Generosity: A Foundational Practice for Awakening

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:58

Last night when Sally was talking about the Four Noble Truths, she mentioned that the fourth truth, the Eightfold Path, is so brilliant because it's really about our whole life, not just about meditation. I'm not talking about the Eightfold Path tonight—we're saving that for Pascal, unless he changes his mind. But I do want to take a little turn and not talk specifically about meditation tonight.

I want to remind us that as far as I can tell, everything the Buddha taught was in the service of transforming our consciousness, transforming the habits of our mind from unwholesome to wholesome. Basically everything he taught was part of our path of awakening. Of course, we're in a meditation retreat, and that's mostly what we're looking at. But I want to remind us that other aspects of his teaching, such as dana or generosity and sila or non-harming virtuous conduct, aren't just nice things to do to get yourself ready for meditation, or a byproduct, or a should.

Tonight I want to talk about generosity, but in the way of really seeing, really opening in our own experience to learn to see and deeply trust that the practice of generosity in all its different forms is actually a deep practice of liberation—not just the preparatory work, not just the waiting room.

In some Buddhist countries, because the Buddha always did start by talking about generosity, then virtuous conduct, then mental cultivation in that order, the practice of dana—supporting nunneries and monasteries, supporting each other (it's not only about nuns and monks)—sometimes remains just in the field of merit: "I'm doing this because I can't meditate, and if I'm generous, I'll have a better life next time around." There's an element of that in the teachings.

But when I talk about generosity as a practice tonight, I want us to really see how in a moment where we experience a generous heart-mind, that's a moment of real purity of consciousness. It liberates us from greed, from possessiveness. It frees the heart and mind from ill will in a moment of generosity. And of course, it moves past the false sense of separation of self—that kind of holding, of possessiveness, of clinging, of trying to protect.

The generous action, which can be of thought, of word, of deed—it's not just about giving things or money, it's about any kind of generous sharing. And also receiving, because there's no giving without receiving. Open-hearted receiving completes the circle. The open-hearted act of generosity, even just in thought—that's an act. It highlights the connectedness, the non-separation. So instead of coming from fear and protectiveness and possessiveness and I-ness, it's a movement in contradiction to that, when we're

really present with it, when it's really being practiced as an awakening practice.

This probably isn't news to anybody. We all know that in all of our different cultures, generosity is a very appreciated and deeply taught practice in whatever religious tradition, and just in general life too. It doesn't even have to be a spiritual tradition.

What I've really been learning in the last few years, mostly from my time in Thailand and Burma—maybe being in a different culture from this one (and I have to say, people are really generous in this culture, I'm not saying we're not)—somehow being in an essentially Buddhist culture, in both Thailand and Burma, spending most of my time in nunneries or monasteries or meditation centers, but also traveling a lot... I've experienced both that very deep generosity and, in the same way, the more superficial kind that's just for merit, which is everywhere. But also, over and over, so often, a quality of spontaneous, heartfelt, natural generosity that is so joyous it has a quality of contagion.

This was a quality I never really learned from how I grew up, or even from all the generosity I experienced here and in my life. But the quality of real joy that comes from this open-hearted generosity—I found it has a quality of really seeing, really feeling how contagious it is. The actual practice of generosity becomes not just second nature but truly natural to us, where one wants to be generous because it's such a source of immediate happiness.

That was kind of like a secret teaching that I hadn't really learned. Yes, generosity is good. We feel better when we're generous, and we should be generous, especially to those less fortunate. But there's room for other moods to come in there.

In Burma, where I've been going for the last ten years, every time I go there are so many big and small spontaneous movements of generosity that it blows me away. At first, when you receive generosity, you think, "Oh no, I can't accept that. I'm so much better off than you." And then you feel how churlish that is—how that completely stops the circle of interconnectedness. That response is all about me: "Oh no, I can't take your generosity."

But when one really opens to it—for example, in the last few years I've been going with a few friends, and many of you here know that people offer us dana, money that we take, and as the vehicle for all the dharma friends here, we share with different nunneries. We've made funds for children to go to school who can't afford it, or rebuilt some houses, or whatever comes up. We've been to one meditation center where I've been staying, and there are many poor nunneries all around, and every year more. We go back—we can't give to all of them, but there are certain ones we've connected with that we give to, and other people may offer dana. We return the next year and see how it's been used, and it's usually been used wonderfully, and we can offer more.

But any time we even just show up—we're not even offering anything, we just come to say hello—immediately there's a lunch invitation. There are four, five, six of us depending. My friend

Aryanyani and her friend Mimi—Mimi is Burmese, Arya speaks Burmese, so there's a lot more communication. There's always a lunch invitation. And the first years, we were like...

No, you know, they'll make a lunch for us that's ten times better than any meal they ever have. And it's embarrassing because you go and sit and eat and they watch you eat. They're not eating. That's how it always is.

In meditation centers, you know, every meal you see the meal dana. That's the thing coming from Asia. In every meditation center all over the country, the meals are offered every day by different people. So it might be if I'm staying in a meditation center, one day I'll offer the meals. And if it's a big one like Shwe Oo Min, last year it was four or five hundred people a day—it's not nothing. And you see so many Burmese people come. They signed up months ahead to offer the meal dana, and they'll come on their day with their families, all dressed up, and they watch you eat and take photos. So that takes some getting used to for us.

But you're just a yogi, so you just eat, you don't interact or anything. So we know it's like that. So when the nuns invite us, we'll go to their nunneries, which are really poor, and sit at the table on the floor, and they'll have a table groaning with twenty-five—I'm not exaggerating—different kinds of curries. Then they'll have another table that's groaning with fruits and little desserts. And they don't eat like that ever, ever. And when we're done eating, they'll take what's left and they may take a few days—the six of us, twenty-five of them—they may take a few days to eat off of the leftovers of what we didn't eat.

So there's that disparity. And if we say no, it just cuts the cycle. Or if we go and feel embarrassed—you know, they're so happy, they're so thrilled, they love to be able to offer. So can we go and be so happy to receive? And when both sides are like that, it's a beautiful teaching. It's a beautiful opening of the heart and mind. It makes one want to be more generous, not as it "should"—first it's like that, well, they were good to us, so we should give them more money. But it really isn't like that at all. What happens is you just go, "Wow." It's so beautiful and you just want to give. It may not be to them. It may be you walk out and someone else comes across your path and the heart and mind is in this open, receptive space. And if there's something to be offered, you just offer it. It's really contagious, and it starts to be not a practice but a way of being.

It is particularly highlighted in the monastic tradition within Buddhism, for sure. The Buddha set up the monastic sangha during his time so that generosity was at the center of it, at the core of it. The whole thing depends on generosity.

This is from the Buddha. He says, "Monks"—he's talking to his monks—"Brahmins and householders are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicines in times of sickness." And just if you don't know, those are the only four things a monk is allowed to accept, what they're offered: robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicine. And they can't keep food overnight, so it's just the food for that one day.

So still, in Buddhist countries, the monks go out every morning at dawn on this barefoot alms round with their bowls—not that big—with their bowls and get food. Now, in many places, all they get is a little bit of rice because the places are really poor. And so then often the monastery or the meditation center will actually cook for the monks and nuns. They'll use the rice that's donated. But then that food that's cooked is also offered by other people. But they keep the alms round up because—and I'll tell a story about it in a minute—it's an opportunity for generosity for the people that come out and offer rice. And to stop doing that is actually an act of selfishness, of taking away that opportunity for dana.

It's not so much the way we think, but that's a common phrase: "Oh, this is an opportunity for generosity." Sometimes loudspeakers will be going through a village: "An opportunity for generosity!" You know, in my Western mind I hear, "Yeah, right, someone's out there trolling for money." But it's really felt as an opportunity for generosity.

Buddha again: "And you monks are very helpful to Brahmins and householders as you teach them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, the middle, and the end with the correct meaning and wording. And you proclaim the spiritual life in its fulfillment and purity. Thus, monks and nuns, the spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

And so the Buddha really set it up that way—that monks and nuns couldn't just withdraw and be separate from lay people, that they're linked together through generosity, through support of one another. Lay men and women and ordained women and men.

Those are the four types of people that are important in the Sangha, and their link is generosity. Generosity with things, generosity with time, generosity with the Dhamma. This is at the heart of sangha, so of course it shows up prominently in Burma, in Thailand, in the nunneries and monasteries. But it really seems to have become quite intrinsic in the culture.

Every year when I go, I know this now—it's not like magic. People have their stuff. It's not some kind of magical, wonderful culture, as you well know from reading the news. Things are just kind of normal for a while, but after a few days or a few weeks, each time we keep running into some little unexpected gesture of such deep quality of generosity and metta that it blows us away. One of my friends, Mario, calls it a "piti opportunity"—where something will be so touching at the depths of someone's generosity that we just come to tears.

And that is touching us, and that's the point I want to make. It's not about thinking, "Oh, these people over there are so wonderful. I couldn't be like that." Rather, it's about what happens with the wholesomeness in our heart and mind when it's generated. Have you noticed how wholesome feeds wholesome in your own self? Unwholesome can also feed unwholesome. Both are lawful. Wholesome feeds wholesome. And we catch it from each other because it wakes up the natural goodness, the natural wholesomeness in the mind that isn't colored by confusion.

Let me share a couple of stories to give you this sense of the spirit of joy in the giving and receiving of generosity.

A few years ago there was a big cyclone in the lower delta region southwest of Yangon, and really thousands upon thousands of people died. The farms were destroyed. It was a huge devastation, and the government, of course, did nothing. Many Burmese people naturally went to try to help. Any Burmese person who had anything tried to load up their car or their boat and go down there, even though the government was stopping them.

A couple of years later, some of us were with Sayadaw Indica at the meditation center where I've been staying. He organized a dana of food—from the money people had donated, he bought a lot of rice and oil and onions and beans and staples. He's an organizer. He arranged these big boats, and we took all this food down the river to a few little villages in the delta, then very formally offered the food. The villages were quite poor and really happy to receive. It's all done very formally, with a kind of ceremony, a kind of honoring of both the giving and the receiving. It's not like, "Well, here you are." "Oh, we'll take it, we're ashamed." It's a real honoring.

Then the villagers all came in a row with whatever beautiful plants they had, because it was a very rich area for growing things. They offered all these potted plants for us to bring back in the boat to plant at the monastery. Of course, you know, you think about how you're going to get all these plants in the boat and schlep them up there, and the Western mind wants to say, "That's too much trouble. Thanks a lot, you keep them." But you don't do that. You accept it with great joy, and then you go back and figure out what you're going to do with all these plants. You put them in the boat even though there's no room for you, and you schlep them up there and you plant them. There's a sense of really honoring the whole cycle. Something truly beautiful in that brings much more depth to the generosity and the receiving on both sides.

That same year, right at this meditation center on the edge of Yangon, the villages around it were also affected by the cyclone and didn't have much food that year. So we decided to organize what's called a rice dana, where every household in every village is registered. People can't live somewhere without being registered, so they know every house, they know how many people are in every house. Everyone would come and we'd all fill these big bags of rice—huge bags.

So they'd get a little chit and come and stand in line. And it would take two of us to heave this giant bag of rice up. These little ladies would go, "Okay," plop it on their head, and walk off—maybe carrying a couple of babies. I mean, I'm not kidding. I have pictures of ladies with two babies and this giant bag of rice on their head.

So they all took their rice and went off. It was a nice day, kind of like a picnic day. And then a friend, a guy from Mexico who was a temporary monk there, told us the next day about the alms round. Every morning when they go out, they walk the same route, because then people know when the monks are coming.

The way the alms round works, there's a little novice monk who goes ahead of them ringing a bell. Then the people who want to offer know they're coming, and they come out and stand by the side of the road. The monks come silently and walk up to them, and then the monk will take the lid off the bowl and they put in the food. The monks don't say thank you, and it's not meant to be personal. It's not me giving to you personally. It's supporting the sangha, supporting the sasana, supporting the Buddha's teachings. So the people come out when they hear the bell.

This monk said basically every day it's more or less the same people. You know which families are going to come out. But this day after the rice dana, when every family had rice, he said so many more people came out to offer because now they had a little rice that they could give. They didn't have it before. Sure, they kept some to eat, of course, but that was the first thing they wanted to do—and they were so happy to be able to do it. It's just so touching to see that over and over again.

And the sense of joy in dana isn't just with monks and nuns. Another example from this year: the whole money-changing scene there is a little weird. It's kind of half legal, half not legal, and it's not really through banks. You have to get money changers to come out to where you are, especially if you're changing a lot of money.

So we were changing a lot—maybe twenty-five thousand, thirty thousand dollars—and it was organized through a friend. These young guys kind of come up, not really sleazy, but businesslike, you know, on an edge. A step up from drug dealers, but sometimes there's a little bit of that sense. They look at every single bill, and if there's the tiniest dot, they won't take it. So you're there a while. It's a whole process. And then they give you all these piles of money, because Burmese money is big. You hand over two thousand dollars and you get a pile like this of things that crumble to dust when you touch them.

So we were there for a long time, changing the money, and it was all just straightforward. The guys were not unfriendly, but not chatty or anything. And I don't even know how—I think somehow just at the end, the woman who owns the B&B, the Burmese woman who was kind of the intermediary for us, just said something like, "Oh great, now you can build a lot of toilets for the nuns," which was part of what we were doing. That's all. No one was asking what we were doing with our money.

There was about six hundred dollars still kept back for some fee. And the lady from the B&B called us a couple days later to say, "Okay, now I have that. It's been released. And someone here donated another three hundred fifty dollars to bring it up to a thousand."

We thought it must be a yogi who stays at that B&B—a lot of Western meditators come through there that we know. We got there, and she said, "No, it was the money changer."

We were all completely blown away. When he heard how we were spending that money, he just wanted to donate. Three hundred fifty dollars for a Burmese person—that's a lot of money. And it was done in a very anonymous, not wanting any kind of recognition way. He just added three hundred fifty dollars to

that.

That was a real pīti moment. You just never know. You think, "Oh, some sleazy money changer." Not the case. That seed of goodness and generosity is really blooming in that person's mind. The first chance they act on it—who knows what other good things he's doing.

So it's very, very institutionalized in the culture. I could tell you ten million more stories, but I'm running out of time, so I won't.

But one point that I want to make in terms of the contagion of generosity—not only how it spreads to others, but how it functions as deepening us into liberation. It's not just about feeling good about it, the joy of it, though that's certainly the case. But it opens the heart and mind to more wholesomeness, to see more clearly.

The Buddha often talked in this way. There are many suttas where he begins with what he calls a graduated teaching, where he sees someone and thinks, "This person could hear the Dhamma," but first he'll give them a talk on generosity, a talk on *sila*, to open the heart and mind, to make the heart and mind more pliable.

So I just want to give a couple of examples again from this year of how you can see it happening in people—first in terms of how the generosity comes in the culture at this place we're staying.

The monks, of course, have nothing to give other than teaching Dhamma. But the few monks who live at this meditation center, aside from the Sayadaw—I've been back there a few years now, and my two nun friends live there half the year, so they know all the monks. And the monks are so wanting to support helping people.

In the past, I've had the impression—not with these particular monks—that monks tend to want to help each other, that they look down on nuns or don't really think about them so much. But that's just not true here.

There are quite a few schools that have been started by nuns because they see there are so many poor kids that can't afford to go to the government school. One started just nearby where we're living, by a nun that we had known for a few years. We thought she seemed a little bit depressive, actually. And her nunnery was nothing special—fine, and we'd support them some, but they weren't particularly bringing up a lot of orphan girls, which a lot of nunneries do. They were just doing their thing, studying.

But she came, I think it was last year, to Ari and Yanni and said, "I really want to start a school." There was another nun school started about a ten-minute drive away, which that nun began three years ago. She just said, "I have to do something. There are all these poor kids that can't go to school."

So they just decided to do it. They build a lean-to, a roof building, and start a school. Somehow they get enough *dana* to hire a few teachers. And that's it—they start a school. She said, "Okay, well, maybe I can

have a hundred kids." We went back the next year: 350 kids. We went back this year: 570 kids.

And so this other nun came last year and said, "In the rainy season, all the little nuns and all the little kids around this area go to that school, but it's so far to walk—it's a forty-five-minute walk. In the rainy season, which is pouring monsoon, it's too hard, so the little ones don't go."

She said, "I want to start a school around here for the little ones."

She asked for about $3,600, which is for us a lot to give all at once. We didn't really think she could pull it off. But we said, "Okay, great, do it."

Well, we came back this year. She did it. They had two little buildings, not a lot of land. They demolished the main building the nuns all lived in. They all moved, cramped up into this other little building. They eat there. They sleep there. They do everything there. And with the money we'd given, she built one of these long lean-tos, hired some teachers. It has 150 kids who are going there—all the little kids.

And then another company, some chemical company—a Burmese company—came and saw what she was doing, so they built another school. And then some other friends of ours came and they built some toilets. And it's like it attracts more and more.

So this year, we saw how she had done that. And then she was talking to Ari and Yanni, and it's really wonderful to be able sometimes to just sit down and have a conversation, because this is where these little gems come out that you don't get even from seeing what she did, which is amazing. But she came and was just chatting...

First of all, as I mentioned, she had always been somewhat depressive. But as she was sitting there talking with us in the little kuti, her face was just radiant—so bright. She was saying that last year, when she came with the idea for the school, the idea had been growing so strongly in her mind. "I just want to help these children," she said. And it got so strong that she could hardly eat, could hardly sleep. It was just such an overwhelming feeling—she had to do something to help these children.

And now, she said, the school is built, and it's so much work. It's so hard, because everything falls on Dana. To hire teachers—regular, government-approved teachers—means every month they have to somehow find the funds. Dana has to come up with whatever donations happen to come in from people who visit, to pay the teacher salaries, to pay for the desks, to have a well that works and toilets that work, all kinds of things. She said it's so much work and they're all cramped together.

And then she said, "I'm so happy. I'm so happy. It's hard. All the energy is for the children and the school." She said her mind is calm and happy, whereas before it had been filled with worry. All the hard work notwithstanding, her mind is so happy, and she would be so happy if she could just do this for the rest of her life.

We could see—sure, it comes and goes—but the transformation through this genuine commitment to

generosity of her time and energy, this really stretching to help others, has brought much stronger peace and happiness and contentment to her mind. And that's then available to see more clearly.

This onward leading doesn't just end with the generosity. I'll read this from Ajahn Pasanno—this is essentially his commentary on a sutta. He says it's just nature, it's lawful, that generosity, the foundational quality on the path of awakening, lawfully opens into deeper qualities of awakening.

This is Ajahn Pasanno: "There's a naturalness to this gradual training. The cultivation of these foundational qualities leads naturally to deeper qualities. For example, common ways of teaching emphasize dana, sila, bhavana—generosity, virtuous conduct, mental cultivation. When one is generous and delights in giving, the heart is satisfied and joyous. This supports the development of virtue 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. Then meditation progresses more smoothly because the mind naturally brightens, making it suitable for seeing things as they truly are."

Do you get a sense of that? Part of the reason I keep telling different stories is that even if just one of them resonates with you, you get a sense of how the mind or heart naturally brightens. And that brightness leads to a pliancy, a suppleness, an openness. We're not clouded by kilesa, and there is more potential to see things as they truly are.

Let me give you a different story. This one is not from Burma, but I heard it on YouTube—someone showed me a little clip from one of those talent shows, like American Idol. I never watched them, so it wasn't American Idol; it was some British one with that guy—you probably know him—one of the judges, the mean one. Simon something or other. He seems like really not a very nice guy, but he's always the judge, so that's all I remember.

The young man who was singing was a teenager, seventeen or eighteen, of Iraqi descent, but he'd been adopted by an Australian woman. He and his brother had both been adopted, and they had both been really severely wounded—I think by bombs or something during part of the war in Iraq when they were really young children. Wounded to where their limbs were gone. I can't remember the specifics, but he was certainly missing arms and legs; both of them were.

This Australian woman had gone to Iraq and fallen in love with them both, adopted them both, and brought them back to Australia. That's the backstory. But first, the audience didn't really know any of that. They just introduced him, and he comes on—just so bright, missing arms and legs—and starts singing.

And he was really good. But of course, everyone's heart was completely open. He was really good, so he's singing, and then at the end he turns—his mother was there and his brother was there. And this is what was really so moving. He turned to them just with so much love and appreciation to his mother, just for her love and generosity. And then you see the brother there. And she's saying, "This isn't generosity, you

know, it's just love." But it was like a love fest, just so much purity.

And I tried to imagine what a generous heart that woman would have to adopt two kids so wounded, who could never really... and how beautiful they all were. Even that mean guy, Simon, had tears in his eyes.

The thing I want to bring out—it's a beautiful story—but just seeing that generosity and love, the kind of generosity where you don't think, "Oh, I'm so generous." It's just a natural sharing. Why does it touch us? Because it opens that same potential. It opens in our own hearts and minds that brightness, that movement beyond the sense of me.

I might think, "Oh, I couldn't do that. She's so great." Well, that isn't really very touching, is it? But when you don't go there, it's just, "Wow, look at that." You're not thinking, "I should be like that" or anything like that. Just "That's so amazing." That expression of generosity and love is so beautiful. We can appreciate it because it's natural to us too. And so opening to see it acted out through other people is really a great way in for us. It begins to open us to a deeper practice and deeper understanding.

In the Buddha's stories, in the scriptures, there's one man who was known as the most generous. He was a huge supporter of the Buddha—Anāthapiṇḍika. When he first met the Buddha, he was so filled with faith that he just basically fell in love with the Buddha. And he's one of those people that when the Buddha first met him, he gave him—I just want to read you this line because this is one of these ways they introduced this graduated teaching.

So the Buddha met Anāthapiṇḍika, who had never met the Buddha before, never heard the Dhamma. And step by step he saw he needed a step-by-step gradual discourse. So he spoke to him of generosity, of virtue, of the heavenly realms, of the perils and vanity and the nature of sensual pleasures, of the joy and benefits of renunciation. And when he saw that Anāthapiṇḍika was ready in heart and mind—the mind and heart was pliable, unobstructed, uplifted, and serene—then he explained to him the teaching that is unique to the enlightened ones, the Four Noble Truths.

So specifically, when I'm talking about generosity tonight, not only in how we do it, but noticing the effect it has in our hearts and mind—any wholesome state does—it brings... it makes the mind uplifted, serene, pliable. In that state, it's more able to recognize things as they really are.

I'll read another sutta towards the end of the talk, but there are times here in practice when practice is going fine, great. There are other times when whatever's coming up is so difficult and so overwhelming. Maybe you're really getting overwhelmed by fear, or physical pain, or self-judgment. And not just that it's there, but you're just lost in it, or fatigue. And you think, "I just can't do this anymore." Everyone thinks that. You more than think it—you really think it's really true. "I can't do this anymore."

And if the only option... and I know I'm always saying, I'm going to keep on saying: have total confidence in mindfulness. I'm not backing off of that. I have total confidence in awareness. That's always the first way to go. But sometimes you're like, "What mindfulness? What awareness? What confidence?" You say

mindfulness doesn't care what's happening, but I care. And I can't look at this thing one more second.

That's when you can remember that there are other aspects of purifying our heart and mind. Generosity is one.

And it doesn't mean you have to run out and do something generous. You can—and I'll say more about this at the end—simply bring to mind acts of generosity from your own past. It can even be thoughts, or remembering the generosity of others. Like even this little story I was just sharing—contemplate it. Recognize gratitude. Tune into that quality of openness of heart and mind and notice what happens. It changes the channel. It can really bring some uplifting to your heart and mind.

That's not cheating. It's really not cheating. It's actually shifting out of feeding the unwholesome by just spinning in negativity, and opening into what is an authentic aspect of moving beyond greed, hatred, and confusion on the path.

I want to give you another example of how this onward leading happens naturally too. This was another powerful moment for us. One of the monks at the place we were staying likes to help people. He goes around and talks to everyone, and he would point things out—"Oh, this young guy, he's really smart. He could go to school, but he doesn't have any money." Or he'd say, "This person's house is really falling down, and they're really virtuous. Maybe you could help them." It's so sweet to see this.

So he told us about two monks he had met just over on the other side of town in this dusty little compound. He said they were two men who had become monks in their mid-thirties. They'd only been ordained a few years, and they didn't really know what to do with themselves. They were just living in this compound as monks, not really studying, not really meditating, not really doing much of anything—just kind of hanging out there.

He suggested to them, "Why don't you do something useful with your life?" I think he said it in a nice way. He went to them and said, "You're just sitting around, and you're educated." One had been a businessman and the other had been a captain in the army, so they were both somewhat educated. He said, "There are all these poor kids who can't afford school, and you could help them with tuition."

The way it works in Burma, even if you go to a government school, even in the younger grades, you somehow don't learn enough to pass the tests. Most kids have to have after-school tuition, which they need to pay the teachers for. And that's also the only way the teachers can survive, since they don't get paid enough in the schools. It's this whole system. So there are lots of kids who maybe scrape by in school but can't afford tuition. These monks decided to help with that.

So Upanyaloka, the monk, told us about them, and we went over to visit and see. It was such a trip. It also cut through our views. Because you get into views of good monks and not-so-good monks, sincere monks and just-hanging-out-doing-nothing-much monks and nuns.

We went over, and these two men were living in just this poor little compound with a couple of shacks. They didn't look like good monks. They were just kind of there, and they chewed betel nut, which is not a good look for anybody once it has become your habit. You know how it looks—it dyes your mouth red and your teeth start to rot. But it's addictive. So when you see a monk who's chewing betel nut, right away you kind of judge. Which is superficial, right? You don't know.

But they had about a hundred little kids there in the afternoon that they were teaching. Then we had a conversation about what they needed. They needed a well. They didn't have any water. They were hauling it in with buckets for all these little kids and for their own daily needs. Very poor circumstances.

We talked more, and one of them had only been a monk for three years, the other for seven. The businessman was the younger one, more talkative. He had been working in the alcohol, cigarette, and beer trade. Then he did a meditation retreat with Pa Auk Sayadaw and wanted to ordain. His parents wouldn't let him, and he had to keep working until they finally relented. He ordained maybe in his mid-thirties.

So he was telling us, just talking away, and we were kind of, ah. And then we started really listening.

He said, you know, first he told us this parable. He said that a frog is sitting on a lotus flower, but he's so close he just doesn't even notice the lovely fragrance of the flower. But then bees come from far away, and they really enjoy the scent and the nectar of the flower.

So he's saying this to us. He says, "You're foreigners. You're like the bees that come from far away." He said, "I, a Burmese person, I live here in a country where the Sasana, where the Dhamma is flowering. But for the first thirty-three years of my life, I didn't even enjoy the fragrance. Whereas you foreigners come from far away and enjoy it."

He said, "But now I've discovered—I feel like I have a new life." He feels like he's reborn from helping people. He said, "Now, to be able to help these kids, I feel like I'm completely reborn, like I have a new life. So I feel like I wasted the first thirty-three years of my life, and now all I want to do the rest of my life is—if these kids grow up, we'll move somewhere else and then start another tuition and help those kids."

It was just so beautiful. And he was also—that was deepening him into his love of the Dhamma, into his wanting to practice more. It's just like a whole circle.

And it was really good for us because we were so touched. It's like, okay, we thought they weren't good monks. Delete that one. So what if they chewed betel nut? So what if they were sitting there not knowing what to do? As soon as they got the idea to help, they were like transformed beings. It was so beautiful. We went and watched them with the kids, and they were just so tender, so kind with these hundred kids running around. We talked to families in the neighborhood whose kids were going there, and you could just see it all spreading out.

But that's just an example of how generosity, when it's really done wholeheartedly in whatever way, is the natural unfolding into deepening and deepening our understanding, our freedom of heart and mind.

So the point the Buddha makes very strongly in the suttas with Anathapindika is that the heart of generosity is—guess what, just like everything we do—in the intention. The motivation in our own mind and heart. It's not about who gives more, who gives less, or even what. It's not about giving things. It could just be a thought of generosity.

There's a saying in the sutta: even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or a cup into a village pond thinking, "May whatever animals live here feed on this," that would be an act of generosity. And you can see how it just shifts our mind and heart from throwing the slop away to thinking, "May this be of benefit to beings." That's an act of generosity. So it's this intention at the heart that really makes the difference.

And there's a story from the Buddha with Anathapindika that illustrates this that I really like a lot.

Anathapindika, as I said, became the Buddha's most wealthy supporter. He bought the Jeta Grove, where—if you read the suttas—more suttas than anywhere else take place in that grove. The Buddha spent a lot of rains retreats there.

So after he established that monastery, Anathapindika would keep supporting the Sangha. When they were in the area where he lived, he would invite the Buddha and all the monks and nuns to his house for the noon meal—up to five hundred. Andy Olinsky says five hundred when you're reading the suttas basically means "a lot." It doesn't specifically mean five hundred. So five hundred monks would come daily, and he would give them alms, give them food, and his home was filled with robes and the ambiance of saintliness—okay, that's not in the sutta, that's from a writer.

Then the king of the area, King Pasenadi, who was also a supporter of the Buddha, heard of Anathapindika's generosity and wanted to imitate him. Basically, he was jealous of him, right? Well, if he gets five hundred monks, I can do that too. I'm the king, after all. So he started supplying alms for five hundred monks daily.

But one day, when he was on his way to talk to the Buddha, he learned from his servants that after he offered the monks their meal, they were taking the food away with them into the city, giving the food to their supporters in the city, and then the supporters would offer the food back to them. The king was mystified. He said, "I'm giving them very tasty food. It's much better than Anathapindika's. What's that about?"

And the Buddha explained to the king that in the palace, he just had his servants, his courtiers, distributing the food without any inner feeling—just following orders, as if they were cleaning out a barn.

So they lacked faith. They had no love for the monks. It wasn't an act of generosity. When anything was given in that spirit, no one could feel comfortable accepting it, even when the meal was made of the most

delicious food.

In contrast, the faithful householders of the city, like Anathapindika and Visakha, a woman who was also known for her generosity, welcomed the monks and regarded them as spiritual friends, appreciating that they lived for the welfare and benefit of beings. 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 the right spirit.

So the purification, the joy of the generosity, the onward leadingness to free our hearts from clinging, from holding, from possessiveness—it's really all in the motivation. It's not about who gives more, but simply about keeping tuning in, tuning into your motivation.

So I can quickly share this practice of purifying motivation—a little seven-fold practice. Don't make a big deal about this. Don't even try to remember it all, but just let whatever goes in, go in. I got this from a talk by Sayadaw U Pandita. It's just practicing in the act of giving.

The first is you really tune in to your volition, to your motivation. When the thought comes up in the mind—"I want to give this" or "I should give this" or whatever—don't think "should I, shouldn't I." Tune in to the motivation and really purify it before giving. I heard a Tibetan teacher say that if you actually can't imagine giving a thing or your time or whatever, just imagine it in thought. That's enough to start with. Just imagine being generous in your thoughts. Just imagine spending time with your sick friend. Or as another Tibetan teacher said, if you can't give something, just take a rock and give it from one hand to the other, and practice letting go like that. But just play with it. Purify the motivation.

And as you're doing that, obviously you abandon the clinging to the thing that you give, whatever it is—your time, an object, clothing, a meal. In that moment, really let go of clinging to it.

The third, which isn't as workable here but is common in Burma where giving to monks or nuns is very formal—it's done face-to-face, not casually. Not "oh, here's this, okay, thanks, see you later." I remember a friend told me once that I had something I didn't really want, and he kind of wanted it. So I said, "Yeah, sure, take it." It was like that. And he said years later, "You know, that thing you gave me—some kind of pillow—I use it all the time. Your casual generosity turned out to be so useful." He didn't mean that in a critical way, but it really went in because that's exactly what it was: completely casual. I didn't give it any attention. "Yeah, sure, take it." It's not like you're building yourself up by giving it attention, but it's honoring the motivation and the connectedness of generosity itself just to do it with yourself being present and the person being present.

So when we go to nunneries and we offer, even if it's just money, it's always done formally. You get a tray—any kind of tray, there's always a tray lying around somewhere—you pile the money on the tray, or if you were giving cups or food or whatever. Then some of the people offering hold the tray, someone representing the nuns receiving holds the tray, and they chant a whole really lovely metta chant. Different lengths—sometimes it's short, sometimes it'll go on for ten minutes. And if it's a big nunnery, even the

little girl nuns, like four years old, they know it. They stand there and completely do this chant. It's so beautiful. The chant's not always so melodic, okay? But it's so touching. You can go through whatever you go through, but it's a real honoring of that whole movement. It's so different from "oh, let me put this check to Amnesty in the mail." But even writing a check to put in the mail—do it really with your mind fully present on what you're doing. Abandon the clinging, clarify your motivation, and do it fully present.

Then after we're giving, again, purify the motivation. Have you ever had that experience? "Oh, why did I do that? That was too big of a check." Or "I gave that away, but I think I might wear that in two years. I want it back." Have you ever done that?

Should I give this? I haven't worn it for ten years, but I don't know. Okay, I'll give it. No, no, maybe no one took it yet—I'll go get it back. So that's not so great. Notice again.

And the other practice is really to be aware of clear comprehension of the broader context. Sometimes we don't fully know the situation, but the classic example is if someone is an alcoholic and they want to drink—is it generosity to give them a drink? Maybe not. So really tuning in, we don't know all the circumstances, but it's important to tune into the broader context as well as we can. It's not that sense of "I should be generous, and whatever anyone asks, I should give"—all these shoulds that we bring in. Notice how that shuts down the mind and the heart? That's not at all the open space of generosity, either giving or receiving. So as much as you can, be aware of the broader context. Clarify your motivation.

And then I've added what I mentioned before: to receive in as connected and open-hearted a way as possible. And if in the receiving a big sense of self comes up, just tune into that with kindness. But don't land on that. Don't let that get in the way of letting the circle of giving and receiving be complete.

As a practice here in quietness—and this comes from the Buddha—we can use thoughts and recollections of generosity, our own generosity and others', to brighten and purify our own mind and heart in difficult times, or just in sleepy times, or just because it's a lovely thing to do.

Here's an example. In past years, I was spending a lot of time with my aging parents when they were alive. And I really noticed, as many of you know, it's very demanding, lots of choices. And whatever one does never feels like enough, because you can't really make the situation the way you wish it were—like how it was twenty years ago. So I would notice how easy it was for the mind to focus on: I didn't stay long enough, I didn't do this, I forgot to do that, I got impatient about this, it's not enough, I have to leave them alone. But that's not helpful. If you can actually turn around and focus on all the many moments of pure-hearted generosity involved in that, it changes everything. So that's with parents, with your children, with your friends. There's stuff we don't do that we could do—yes, sure, I'm not saying go into denial. But it's so easy for us not to really appreciate the generous acts and thoughts and deeds, the goodness, the non-harming behavior. And to actually bring that into heart and mind is not an ego trip. An ego trip would be "I'm so great." No, no, no. You'll notice the mind doesn't get brighter with that. It doesn't get more supple. It's not onward leading. It just feels the limitations of self coming in. But when you actually use it

as a practice—and this is from the Buddha—it's extremely helpful.

This is from a sutta, and the Buddha is talking about six different recollections. One is sīla, one is generosity, one is the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. He talks about the devas and other things. It's all the same pattern, but I'll read the generosity one:

"There is the case where you recollect your own generosity like this: It is a gain, a great gain for me, that among people overcome with the stain 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, delighting in the distribution of alms. At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, her mind is not overcome with greed. Her mind is not overcome with aversion, is not overcome with delusion."

Did you hear that? At any time one is truly contemplating, recollecting generosity, your mind is not overcome with greed, with aversion, with delusion.

"Her mind, her heart heads straight based on generosity. And when the mind, the heart is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones has a sense of the meaning, a sense of the Dhamma, experiences joy connected with the Dhamma. In one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm."

In one whose body is calm, experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.

So, 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.

If we can recollect it when we're resting in our home crowded with children, perhaps we can recollect our generosity now, just for thirty seconds.

Recollect your generosity.

And thank you for listening.

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