The Power of Generosity

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:02

Once at a three-month retreat, deep in the retreat, it was just a group that liked to laugh, and definitely they were desperate. I came in once—I think it was in the morning—and I said, "uh," and that's as far as I got. They all cracked up.

As I'm sure you've heard, there are different ways to describe, in a nutshell, the heart of our path of awakening. One way to talk about it is that what we're really doing—not just on retreat but in our whole life—is transforming our consciousness. We talk about purifying our consciousness, transforming the habits of consciousness.

We've explored this a great deal, mostly in terms of the actual meditation practice. Whether we're doing one-pointed samatha practice, where the mind gets more and more collected and the hindrances, the kilesas, are kept at bay—that sense of collectedness is part of why it's so lovely, because there's also a purity in the consciousness at that time. Just seeing what it feels like not to have any hindrances is extraordinary. It's lovely just to know it's possible.

The same is true with mindfulness. The steadiness of mindfulness, that momentum that builds, is the condition that allows wisdom to arise. It's not that we create wisdom, but the momentum of mindfulness sets the conditions in consciousness that allows wisdom to arise.

What I want to talk about tonight is the fact that it's not just meditation. The Buddha, in all of his different teachings, at the heart of all of them—they work to transform the habits of our consciousness from being lost in negativity, craving, and self-referencing to wholesome qualities. In Pali, *akusala* means unwholesome, *kusala* means wholesome—the wholesome qualities of mindfulness, wisdom, energy, equanimity, calm, and all the others.

There are many different suttas where the Buddha gives a graduated teaching. I'll share one that I particularly like, though he does this often. Rather than simply saying, "Here are the Four Noble Truths, start abandoning craving now," he recognizes that one's mind needs to be in a receptive, appropriate state. When our mind is in an unwholesome state, we can't even recognize or hear the Dhamma accurately. As I mentioned the other night, when the citta is colored by the unwholesome, we can't recognize accurately.

All the different teachings of the Buddha are equally important, and they're all grounded in freeing our heart and mind from confusion, in brightening the mind in order to recognize the truth accurately. Because we're on retreat, we can get so myopic, thinking it's just about bhavana, just about meditation

practice, and everything else is lesser—or that we only turn to other practices when we're hopeless in meditation. That view is far too limited. This is about our whole life.

This story comes from a time when the Buddha was at Rajagaha in the bamboo grove. At that time there was a leper named Supabuddha, a poor, miserable wretch of a person. This poor, miserable wretch saw a huge gathering—people coming to hear the Buddha teaching—and thought, "Without a doubt, someone must be distributing food over there. Let me go and get some." So he went over, sat down on the edge of the group, and saw that the Buddha was teaching. He thought, "Oh, no one's distributing food here. He's teaching the Dhamma. Well, why don't I sit and listen?"

So he sat on the edge to listen. The Buddha, with his all-seeing mind—when he turned his attention to it, he could perceive the minds and hearts of everyone—looked through the assembly and asked himself, "Who here is capable of understanding the Dhamma?" He could sense whose mind was ripe. He saw Supabuddha and recognized, "Here's a person capable of understanding."

So he gave a step-by-step talk. This appears in so many of the suttas—a step-by-step talk. He began with a talk on giving, on generosity. Then a talk on virtue, on sila, non-harming conduct. Then on the heavens. Then he described the drawbacks, the vanity, the corrupting influence in the mind of giving in to sensual passions and craving, and the rewards of renunciation.

Then, when he saw that Supabuddha's mind was ready—pliable, malleable, not stiff, free from hindrances, uplifted and bright—and this phrasing is used in most of the suttas where he gives this graduated talk—when he saw the mind and heart was free from hindrances, uplifted and bright, then he gave the Dhamma talk particular to the awakened ones: the Four Noble Truths.

This is not a throwaway line. This is really important: there are many ways to cultivate brightness and clarity in the mind so that the mind can actually open to wisdom.

The metaphor given, the simile, illustrates this beautifully. So he gave a talk on the Four Noble Truths, and just as a clean cloth free from stains would properly absorb a dye, in the same way, as Supabuddha the leper was sitting in that very seat, the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye arose within him. Whatever is subject to arising is subject to cessation.

That statement—when the Dhamma eye arises, when someone sees that—is said in the suttas to mean the first stage of awakening. So the mind is bright, just as a clean cloth free from stains can properly absorb a dye. In a moment when the mind is bright and clear and open and not caught in craving, it can properly absorb, recognize the Dhamma, recognize things as they are—that yathabhuta we talked about the other night.

So tonight what I want to talk about is just this first one of the graduated teaching: dana, generosity. Because it's really something at the foundation of the Buddha's teachings. Whenever he talks to lay people, he almost always starts with talking about generosity. It's something I've been learning more and more

about. In the more Buddhist cultures in Asia, it's still more formally rooted in the way relationships between ordained monks and nuns and lay people are set up. Because of that, it's more ingrained in the culture in a certain way. But of course, we're generous here too. I just want to talk about it as a practice that supports our awakening.

Not as a good thing to do, not "we should be generous, good people are generous"—I grew up that way, and there's nothing wrong with that. But generosity as a practice of awakening, as a way of setting the foundation for freeing the mind and heart from clinging—it's not about an external should. It's actually a practice that cultivates this brightness of mind and heart, a really powerful source of joy and connectedness and non-self, really. Not holding to the isolation of me. And it's fun. It's really fun.

I'm sure most of you are aware, but when the Buddha set up his Sangha, his group of monks and nuns, he was basically making it up. There were a lot of renunciates all over India at that time, more men than women, but some women. They wandered around; there were different sects. So when the Buddha set up his sangha of monks and later of nuns, he was using what existed in the culture, but he also set it up in his own way.

At the very heart of it was this: there are four types of people—ordained men, ordained women, laymen, and laywomen. He always said that the Buddha Sasana, his Buddhist teachings, to remain vibrant and alive in the world needs all four types of people. So even though often in the suttas he's talking to monks and nuns, there's never a sense that they're the only ones and the lay people can just come if they want. They depend on each other. He set up the way monks and nuns lived and the way they relate to lay people—and at the heart of it is generosity, dana, the word in Pali.

Bhikkhu Bodhi—you know Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the foremost translators into English of the Pali texts, an American monk who lived in Sri Lanka for many years and is now back in the States—he writes about the importance of generosity in the Buddha's teaching. Believe me, he knows the Buddha's teaching. He says: "Viewed as a quality, generosity has a particularly intimate connection to the entire movement of the Buddha's path. For the goal of the path is the ending of greed, hate, and delusion, and the cultivation of generosity directly weakens greed and hate while facilitating that flexibility of mind that allows for the eradication of delusion."

So the practice of generosity, not just in action but in intention, in mind, in heart, directly in the moment weakens greed and ill will and hatred. And it brings this flexibility, this brightness, this pliancy of mind that allows for the opening into seeing, recognizing things as they are.

When the Buddha set up his Sangha, he really made it so that monks and nuns and lay people were mutually supportive of one another. They mutually supported each other's awakening. It's pretty widely known that monks, and also nuns, would go out for alms round every morning with their bowl—a little smaller than this—and lay people give food. This still goes on in Thailand, in Burma. I don't know about Cambodia or Sri Lanka; I haven't been there. But it still goes on, and lay people go out and give what they

can.

In the places I've been in Burma now, it's often only a little bit of rice. That's really all they can give, and the meditation centers cook. But there's still this sense of mutuality, and it's really important. When the monks are going out, someone goes ahead—a little boy ringing a bell, a little bell—and the people come out and stand there waiting, some nuns or lay people, men, women, just to give their little bit of rice. And you can see they're happy to do it. They don't have to do it.

The monks just walk without looking up. It's not a personal interaction—the laypeople simply give. And the Buddha set it up so that monks, bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, couldn't keep food overnight. You can't store anything. It's not like you can accumulate a lot and then say, "Okay, now I don't have to deal with people." Every day they have to go out and receive their food.

So even though the Buddha talks about being a recluse, about living alone and going to the roots of trees, the monastics could never completely divorce themselves from connection with lay people. They remain dependent on them on a daily basis—for food, for medicine, for shelter, for their robes. Those are the four things that renunciates could have.

And in turn, their gift of generosity to the lay people is this: because the monks and nuns have more opportunity for the subtle meditation practices—sure, lay people could practice too, but clearly renunciates have more time and more opportunity—their dana, their generosity, is to freely share their understanding and the Dhamma whenever asked or whenever the opportunity arises. Not to be stingy with it.

As Bhikkhu Bodhi translates at the end of the Buddha describing this relationship: how monks and nuns are helpful to the householders—you teach them the Dhamma—and they are helpful to you—they provide you with the requisites that you need. "And so, monks, nuns, this spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

Mutual support based not in any kind of should or pressure, but based in the quality of open-hearted sharing, open-hearted generosity.

Now, generosity can become corrupted. One might think, "Well, let me give this monk this good thing, and maybe this monk's a better monk. He'll give me a good Dhamma talk, and maybe I'll get something in return." We can turn it toward selfishness. But again, in the way the sangha was set up, one of the reasons that when monks and nuns are going on alms round they don't really look at the givers, they don't say thank you, is because it's not meant to be personal. If something's offered in the alms bowl, in many of the places I've been, they go back and share it all with everybody. When you're offering something to a monk or a nun, you're offering it to the whole sangha. It's meant to take the personal getting or giving out of it.

And it really counters this false sense of separation—that fearful "I need." A monk gets good food, and the temptation might arise: "I'm not going back to the others. I got a good curry this time. I'm going to go off

and hide in my hut." They don't do that. They just all come back together and share.

Even today this is very present in the culture in Thailand and in Burma. And it's this immediate, face-to-face quality that I think gives it the power—a power I hadn't experienced in the many, many examples of generosity in Western culture.

I think I first noticed it many years ago when I was a nun for a short time, maybe a year, in Thailand. At one point I was staying in a meditation center with nuns and monks up in the northern jungle region. On the nun side of the river, there were only a few kutis—maybe five or six small huts for nuns to stay in and meditate.

The way those wats work in Thailand, and it's similar in Burma, is that it all runs on dana, on generosity. People show up, whether they're monks or nuns or lay people. In Thailand they just show up. You could have a day when thirty people arrive and say, "We want to stay here." At least back then, they didn't have computer bookings. People just showed up, and you'd find a place for them. Maybe you were in a little hut by yourself, and then the next day ten women show up, and suddenly you have five women moving into a hut that you thought was small for one.

There's no charge at all. Even now today, you go to meditation centers and monasteries in Burma or Thailand, there's no charge. Sure, it's made known that the place runs on dana. It needs money for electricity, for food, for maintenance, for the workers, for everything. So it's clear that support is needed. But no one comes around and knocks on your door saying, "Hey, you've been here a month. When are you going to offer some dana?" Nothing like that.

So in Thailand, as the Westerner, the guest, I started to notice something.

So I was treated very kindly, with a lot of generosity. And after a while, when I came out of my self-involved attempts to organize how I could be comfortable there, I started to notice something remarkable. When several women showed up, not only did they not place any pressure on me in my kuti, but the first person to give up her place was the head nun—a young woman, about thirty, really dedicated to meditation, deeply committed to awakening.

When people came, it wasn't like she was the head with seniority, right? The way we think here, that would be the last person to have to move. The junior ones would have to deal with it. But she would be the one to give up her kuti or move in with someone else. And I started to notice—that's really interesting. The sign of greater practice is actually a more open, generous heart. Less holding. Maybe I read that somewhere.

It's been more in the last few years in Burma where I've really experienced a huge opening, a huge learning, an incredibly joyful one—the power of generosity. I don't even want to say it's a practice because that sounds like forcing. But the power of generosity to affect both the giver and the receiver, to where you sometimes can't tell, in terms of how one feels, the qualities in the mind of brightness and openness

and non-clinging and metta—who's giving and who's receiving.

The quality of this open-hearted generosity is not about what is given or how much. It's that openness, that letting go, or not even holding to this sense of separate self—just that metta that wants to share. It's so vibrant and so contagious that after a short time in Burma—and I know I'm not the only one with this experience—and I don't mean to idealize. There's plenty of weird stuff going on. I'm not at all trying to idealize. In fact, the more I've gone over the last ten years, the more I see the distortions that come from living under such a repressive government, people who have to navigate it. No one can really escape it. All of that's true in a strange way.

And yet the power of this—it's not even a commitment to generosity, it's just a quality in the culture—is so contagious and so happiness-producing that the longer I'm there, the more it becomes a way of being. I never knew, and I never really learned it so deeply before, how much that goes towards purifying the heart and mind, the consciousness at the times it's happening, how energizing it is, how connecting it is.

The last couple of years, I think I've mentioned before, I felt really grateful, really blessed in a way, to be one of a few people who serve as representatives of many friends who've offered money in a very generous, open-hearted way but aren't able to go and actually hand either the money or the equipment to people face to face. That's part of the nature of our world—where we know so much suffering and pain and disasters going on in so many different places. Every month something happens. There's such generosity in so many of our hearts. Okay, there's Haiti, and then there's an earthquake in Pakistan, then floods in Bangladesh, then floods in Australia, an earthquake in Chile, the cyclone in Louisiana, the cyclone in Burma. It just goes on and on.

So many people donate so much money. We send a check, we use a credit card, we look at pictures. And that's really deeply generous. But that's all we can do. We can't all go to Haiti, to Chile, to Pakistan every time there's a disaster. We just can't. So we have the generous impulse and the generous giving, and we feel—when I do that I feel some sense of happiness from it. But it doesn't have the strength, the completion, the kind of interrelatedness that I experience when there's person-to-person sharing, that contagion, because you don't get to be present with the receiving.

What I really learned in Burma is that the receiving is done with such happiness and dignity. And then as soon as there's something to receive, something wants to give back. It's just a way of being. The receiving is beautiful. The giving is beautiful. To be on only one side ever is kind of limiting. It's a cycle that keeps on flowing.

So I felt really grateful to be a representative for so many people who don't have the chance to be face to face. The six of us who do this work have a commitment, for those who are interested, to send around letters and pictures and describe the actual interactions. Whenever we've done that, people say, "Oh, it's so wonderful to hear about the actual connection. It comes alive."

That's how I personally feel generosity as a practice of awakening our mind and heart—out of torpor, out of confusion, out of self-interest, out of clinging. It brightens the mind and heart, makes it stainless, able to absorb and see reality as it is, to absorb the Dhamma. And it just so happens that along the way, wholesomeness is really pleasant. But we're not cultivating it for pleasant feeling. That's what we mean when we say don't just go after the pleasant. Not that there's anything wrong with pleasant—pleasant is nice. But when we go for pleasant feeling, that feeling is just evading, gone like that. And we want more and more feeling. That turns into craving.

But when we recognize the wholesomeness—which happens to be pleasant, bringing great joy—it's a joy that creates brightness and non-clinging open-heartedness in the mind, something that's actually onward-leading, that allows us to recognize more accurately. We were going around for a month, offering support to different nunneries, to an HIV orphanage, to some schools, rebuilding villagers' houses. You see a lot of suffering. So I'm not idealizing, saying, "Oh, isn't it nice we give this little drop in the bucket."

And the negative mind could go into, "Well, what good is this? You rebuild their house, and the next month they're going to be in just as bad shape. You might as well not even bother." That's one way to go. Or you say, "Well, you help these few people, but there's so many others. You're just going to engender greed in other people's minds, so you shouldn't do anything." You see all of that. It's not that it's hidden.

And yet there's still this sense of face-to-face generosity and receiving that opens the mind and heart beyond ourself and is really energizing. So I feel really, really grateful to be able to have that opportunity. And we noticed it was exhausting, as I think I said the other time—a month of just go, go, go. But we really started to notice how it felt purifying. We'd come back to our meditation center, really exhausted, but the mind, the heart feels cleansed a little bit.

And then when I come back here and say, "Oh, I'm just tired, I think I'll watch a movie"—I'm not saying that's bad, but I don't come out of it feeling cleansed. I come out of it feeling like, "Well, that was nice," or "That wasn't a nice movie," or whatever. But it's not the same thing. There's not this vibrant, wakeful joy that comes from wholesomeness, from purity.

I just want to give you a sense of how, in that culture, generosity is so implicit, so alive. I'll give you a couple of examples because it's so amazing.

One nunnery we visited, we've known them for a few years. The head nun, Daw Etengi, has been there about six years. Three years ago, there were about thirty or thirty-five nuns who lived there and a few buildings. Then about a year and a half ago, she thought she needed to start a school because there are many young nuns and poor children—not nuns or monks—who can't afford to go to the regular schools. They claim there's no fee, but there's all these hidden fees for books and uniforms. It maybe comes to twenty dollars a month. There are so many kids whose parents can't afford that.

So she thought, "I need to start this school." A free school, hiring teachers. This is a nun. She has no

ongoing source of support, no steady income. So she started a free school for the little nuns in the area. And this year when we went back, all the little nuns within a half hour walking distance would walk up there to school through the eighth or ninth standard, about thirteen or fourteen years old. She started with 160 kids. And there are so many in the area—she just couldn't say no. Now she has 370 kids in the school.

Every square inch of her place is turned over to the school. Mostly they're under this outdoor space with just a bamboo roof, no walls. She's paying the teachers every month—not a lot, but every month. Once a week she feeds the kids, which costs about five hundred dollars to feed them one meal. Food's actually quite expensive there. And she says when she feeds them, they eat a lot because she can tell they're really hungry. And so 370 children—she can't say no. These poor kids, absolutely free. And this is just in one little area, a suburb of Yangon. This could be replicated anywhere. And she's just doing it on faith and generosity.

So we go to visit, we see what she's doing, we offer something. Maybe it'll keep it going for a month or two. Maybe. She needs new buildings, she needs all this, but she's just totally happy and bright. She was telling us when we were visiting how she was so happy because it was her birthday soon, and on her birthday she could make a little party for all the students, give them all ice cream, make some little game. She was so happy to be able to do this. She must have told us three or four times. I mean, she's already given them the whole school.

Plus the 38 nuns who live there—they just have to basically turn over their whole space all day, every day. And then at night, they roll out where they sleep.

So that's just one example, not a really unusual example. It's the incredible generosity, the faith that it will be supported by people's generosity, and the happiness. I mean, I could imagine myself, if I was doing that, thinking, "Where am I going to get the money? I can't believe I started this—300 students!"

But she didn't have anything like that. Smiling, happy. She said, "Yeah, 370, it's a lot. So we have to have two sessions, morning and afternoon." That's it. No "I wonder where the money will come from." Just happiness to be able to offer.

And this is really, as I say, not at all unusual. I could give you many other similar examples. And it's not just among the ordained people—it's really endemic in the culture.

Another time, a couple of years ago, right after the cyclone, there was real starvation. People's houses and food sources had been destroyed. When we went, a few months later, we offered the Sayadaw where we stay—a teacher—and he wanted to offer a rice dāna to the two villages on either side of the meditation center, which means each household gets a big bag of rice. In Burma, you have to be registered. They know exactly how many households in each village, how many people in each household, who's poor and who's not. It's very organized.

So we offered this to each household, and people would come and we'd give them this huge bag of rice. The women would take this—it took two of us to lift it up—they'd plop it on their head and go walking off. Quite amazing.

The next day, some of the monks were going on their alms round. There was one Western monk, a Mexican friend of ours who had been there a few months. When he came back, he said he was so touched. On the alms round, each monastery goes the same way. The villagers know which route they'll take. The same people generally come out—it's a kind of ritual. People who can and want to come out do so; people who don't want to don't have to.

I went on that alms round this year, and I really saw what tiny little bits of rice people give. They're really poor, but they're so happy to do it. This monk said that the day after the rice dāna, there were so many more people out offering rice, because now they had a little extra they could offer. That's the first thing they did with it—they went and offered it. "Now I can give something."

The ability to give brings so much happiness. It's not about how much. And so the receiving is necessary for the giving. It has to go together.

It's so endemic in the culture that by the time one has been there a while—and I've talked to so many people, not even those staying in monasteries—it becomes a natural response. People want to give. By the time you've been there a while, it starts to seep in. You start to feel happier. At first it's like, "Oh no, I have so much—don't give me anything!" But then you start to see that's actually selfish, because we're uncomfortable. "No, no, don't give me anything. You keep it, you need it more than me."

What does that do to someone who wants to offer you a bowl of rice? "Oh no, no—you keep it." It really stops the flow. Instead of allowing that person to experience the joy, the openheartedness, the non-clinging of giving, they're told, "No, you need to hold on to it. You need to take care of yourself. Don't give anything away because you might not have enough." Feeding fear and feeding a sense of "I have more than you."

It just feeds differentiation.

So it's really a great learning and a very powerful one.

And you even see it in the little kids. One time I was walking on this little street between two meditation centers, just by myself, walking from one to the other. A little boy came up. He still had on his little school uniform. He was in a poor area, but he looked very tidy somehow. He came up to me with a little tiny jasmine flower, very formally bowed, handed me this jasmine flower, and ran off. I'd never seen him before. I never saw him since. He didn't know me from anybody. It was just such a pure act of connectedness, of generosity. I mean, I'm still happy when I think about it.

And that's another thing with generosity that I'll get to later. It's in the motivation in our mind before we

do an act of generosity. It's in the doing of it. And later, the karmic result, the *vipaka* of our generous act, is that we can recollect it to cultivate wholesomeness in our heart and mind. That's really important and something we don't do that much. "Let me reflect on my generosity"—don't we think that sounds a little bit full of ourselves? But it's completely the other. Bring up the wholesomeness. Contemplate it. It brightens the heart and the mind.

In the Buddha's teaching and in the suttas, the heart of generosity, just as the heart of all action, is in the motivation—not in the actual action, certainly not in what is given. The heart of it is in the motivation.

You can see this in some stories from the time of the Buddha about Anathapindika, who was called the most generous of the Buddha's supporters. You read many suttas where he appears; he's very devoted. So many of the suttas that begin, "Thus have I heard"—that's Ananda speaking—"on one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Savatthi in Jetavana, the monastery of Anathapindika."

Anathapindika, when he first met the Buddha, was so moved by faith that he bought, at a ridiculously exorbitant price, this beautiful place in Savatthi and offered it to the Buddha and the Sangha for their monastery as a place to stay. It's said that the Buddha spent nineteen of his forty-five rain retreats in that place—he stayed there more than anywhere else. So you read about Anathapindika a lot.

What I want to highlight at the moment is how not only was he hugely generous, but what was important about it was that the seed of his generosity came from faith, from happiness, and from wanting to support the Sangha. That's really what matters in terms of generosity.

When he first met the Buddha, he was so excited. He heard there was this enlightened being, and he was so excited he couldn't sleep. He was at his brother-in-law's house. Finally he got up in the middle of the night and started walking towards where he heard the Buddha was. Then he got really scared—"I don't want to go. No, this is too intense. Oh no, I can't do it." He started to turn around and go back home. But they say some unseen being spoke to him, said, "No, no, householder, go forward. You need to go forward." Sometimes we just know something's going to be so life-changing. And even though our intuition's telling us this is for our own good and the good of all, it's scary. We pull back.

But he went, and was so much in awe when he first saw the Buddha that he just fell at his feet. Then he stammered out the first thing that came to him, which was, "Oh, how did you sleep last night?" And then he thought, "Oh, what a jerk. 'How did you sleep last night?' That's the best I can do."

But of course the Buddha said, "Having cut off all attachments, having removed care from the heart, the peaceful one indeed sleeps well, for he has attained peace of mind."

So it doesn't matter what you ask the Buddha—you're going to get a good teaching. And then he led Anathapindika step by step, speaking of giving, of virtue, exactly what I read about Supabuddha. And Anathapindika woke up.

And he was so filled with faith. He was a real faith type in wisdom that he immediately invited the Buddha and all five hundred of the Sangha to come for a meal. And he bought this grove, the Jeta grove. And then he just kept on supporting. Every day he would make a meal for five hundred monks and nuns, and they would come and he would offer this meal. Just so filled with faith.

Then the king of that area, King Pasenadi, heard of Anathapindaka's generosity and wanted to imitate him. If Anathapindaka can have five hundred monks, I can too—I'm the king. So he supplied alms for five hundred monks daily. But one day, as he was on his way to talk with the monks, he learned from his servants that the monks were taking the food he had given them away and giving it to their supporters in the city, who would then offer it back to the monks.

King Pasenadi was mystified, for the food he gave was very tasty—much higher quality food. Why were they doing this? So he asked the Buddha.

The Buddha explained to the king that in the palace, his servants distributed the food without any inner feeling, just as if they were taking orders from the king, as if they were cleaning out a barn or doing any other task. They had no feeling. In fact, some of them had no love for the monks at all but thought they were parasites. The Buddha said, "When anything is given in that spirit, no one could feel comfortable accepting it, even if the meal is of the most delicious food." So the monks would go to the faithful householders and give the food, and the faithful would offer it back.

The Buddha said that Anathapindaka and Visakha, a woman who was his equal in giving, welcomed the monks and regarded them as spiritual friends. A humble meal provided by a friend would be worth much more than the most sumptuous meal offered by someone who did not give in a truly generous, open spirit.

So that's really the heart of generosity—the motivation.

Again from the Buddha: "Even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or a cup into a village pool or pond—just washing it, rinsing it and throwing the slops into a pond—thinking, 'May whatever animals live here feed on this,' that would be a source of great generosity, a source of merit."

It's what's going on in the heart and the mind. Which is obvious, because that's what's going to brighten and purify the heart and mind—the motivation, the quality in the mind, not just the outer actions.

Once in a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, the monk who was teaching with him, a Nepalese monk named Nyanaponika, gave a talk about practicing generosity. I had notes of six things to pay attention to that I've really liked a lot, so I'll share them.

The first is obvious. When the thought of giving comes up, give attention to the motivation, to your inner motivation. You could say, purify it before giving. I was listening to a Tibetan teacher, Kilung Rinpoche, and he was talking about how you could spend a long time just practicing giving in your mind. Imagine someone and imagine giving something to them. It can start with someone you love, like metta

practice—go through people you love to people you feel ill will toward. Just begin with the idea of giving in your mind, purifying that motivation. Not "Oh, well, I guess I better give. Okay, here." Really looking and seeing, because it's about the motivation.

I've heard a Tibetan teaching, which I kind of like although I haven't done it, that if it's really hard to let go of something in a material way, you could practice giving it from one hand to the other. Really let it go and give it to this hand. That's just a way to play. Try it and see.

And in terms of giving, I'm not just talking about material things. Giving of our time, giving of our services, giving of our care. Just being willing to sit and listen to a friend talk about some problem they're having when you're in a little bit of a hurry.

So start by paying attention to the volition, to what's the quality of motivation in the heart and mind right now, and hang with it, let it purify. Of course it's not perfect. You don't have to wait until it's perfect, but at least notice.

Then, whether it's time, service, or material things—whatever you're giving—notice if there's still clinging to it, and see if you can abandon the clinging so that you're really giving. Not "I'll give it, maybe they won't want it and I'll get it back."

I notice this when I'm booking phone conversations with people and have to figure out the time. I'll book the time and then think, "Oh, maybe they won't call today." That's not generosity. I see that. What am I hoarding the time for? I don't even have something I want to do with it. To just look at that and feel that contraction, that separation—and then connect with the person, connect with why. That open-hearted willingness to be present is lovely.

It's not so much about doing it for them; I'm doing it for me. Opening my mind, opening my heart from the clinging.

The third aspect Sayadaw U Pandita also spoke about, and this is where I really felt the power of this practice from being in Burma, is when it's possible—and it's often not possible in our culture, and not on retreat either—but when it's possible to directly give and receive face-to-face, with real presence.

I noticed this with Sayadaw U Pandita actually. One time I was on retreat and heard he wanted a particular book. Since I was on retreat, I had someone buy it and give it to him, saying it was from me. When I came out of retreat—this is how he was just so constantly teaching—he said to me when I went to pay my respects, okay, he got the book, now hand it to me face to face. And I saw how shy I was, how I felt this isn't good enough or something. Just self, selfing. And it's nothing. You just hand it. He received it. Blessed you for it. May this be a cause for your awakening.

That's something they often say in Burma. Even lay people—you hand them something and they say, may this be the cause for you to reach Nibbana in this lifetime. Can you imagine? You're sitting in a monastery,

you offer something, and someone says, may you reach Nirvana in this lifetime. It's so beautiful.

Can you imagine you're in a supermarket and you let someone go ahead of you? May you reach Nirvana in this lifetime. It really sets your mind in a different way than ours. "Okay, thanks." "Yeah, right, I do only have one thing—I should go ahead of you." Really different. You see how it's contagious, how it opens us up.

In Burma, for example, when you're giving—and it's not only to monks and nuns, but we were giving a lot to nuns—it's really quite formal. If you're handing money, nuns can take money directly; monks cannot, so it would go to an attendant. But you may be offering something substantial. We'd find out that they needed toilets, and believe me, some of those nunneries needed toilets. We'd give them six or seven hundred dollars—it's not nothing to build a couple of toilets or a well. You should see the disgusting holes they're drinking water out of.

So we'd be giving money for that, and it's always formal. You get a tray, you put it on a tray. The people who are receiving and the people who are giving all hold it together. And then they always take a picture—they love pictures, always taking photos. You're holding it together, and then they chant. They'll chant a metta chant, a gratitude chant, a blessing chant. You sit there on your knees holding it while they're chanting. It's beautiful. Even the little nunlets, like five-year-olds, they all stand there and chant the chant of blessing.

By the end, it's not just, "Oh, here's some money." You feel blessed. You are being blessed. And you're all together in this energy of faith and happiness and generosity. You think, well, who's giving what to whom here? It's just lovely.

This face-to-face dimension is something I really miss in this culture. As I said, some of it is just how things are set up—we can't do it. And here on retreat, please stay in the noble silence. Please don't all start going face-to-face, giving each other things.

But just to notice, not to shy away. That sense of receiving with dignity and beauty is really, really important. It completes the circle.

And I feel like I want to be a transmission for the people who've offered to these nunneries, just to show how it really works. Here's an example. Two people here—and I've talked to each of them, it came up in different ways—were part of a group that donated some of this money to one of the specific nunneries. And in both of them, they kind of said, "Well, what happened?"

And I could say, "We gave this money to these nuns, told them who it was from." They had a photo from last year of two of the people who were spearheading that donation. So we showed them their photo. "It's from this group of people." Because they want to know. They want to know specifically if they can. They'll put the names of the people—I have my name on a couple of toilets, I'm very proud. And you know, they want to know. They send blessings. And it was specifically for building a stone brick room instead of these

bamboo buildings that fall apart every six months.

And then the next day I could tell them—the next day we were out walking on this dusty road and this truck came by. And the sister, one of the two nuns, was in the passenger seat. She stopped to say hello to us. And it was a truck filled with cement and bricks. They had gone out immediately with that dāna to buy cement and bricks to start building the room.

So when I told each of these two people separately this, they got so high. I could see. They weren't just saying it. Their faces lit up. They were so happy. It's like having that connection, that completion. It's not a completion because it's bringing happiness, and then from that happiness you want to do something for somebody else, and it just keeps on going. It's really a profound and enlivening practice. So the face-to-face is wonderful when it can happen.

Then obviously the next upanisā, uddāna paṇika said, when we're giving time, materiality, energy, whatever, be present for it. You know, it says "with the mind focused on giving." It's not like, "Oh yeah, right, I wanted to give you this thing," and then I'm going to go have some tea. And how often do I do that?

I remember some little thing I gave a friend once, and he later said, "Oh, from your casual giving"—but that particular thing has been really useful to me. He wasn't chastising me, but I felt chastised because it was true. It was a really offhand, "I don't need this, if you want it, you can have it." So different from, "Oh, can you use this? You can have it." That's not to aggrandize myself, but it's just to be present with the giving. To open to the connectedness, to the interrelatedness, is so much more powerful—in my mind, than it would have been in his.

After giving, continue to be aware of your volition. Because, you know, sometimes we regret it, right? "Ah, damn. Why did I do that?" Okay, if that comes up, it comes up, but notice it. Don't have to keep going into it. You know, don't have to shut down again. I did give it. That was a good thing. Be mindful of the volition.

And clear comprehension, awareness of the broader context—there are times when we give something that isn't really appropriate or helpful. You know, the classic example is if you give someone who's an addict, you support their habit. You know, it's maybe not the most helpful thing.

And there are the stories in the suttas about it, again with Anāthapiṇḍika. He was incredibly rich, and he had a nephew who was a real wastrel, who would just keep wasting money. So I won't read the whole story because it would take too much time, but the nephew would come and ask Anāthapiṇḍika for like three thousand talents, whatever. He would give it. The guy would go off and gamble it all away. Then come back and ask for four thousand. Anāthapiṇḍika would give five thousand. He would go off, spend it all in raucous living, gamble it all away, come back and ask for more. So Anāthapiṇḍika went through this a couple times. Then he said, "This is a warning. This is the last I'm going to give you." But of course, same thing.

The nephew came back again. So then Anathapindika said, "Well, I'm not giving you any money, but I'll

give you some clothes to take care of you." Of course, the nephew just went off and sold those, then came back again. And finally, Anathapindika said, "No, I'm not giving you anything more."

The nephew went off and continued in his wastrel living. He didn't even want to beg, which was an option, and he died what the texts describe as a pitiful death. Anathapindika felt terrible and went to the Buddha, asking, "Should I have done something different?"

I can really relate to this—the question of what's the difference between real generosity of heart and codependence, where you feel "I have to do it" even though it's not really generosity. The Buddha said, "No, you shouldn't have done anything different. You did what you could, and he was one of the fortunately few people who are like a pit, a money pit, who would just take and take and take and couldn't better himself. There's nothing you could have really done."

I find this so interesting. Dana or any of the wholesome qualities—they come together with wisdom, not some idealism. It's not "give till it hurts, then give more, then give until you're destroyed." It's not that. There's clear comprehension of whether what I'm giving is actually helpful or harmful to the person or to myself.

In terms of how this can support our practice here and now, this sense of purifying and bringing wholesome qualities to mind, of changing the channel when we're caught in fear, ill will, or aversion—sometimes we say, "Why don't you try doing some metta?" when the mind seems really locked into a suffering, unwholesome place. It's the same idea. Metta is just one way, not the only way.

There's a beautiful passage from Ajahn Pasanno in the book *The Island*. He writes: "There's a naturalness to this gradual training. For example, when one is generous and delights in giving, the heart tends to be satisfied and joyous. This supports the cultivation of virtue, of non-harming, because a heart that is satisfied and contented easily inclines to restraint and composure. With this composure, together with the lack of remorse that virtue affords, the heart is easily settled and focused. Meditation thus progresses more smoothly and the mind naturally brightens, making it suitable for recognizing things as they truly are."

That's the key. Only the mind-heart that's free from clinging, even for a moment, can recognize things as they actually are—*yatha-bhuta*. All of these different practices—virtue, generosity, the Brahma-viharas—are different ways of bringing in and strengthening this clarity, brightness, openness, and freedom of heart and mind.

For our own practice, both here and in daily life, when you notice you're really locked in clinging or self-judgment or negativity or depression—anything that's all about me, me, me—try just doing some generous act, simply to see how that changes the channel. It busts us out of, even for a moment, the self-involvement. Give something to somebody. Do something for somebody. It can be a small thing. But do those things of really clarifying the motivation and doing it wholeheartedly.

You'll notice that "I'm doing this for my own good" is part of the mixed motivation. But get in touch with what it actually means to offer this thing, this time, this service, whatever it may be. Feel the happiness, the uplifting that can bring. Don't be shy about really settling into this wholesomeness. Not "Oh yes, that's wholesome, la la la, don't want to get too caught in the pleasant." No. Settle into the wholesomeness. Really feel the difference between the wholesome mind and heart and the unwholesome. We can tell the difference. We know when we're suffering, but we can also know when we're not, when the mind and heart is bright, and what feeds that. Really, really helpful.

As I mentioned at the beginning, we can cultivate as a contemplation—and the Buddha talks about this—contemplating our own past generosity as a way of changing the channel when we're caught. There's a sutta translated by Andrew Olendzki called "Directed and Non-Directed Meditation." It describes how when one is practicing the four foundations of mindfulness, contemplating body as body, ardent, fully aware, mindful, leading away from the unhappiness that comes from wanting the things of the world—it can happen, maybe you've noticed this—a physical object arises, or a mental object arises, or bodily distress arises, or mental sluggishness arises, and the mind becomes scattered outwards.

You ever notice that? The mind goes outwards.

So the Buddha says you don't have to just be mindful of that—sometimes we can, but sometimes the mind is too scattered. And then he says: direct the mind. This is directed meditation. Direct it to some inspiring object or subject, some inspiring image. Metta is one example of that. Another example he talks about is contemplating our generosity.

There are actually six contemplations he discusses: our generosity, our virtue, the devas—though that may or may not apply to you, and this is much more commonly practiced in Buddhist countries. I don't know how much it works for some of us. But also contemplations on the qualities of a Buddha, on the Dhamma, and on the Sangha. All of these can bring real wholesome energy into the mind.

But I just want to read the passage on generosity. Here he's talking to laypeople too:

"Furthermore, this is the case where you recollect your own generosity. 'So it is a great profit for me, great gain, really wholesome for me, that living among people at home, among people who are overcome with the habit of possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness. Freely generous, open-handed, delighting in being generous, responsive to requests.' And at any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting their generosity, her mind is not overcome with greed, is not overcome with aversion, is not overcome with delusion. Her mind, her heart heads straight based on generosity."

This is the key: anytime you're recollecting your generosity, the mind is not overcome with greed, hatred, or delusion.

"When the mind, the heart is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones has a sense of the goal, gains a

sense of the Dhamma, experiences joy connected with the Dhamma. And one who is joyful, rapture arises. And one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. And one whose body is calmed experiences ease. And one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated."

Just this sense of cause and effect—not willpower.

"So Mahanama"—this is the layperson he's addressing—"you should develop this recollection of generosity while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children."

In other words, whatever we're doing, it doesn't have to be on a meditation retreat. We can recollect our generosity, we can practice our generosity, and it's a great gain for us—a great practice of freeing the heart and mind from clinging, and a great source of joy and happiness.

So may we all experience the happiness and freedom that the cultivation of generosity can bring into our minds and hearts.

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