suffering aspect, the personal aspect—identified with it, really—that that's all we can see. We get caught in either the dukkha aspect or our reactivity to it.

And it can just feel like everything gets more and more compact, squeezed together. Energy gets drained. We become very unbalanced in our perceptions, to where we only see the dukkha, we only see the wanting, we only see the fear. Nothing else seems to ever be happening. And it wears us down. It wears us down to where we become like that unlearned person in the sutta I read, the one who doesn't know that the luminous nature of mind can't be touched by passing experience. We think it has been touched. We think all there is is this passing experience. And we kind of cave. We can't keep going.

This is when it's really important to—it might take a moment of thinking, if you can spare a moment of thought here—just remember that bhāvanā is embedded in a path, and consciously call on a few of the things I'll mention, whichever one is most accessible to you at a particular time, to consciously brighten and gladden the heart, to gladden the mind.

Because really, it's a bright, spacious mind and heart that again allows the touching of the way things are. It's not an avoidance of the patterns of mind or psychic knots. It's not an avoidance of suffering. It's more an expansion of consciousness, an infusion of energy and inspiration that allows us to be with whatever's been difficult—but without being so identified. To be with it more from the place of freedom than from the place of reactivity.

In some ways, to me—and I can't speak as a scholar, but from what I know about the Buddha's teachings and the various practices he offered on his path—

It's really a marvel how all aspects of the path are different ways of highlighting, different ways of cultivating the happiness of the luminous mind of non-clinging. And when mindfulness and concentration aren't doing it, there are other ways that all work together in the same path to work towards recognizing the peace of non-clinging that's always available.

So to brighten the mind—that's why there's cultivation. We know that this is possible. Ultimately, both mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom arise out of a relaxed and happy heart and mind.

It doesn't mean we're always happy. I definitely just have to say this. I know you know it, but I have to say it. It's not that if you're doing this right, you go around grinning all the time, happy, happy, happy, and suffering doesn't come. You know good and well that the first noble truth is dukkha. I don't have to go into that, right? You all know it. Sometimes we get a little bit so focused on the first truth being dukkha that we forget that the brightness of mind gives us the strength and the spaciousness at the same time to open more deeply.

This is where the Buddha, when he talked about right effort, the four aspects of right effort—half of it really speaks to this consciously cultivating happiness, brightness of mind. So I'll read you the four, in one of those complicated ways he says it. The first right effort is to awaken zeal for the non-arising of unwholesome states. The second is to have zeal for abandoning unwholesome states that are already arisen. Now that we're more familiar with. We're aware of greed and we have zeal to abandon it. That does not mean aversion—that's another unwholesome state. We often get lost there.

But the third and fourth: zeal for the arising of unarisen wholesome states, and zeal for the continuance and strengthening of arisen wholesome states. In other words, it's not a manifestation of greed or avoidance when we feel that our heart and mind is really contracted and we're lost in fear and we can't really be mindful. It's a right effort to consciously cultivate some inspiration, to consciously call up seeds of happiness, of purity, of generosity. These are really helpful tools in our practice. And so that's what I want to point to for the rest of the talk—just remind us of some of the things we can call up.

Now, in cultivating zeal for the arising and continuance of wholesome states, of happy states, of states that help us abandon identification, remember that the guiding principle is always that wholesome states are not states of clinging. Sometimes we can get a little confused because a wholesome state is a happy state. Wholesome states do bring brightness to the mind. They can be memories of generous deeds, memories or current experience of non-harming behavior. Wholesome states are states of concentration, meditative states, strong mindfulness states. All of those are helpful.

Sometimes we get confused, especially when strong, happy, blissful states arise in practice. They do feel very purifying, very wholesome, very enjoyable. And we'll tend to say, when you come into the interview,

we'll tend to say, don't try to keep making that happen. In some way, don't hold on to it. But that doesn't mean the state isn't helpful, purifying, wholesome. Cultivating wholesome states does not mean clinging. It's not self-referential. It's not about having a pleasant experience. It's about cultivating wholesome qualities of heart and mind that are, as the Buddha said, onward leading. Onward leading towards wisdom, to the wisdom of non-clinging, to the wisdom of not identifying, of not creating a stronger sense of me experiencing this far-out state. That's not the point.

And I think you can tell the difference in yourself. Does the sense of me doing good get stronger? Then there's some clinging in there. Does the sense of just a happiness, a kind of brightness, more of an expansion, an opening of the heart and mind and inspiration get stronger? That's really helpful. That's really supportive. It's wholesome. And we don't need to shy away or be afraid of that.

And sometimes that happens. And that's not so helpful. So that's why I just want to highlight a few of these practices.

The first I want to mention is usually spoken about in the suttas when the Buddha talks about taking refuge. That might seem a little foreign or not so much the way we think about things. But if you think of it in terms of when you're having a really contracted time, actively bringing to mind – whether it's the Buddha, which in Asian countries is very inspirational for people. That may or may not be true for us. But there may be a being, a teacher, someone who manifests some of the beautiful, wholesome, inspiring qualities of the Buddha that you could bring to mind.

Someone mentioned today something that was a beautiful example of this – someone who calls to mind His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He really inspires this person, specifically mentioning the sense that, and I've read this often too, of how he seems to meet each person, to treat each person really equally, really kindly, totally present with each person that he talks to. Just contemplating that quality and what that would mean or what it would feel like inside to be that non-judgmental, to be that kind, to be that present, to be able to see the beauty or the emptiness in each person – that was really inspiring to that person. And that quality of inspiration gives us energy, gives us a brightness. It's really very helpful.

So at times, just reflect on the inspirational qualities, whether it's the Buddha or someone else. It's really about feeling it, not thinking about it so much. And knowing that when we're reflecting on it, it inspires us because it's touching those same qualities in ourselves. It's not some abstract thought, or it wouldn't have that inspirational quality. Very helpful.

And then more classically, to recognize that the classic formulation when the Buddha spoke about the breadth of his path, bhavana or mental cultivation, is always embedded in the trio of dana, sila, bhavana – generosity, moral non-harming conduct, and mental cultivation.

It's interesting – the more I practice, the deeper and deeper is my appreciation for both dana and sila. I'm not saying I've got it down or anything. But the subtlety and the power and the uplifting qualities that a

real exploration, a commitment in my heart and mind to dana and sila bring about – it's gladdening the heart, these beautiful factors.

So I want to talk a little bit about dana, a little bit about sila, just pointing for yourself to see what really brings you this happiness, this gladdening, this brightness of heart.

Generosity, as I'm sure you're well aware, the Buddha talked about all the time. It's really essential as a beginning of the practice. And it's not just a should – you should be generous, it's a good thing to do, it helps us let go. All those things are true. But I didn't understand this so well until I spent more time in Asia, especially the last four years when I've been spending more time in Burma, in a country where for some people, dana and sila are really kind of deeply rooted.

Of course, with the government, that doesn't seem – it's a paradox, it's very confusing. But to spend time with people who've grown up and are really committed in a Buddhist culture, where it's more in the culture than here in this country – I mean, people are generous in this country, no question. There's huge generosity. But there's a way, at least how I experience it, the way the generosity is expressed as an expression of happiness. It's not that I should be generous in order to let go, but the act of generosity itself clearly brings and is accompanied with so much happiness of mind and heart, so much brightness of being, that it's absolutely contagious.

And it's a kind of teaching in the power of dana, of generosity, to really open the mind and heart beyond self-interest, to really open the mind and heart beyond the false sense of separation. There really isn't so much sense of me taking care of myself, but this really powerful sense of the joy of being able to give. It's quite beautiful. For me, when I just have to remember little acts of generosity that I've experienced either personally or that I've seen happen any time I go to Burma, the effect of the memory is that it brings real happiness to my heart. It really opens me past whatever particular concerns, self-interest concerns I may have, whether I'm on retreat, whether I'm off retreat. And it's not a thing of thinking it should feel that way. It's an absolute experience of it.

I'll just give you little examples – there are a million of them. There's a young woman Steve Smith talks about a lot. She's kind of a protégé of Steve Smith, and he started meeting her when she was sixteen or so.

She's in her early twenties now. Pretty poor, really quite poor. She got married a couple of years ago. When we went to see her this year, she had just had her first child, a baby that died right after it was born, about a month before we came. And she was heartbroken, really, really upset, kind of depressed. She and her husband live with his family. She doesn't get on very well with the mother-in-law. She's a really bright, lovely being, a happy being, but having a hard time.

We would spend some time and talk, and we would try and do little things for her. We didn't do any huge thing this year. We tried to bring little gifts, tried to just listen, tried to help in some way. At the end of the time when we were leaving, she came up to the monastery where we were staying. She took a day off

from work and came up looking for me and Michelle McDonald, the other teacher, and another woman who was managing the retreat. The three of us had spent some time with Chesu. And she had gone out and bought us each a little beautifully hammered tin vase, one for each of us.

Now, for someone like her to go and buy three vases like that—it's huge. And then she took the day to come and look for us, to specifically find each one of us in our little huts, to give it to each of us. And she was so happy giving it to us. It's so beautiful.

And it's really learning that the other side of it is to receive with the same happiness, with the same non-separation. My first years in Thailand, I would say, "Well, I have so much. Don't waste your money on me. Save it for yourself." And that makes sense to us in our Western way of thinking. But in terms of the qualities of openheartedness, of freedom, of luminous mind, that is so churlish to say, "No, take that back and sell it, make yourself a nice meal." No, it just cuts the whole picture.

Another time, another year, I was with two friends, and we were riding in a pony cart back from another monastery to the monastery where we were staying. It was with Steve Smith and another friend who speaks Burmese, a Western guy. We got the pony cart, got in the cart, argued with the driver about how much to pay in the usual way because he wants twice as much. You argue him down, and we're driving back. Then he got to chatting with our friend who speaks Burmese.

At the time, there were two or three Western monks doing the retreat with us. One of them had been living in this area in Sagaing for several years. So the pony cart driver was asking, "Oh, do you know this monk?" "Oh, yes." And he said, "I see him all the time." This monk was doing an ascetic practice—he would never wear shoes, for three or four years. That is an ascetic practice. And the pony cart driver was saying to our friend, "I see him, and I feel so bad for him. He has no slippers, he has no shoes. I think I would like to buy him a pair of shoes. It really makes me feel so bad that he does not have shoes."

This is just an average person you run into on the street. Notice how it can kind of brighten the mind. It gives a space beyond whatever particular little problem the mind is caught up in. It reopens us again to the luminous nature that isn't touched by whatever happens to be visiting us.

So you see, just hearing about generosity—never mind practicing it ourselves—can have this effect. And it can be in our life. It can be here. It's not about going around and starting to find all kinds of things to do to be generous and driving each other crazy. Not that. But just to have the intention in small ways, here in life. And even more, you can actively

call up the memory of times that you have thought, said, or done something generous and see how it brightens the mind, how it brings spaciousness into the heart.

It's really interesting, you know, how the Buddha set up his whole sasana, his whole teaching, around generosity. The whole relationship of the ordained sangha—the nuns and the monks—and the lay people, that they both were linked to each other through generosity. The lay people depended on the generosity of

the monastics, and still today, the monks and nuns depend on the generosity of lay people for their food every day, for their robes. And that's not like lay people having to pay. It's a way of really cultivating and developing the mind and heart of non-clinging.

Remember that it's not a practice of renunciation that makes you miserable. It's a practice of happiness. The giving in itself is a source of huge happiness. And then as well, the lay people depend on the generosity of the nuns and monks to really share their Dharma understanding, to teach and share their being and what they've heard and what they've learned, really freely, with anyone who wants to hear it. So in both ways, this cultivation, this development of the heart of non-clinging, is really the central piece of the way of life that the Buddha taught and lived.

And it's so different from the kind of sense of neediness, the needing to have enough to take care of myself. A friend of mine a few years ago was writing a thesis for a master's or a PhD on economics. She was back in Burma, in the same village, because she knew Burma well. She could stay at the monastery and really explore. What she was exploring was dana as a second economic system in Burma.

And actually, the Burmese economy is a total, complete shambles. The government does not provide much of anything in the way of what we almost don't even think about—like roads, for example, building, whatever. And the dana, the generosity—a lot of money may be given to the monastery, may be given to the Sayadaw. And in my Western way, I think, "Oh, yeah, they really need another building. Somebody comes and gives money and says we want another building built." And we think, "That's not what we need. People need food. People need this." But then that money for the building, the Sayadaw hires the local people to do the building. And they hire local people to get the supplies and to bring in the food. And it really gets the whole economy going. It's all kept extremely local. Dana is really what runs the economy. The whole hospital there is run on dana. It has nothing to do with any kind of government support.

So just notice how in a moment of giving, even having the thought of giving, it brings a sense of unity. It cuts away that feeling of separation. It just seems to cut away the distance. I think that's one of the reasons it's said that if you're having difficulty with somebody, give them a gift. Because if we're really giving it, and in giving, the focus is of course on the intention, just that open-hearted sharing—if you really give something with that clear, focused intention, the sense of separation, the sense of holding them as a problem in that moment, just for that moment, is cut through. It's really a powerful force.

So intention is, of course, the key. And the other side I also want to mention is when we're on the receiving end—to really allow ourselves to consciously experience gratitude. That can be gratitude in the moment of actually receiving, as when Chesu gave us the little vases, to really not only say thank you but to really feel the gratitude, the being touched, the appreciation. Because in that way as well, the sense of limitation and separation is gone in that moment. It really is a whole act.

Something I've found really helpful on retreat, when we're not giving a lot of things and really staying with ourselves, is to call up the seeds of memories of times you've been generous, but also to consciously

open to gratitude—either for specific acts of generosity or just for what we have. I found this enormously supportive when I'm on retreat and when I'm getting caught in some kind of negative pattern or dukkha, to consciously cultivate gratitude. Sometimes it's just hitting you in the face and it's beautiful and you don't have to cultivate it. But other times—and as some of you know, I tend to have an aversive type of mind, so I'm not bounding through the place filled with gratitude all the time. That's not the way my mind works.

But some years ago, at the end of the day, I was getting into bed on a long retreat. It was one of those moments when you're getting into bed going, "Thank God that day is over. That's a wipeout day. But maybe tomorrow mindfulness will be back." Have you ever had a moment like that? Just go to sleep and hopefully this will all be gone when I wake up. And it just kind of went through my mind: okay, gratitude.

And it started out, OK, great. I'm really grateful for a bed. I'm really grateful I had three meals today, or two meals, or one meal, whatever you had. And the first three or four, it was grumpy. It was cynical. It was, yeah, sure. But I just kept going. And it was like magic. It didn't take long at all to where that brightness, that spaciousness, that gladdening of heart was real. And then things just started pouring out of my mind that I was grateful for. There's so much. Not a should. Not, you know, you have so much you should be grateful. Not that at all. But just things like the moon, the snow, being at peace, other people practicing. It just goes on and on. I don't need to make a list for you. And the effect is, again, that luminous, spacious purity of mind and heart. It's here again. It's always here. But again, that's what's so obvious, that's what's so clear. It's really a wonderful thing.

In fact, since last March, a friend and I started a practice that we'd heard about through someone else—a daily gratitude practice where at some point, almost every day, we email each other what we're grateful for that day. For both of us, it's been an amazing practice. And we're very different temperaments. She's a person that is always much more effervescent and upbeat, someone you'd think is naturally grateful. Both of us will come to it and we'll write, and we're really honest. So we might start out writing, "I'm not feeling grateful for anything. I had a fight with my husband and this and this and that." She'll start out like that sometimes. But the intention in writing it is to say what we're grateful for. So we don't pretend. We just keep writing stream of consciousness, and it turns around. Sometimes we come and we already knew what we were grateful for. Sometimes we actively didn't know at all. But as we're writing, just that intention turns it around, and we always end really in a different state of mind—feeling grateful, feeling happy, touching again the infinite brightness, the infinite luminosity. It's really amazing. And we keep saying this to each other all the time.

Right now she's on retreat for a month, and I'll forget about it for a couple of weeks. Just yesterday, I was kind of mumping around the house and I thought, oh, I really miss the gratitude practice. Why do I need to have someone to email to? Why can't I just think about it without that? But, you know, our minds get in a habit.

So, gratitude—and that really goes together with generosity. I also want to mention sīla, non-harming conduct. Because here, of course, whatever you think, just coming here, taking the five precepts in a really committed way—even if it's just out of fear, you have to obey the precepts because otherwise people will see you and hate you—it doesn't matter. Just not acting in harming ways brings what the Buddha calls the bliss of blamelessness. And he says that, in terms of householders, the bliss of blamelessness is worth sixteen times the other happinesses that a householder can know. I don't know where he got sixteen times, but that's what it says. The other happinesses are from debtlessness, possessing things in a wholesome way, the enjoyment of what is rightful. And then the bliss of blamelessness. That's a huge happiness—freedom from remorse, the real purity, spaciousness in our heart, in our mind, the contentment that is possible.

You know how it is when you have one of those periods of practice, a kind of life review, where everything you ever did that was unskillful, that was unkind, that was thoughtless, that was cruel, starts to come up. Have you ever had a time like that in practice? Sometimes it's really...

Hard things that we did that anyone would say, yes, that was a little self-interested. Other times—it's happened to me and it happens to others—people will come in wracked with remorse, really feeling awful about some incredibly subtle, negligent thing they said or didn't say to somebody twenty-five years ago. And they're wracked with remorse for being unkind.

This is a sign, obviously, that our heart and mind is getting much purer. But to see how much remorse and suffering can come even from such a slight thing—then on the wholesome, supportive side, it's also true that a great deal of uplifting can come from non-harming thought, speech, and action.

Just in the not doing of it, sometimes we don't really notice that. It's another thing we may not tend to consciously reflect on or consciously bring into awareness. We do it, you know, in the beginning when we're teaching metta practice. We often say when you start practicing, begin with yourself, really direct the wishes of metta to yourself. It's often suggested as a way to connect with yourself in a wholesome way, to see the good in yourself. And it's often suggested to really contemplate the wholesome things you've done—contemplate your morality, contemplate your non-harming behavior.

I don't know about you, but that's not something I really sit down and do very often in my daily life. And it's often hard—maybe not for all of you, but I know many people I talk to in this culture, and myself included—it's so easy for us to focus on all the unskillful things we've done. I bet if I said make a list of unskillful thought, speech, and action, you could just start writing without any pause at all. You wouldn't have to think, "What have I done that's unskillful?" It's right there. But make a list of the really wholesome things you've done, refraining from harming thought, speech, and action—sometimes that's a little harder. And sometimes we think, well, that's just being egocentric.

But you know, it's not. It's a source of freedom from remorse. Actively contemplating our wholesome past actions can be a source of inspiration and gladdening of heart and mind in the present moment, so that in

a way, the memory of past wholesome deeds is like the result of past kamma in the present moment. It's the fruition, the wholesome fruition of past wholesome deeds.

I'll give you a little spontaneous example. I remember it because it's so rare—and it's pathetic that it's so rare—when I spontaneously remembered a wholesome thing I had done many years ago. It's pathetic that that should be so rare, either the wholesome thing or the memory. I mean the memory. I hope the wholesome thing isn't that rare.

It was a day when I used to work, many years ago, in a sheltered workshop in North Carolina. In not very good conditions, with adults who were mentally handicapped. In a sheltered workshop we had very simple little tasks, like put two screws in a little plastic bag. These were really pretty severely handicapped adults, and it was difficult. But there was a lot of love, and I really felt a lot of love for them. And I remember one day I came in and there was just one after the other, a series of connections and expressions of appreciation and love going both ways.

This was a long time ago—I don't want to say how long ago. And one day, the memory of this day just came into my mind, and so much happiness just welled up. Again, the sense of the luminous nature of freedom—it's not self-referencing. It wasn't about "Oh, aren't I great." That doesn't feel luminous. That doesn't feel free. That feels more contracted. But it's the same as with generosity and gratitude—it just opens us up and gives the inspiration to then be with the difficult stuff, whatever it is that's happening. It gives the inspiration to keep going.

Freedom from remorse, our commitment to non-harming behavior—it's not just "I have to do this so I can get concentrated." It's really, as well as dana, as well as bhavana, a path of happiness, a path of non-clinging, a path of freedom. Here and now, in the past, in the present moment, it brightens our mind.

And there's a sutta from the Buddha—I won't read the whole sutta, but he starts with: What is the purpose of skillful virtues? And he says to Ananda that the purpose is freedom from remorse. Freedom from remorse is their reward. And it's one of those suttas that keeps going. What's the purpose of freedom from remorse? Freedom from remorse has joy as its purpose and reward. And the purpose of joy is rapture.

Purpose and reward of rapture is serenity. Purpose and reward of serenity is sukha, happiness. Purpose and reward of sukha, concentration. Concentration goes to knowledge and vision of things as they actually are. Knowledge and vision of things as they actually are goes to disenchantment. Disenchantment goes to dispassion. The purpose and reward of dispassion is knowledge and vision of release.

So in this way, Ananda, skillful virtues go all the way up. Skillful virtues lead step by step to the consummation of arhatship, to freedom. That's pretty powerful. And it's something that we can really appreciate, really call up in the present moment when we need to brighten the mind, to gladden the heart, to find the energy to keep going.

I don't have time to speak about this in depth, but I want to mention that the practice of metta or any of

the Brahma Viharas is also a way to brighten the mind, gladden the heart. And it doesn't have to reach the point of absorption or jhana. Just some moments of metta can be very powerful in again expanding the perception beyond our limited, constricted self.

This is from the Buddha: "If just for the lasting of a finger snap, a bhikkhu indulges a thought of metta, cultivates a thought of metta, gives attention to a thought of metta, such a one is to be called a bhikkhu, someone who's practicing, carries out the master's teaching, responds to advice, he does not eat the country's alms food in vain. What then should I say of one who makes much of such a thought?"

So we can all do that. A finger snap of a thought of metta? No matter what's going on, we can manage that.

Calling up what you can be grateful for helps. Actually calling up good deeds of others, the generosity of others, like when I described the people in Burma—that also brings happiness. It's a way of seeing that we're not separate. So if you start spinning into "I never did a generous thing in my life, I never did a wholesome thing in my life," well then, tune into that of others. It brings us the same open-hearted happiness. It's wonderful.

The last thing I'll mention is the sense of just holding the thought of our practice being not for myself alone, but for other beings. You don't have to even feel it, but just holding that thought—like I quoted Sakyong the other night saying that if you just have the correct motivation, in your own experience it turns into bodhicitta, into this vastness of motivation, all by itself.

I've found this really helpful when I'm getting too self-involved in my practice, really spinning down—to just, at the beginning of each sitting, start by taking refuge. This is Tibetan. The Tibetans really advocate practicing like this all the time. Just start a sitting very consciously by taking refuge. And then just for a moment, hold the motivation of bodhicitta. "May my practice be for the benefit of all beings." That's all. Just saying it. You don't have to feel it. But just inclining the mind and heart in that direction—it really does something.

Then you forget about it. Just practice your session. And at the end of the session, they say to always complete it by dedicating the merit of the session, of your practice, to all beings. So again, we're ending our sitting, our walking, our period of practice with a conscious act of generosity, of connection to all beings. And that's quite beautiful.

Then, as well, this being a very generous act—sharing our practice with all sentient beings—make for yourself a pure aspiration. The Tibetans say that this is a really strong generous act, to share the merit of your practice with all beings. To then make an aspiration is focusing your own motivation. For example, we could all have a different aspiration. Say your aspiration is to awaken your mind and heart to liberation in this lifetime. You make that aspiration. It's very important, they say, because if you make the aspiration in combination with our wholesome actions of meditation and generosity, it helps to fuse the wholesome effects of our actions in terms of our aspiration. It's not "I did this good thing and that means

I'm going to get chocolate cake for lunch." It's really focusing our intention and then sharing it with all beings. Just a very light way of taking refuge in the beginning and sharing at the end, and clarifying our motivation.

So I think that's enough. Just find whatever way helps you brighten and gladden your own mind and heart.

Thank you.

Thank you for listening.

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