An Unhesitating Generosity

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 16:13

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As many of the yogis here probably know, some of the forms of meditation that we teach come from Burma. Goenkaji, my first teacher, was coming from a tradition out of Burma—U Ba Khin, who was Burmese. Mahasi Sayadaw, U Pandita, Sayadaw U Janaka—they're all Burmese, coming from a form of meditation that Mahasi Sayadaw began.

But for many years I wasn't interested in going to Burma. When I did go to Burma to do a retreat for myself, it was in 2001, I think. So I wasn't going anymore looking for the tradition or the lineage. Something just drew me to go do a retreat in Burma.

And it completely took me by surprise and crept up slowly. But there's some way that after I spend time in Burma, my heart and mind feel a little bit purified. I come back often uplifted. There's really a sense of being cleansed out, and I did not understand that for a long time because Burma is a very conflicted country. It's a country of great opposites.

What I've come to see is that what uplifts me and purifies me is being in this field. The nuns, the monks, and many of the lay people that one comes in contact with are filled with a kindness, an unhesitating generosity—to strangers, to friends. It doesn't have to be that you're someone coming to meditate. It could just be the guy who's driving the taxi. There's just this mettā-full generosity and kindness.

And at the same time, the government is violent and brutal. Everybody in that country has to deal with that on a daily basis. It colors, it invades, it intrudes on everybody's life. So everyone is living in the face of compromises with a really brutal government that does nothing for the people—compromises and ways of finding ways around it, how to take care of each other. They really have to take care of each other because the government doesn't. And personal compromises that you don't hear about but that you know people are having to make.

There's no way anybody escapes that ugliness, that brutality, that fear on a daily basis. And it's not something that's shared. That's not what you see. It's taken me years to start to even feel into it. I still have no clue how much that's coloring people's lives. We can't imagine it sitting here safe and secure in Barre, in our middle-class, seemingly safe world.

And so many of the people that one comes across—I think it's seeded by the nuns and the monks. I think it's seeded by Buddhist ways of looking at life. But it's actualized in how people meet you: with the friendliness, with the kindness, with the generosity, with having so much faith in goodness and faith in

meditation practice, faith in practicing mettā and sharing that with each other.

You don't notice it at first. Our mind can see some of the practices as being too faith-based, simplistic, ritualistic. But you start to see how it affects people's lives on a very deep level—their psyches, their hearts.

I know I'm not alone in this experience. Many people I know come out feeling, "Wow, I just feel so much more willing to be kind, to be generous, to have mettā for people." It just is contagious. So that's the best I can say as to why I keep going back.

One of the things that I've gone back to in Burma year after year is in fact visits with the nuns in various monasteries. Burma is basically a traditional Buddhist country. It took a few visits, because the first couple of times I just went to a meditation center to meditate. Usually those are run by a Sayadaw who is a monk, and there are monks there. There would be nuns practicing as well, in general. The more you go to Burma, you see monks all over the place—although less obvious in Yangon after their troubles a couple of years ago. And nuns in their beautiful pink. You just see them everywhere on the streets.

And if you go up to Sagine, where I went for a few years to help teach a retreat at Chazwa, there are hundreds of monasteries and nunneries—and they're different. Monasteries and nunneries for the nuns. They generally keep separate, though meditation centers can bring them together. But generally nuns will be in their own nunneries, and each of them is very different from the other. There's not just one way.

For example, just around the area in Yangon near Shwe Oo Min and Chanmyay Myaing, two meditation centers where I've spent a lot of time, there are probably twenty, twenty-five, maybe more nunneries within a couple of miles. Some of them are rather large, with twenty or thirty nuns, established for a few years. Some are very small, like startups—two or three nuns building a place by themselves, bricking it by themselves, putting up the bamboo walls by themselves. And as soon as they get it going, they bring in several small girls who become nuns, whom these older nuns, who have done some studying, then educate. They really take them on, take them in.

Many of the nunneries consist of a few older nuns and a lot of young girls who are either very poor or orphans, or some who just want to be nuns from the time they're young. Others, like those up in Sagine, are older, more established. There's one right next door to where I used to teach, and I know the nuns there pretty well. I was just talking to one this year, my friend Yuzina, and she told me the building had been there over a hundred years. There were forty-two nuns there. She herself is very bright, very with it, with a great sense of humor. She's been there since she was seven. She wanted to be a nun from that age, and her parents didn't want her to, but she talked them into it. She's been in that place since she was seven. You'd think she'd be really isolated and out of it, but she's very savvy, very together. She's in her late thirties now.

There are forty-two nuns there, and now that she's older and has finally passed her

Dhammacariya—which is a very difficult period of study that takes years and years—she's become quite accomplished. Many of the nuns are study nuns. They don't meditate as much; they study a lot. She will have studied for years and years to learn Pali and Burmese to pass this exam. And at the same time, she's getting up early, doing the chanting, doing the cleaning, doing the cooking, spending two full days a week going out on alms round where they receive raw rice and a little bit of money. They have gardens—this huge amount of work alongside this intensive study. Then once they finally pass, which is extremely prestigious and hard, they start right away teaching young nuns. I noticed there were a lot more young nuns there this year because she passed her Dhammacariya last year.

There are also huge places in Sagine, in Mandalay, in Yangon that are more established, where the nuns focus more on studying. There are places where nuns go specifically to meditate. And then there are tiny nunneries with just two nuns, really poor, hardly having anything to eat. You don't always know if they became nuns because there was nothing else to do—and I will say that's part of how it impacts their lives. Or perhaps they just don't happen to have the support, because many nuns don't. Yet they still manifest this generosity, devotion, kindness, friendliness—completely dedicating their lives to taking care of these young girls. It's really so beautiful to see. And this is throughout Burma. There must be tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of nuns. They're really part of the fabric of life.

So if we were to take all of this rich experience you've had in Burma and try to understand how it might speak to us—how would you describe that? How would you translate it, if you will? Or can you?

I think partly, for me, you notice I keep talking about the qualities, the broader qualities. I'm not so much talking about meditation, which is of course a huge part. But here, coming up in the West, we learned meditation as part of Buddhism, and it is the jewel. I'm a meditation teacher—it's the jewel of the Dharma. But it's not the all of the Dharma.

I really feel that for me, coming out of this Western system, we needed to bring up the meditation, but it doesn't have a culture to rest in. In Burma, you see that the culture naturally supports, encourages, and brings out the really important qualities that go along with practice: *dāna*, *sīla*, *bhāvanā*—generosity, ethical conduct, and meditation. That's resting in the culture. The *bhāvanā*, the meditation, is enormously respected in Burma. You get in a taxi, and some young guy driving you asks, "What are you doing here?"

I came to meditate. And this is a normal experience. "You came to meditate? That's so wonderful. I wish I could meditate, but I have to take care of my old mother." Not said with resentment—just, that's how it is. There's both the respect for meditation and the understanding that you take care of your old mother with love. You're generous. You take care of people.

You have nothing. There are poor people, and you offer them something out of dana. Or you offer the nuns something. There's not so much a sense of greed. The nuns will stand and chant metta to the people who've given, and I have seen this happen—people are crying from being so touched by the gratitude, the blessings. The nuns are really blessing you for your generosity, hoping that this will be the cause for your

awakening, inspiring metta. You leave feeling a million times better than when you went in to offer the thing. You think, "Who's giving what to whom?"

I don't feel that we have quite learned how to manifest that yet. And it's so natural there. And it's not just with nuns. I know young families that some of us have come to know over the years, and we might offer them some support. There is one family we offered support to this year—a young family, just some money. We have a long-term relationship with them. The next day they show up. I mean, often there's not money for food, but they will always show up. They arrived with huge bouquets of roses to give us, just out of such happiness. You just always reciprocate. And it's not like a tit-for-tat, "I should." It's an expression. You can feel the metta. You can feel the dana. And it just reverberates through the culture.

So I feel, for me, it's really broadened and deepened my internal understanding of Buddha Dharma. Of course, I always knew it wasn't just meditation—and sila, ethical conduct, of course. But there's a way it's more vibrant, more alive. I feel it as a natural, almost reflexive action of mind and heart. Not like, "Oh yeah, dana—that's good. I should give." Or, "Oh yeah, right—moral conduct. Oh, metta—okay, let me try and feel some metta." It's just there.

And people are messed up, and people are greedy, and believe me, there's weird stuff—I'm not saying otherwise. But there's just a way that these qualities are so much more seeded in the culture, among good people, and it has affected me deeply. I'm trying to find how to bring that more into my own life and teaching.

I know when I'm teaching a retreat, sometimes if I give a talk educating about dana as the movement of the heart—which I feel as a teacher, we feel that—the real educating about dana comes in the face-to-face. You're sharing your love of Dharma. People are sharing their inner practice. That's beautiful. That's dana. People support with finances. That's beautiful. That's dana. We offer. That's dana.

So sometimes on retreat, when I talk just a little bit about a story of this nun or that nun, or some generous person in Burma, I can see it in the yogis. First, I can tell who has been to Burma because they get this look on their face—their face starts to glow. You can see it's touching that place of metta, that place of generosity, the beauty of it.

It brightens our heart and mind. You can see it in the audience. And then often many other people are touched. Stories help, you know.

Well, Carol, just seeing the way they have lit up your eyes and inspired you, obviously there's something very powerful that's there. And I do hope that you'll find a way to tell their stories, to learn their stories, to tell them, and that it has the same impact on the rest of us as you transmit those stories to us.

So thank you for taking the time with us. We really appreciate it. I hope it was helpful in some way.

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