Generosity: Foundation of the Path

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:48

As Joseph mentioned the other day, I'm going to talk about generosity, the practice of dana tonight, which is one of my favorite things to discuss. It makes me happy, mostly because I get to tell stories that make me happy, and that's fun.

To start: as we've said many times, the liberation, the freedom of heart and mind that the Buddha speaks of—the simplest way we've described that is the heart and mind of non-clinging. As far as I can tell from my limited understanding, all of the teachings, all of the different ways of teaching that the Buddha offered, were about this. Nothing was extraneous, just for the heck of it because it's kind of interesting. And none of it was simply, "Well, if you can't liberate yourself, do this instead."

All of the teachings tend towards purifying the habits of our heart and mind, transforming the habits from suffering—so-called unwholesome habits—to wholesome, to pure habits. They work toward weakening the habits of greed, hatred, and confusion in our mind while feeding and strengthening the wholesome. And this matters not only so that at some future moment—which is true—only the pure heart-mind can see Nibbana, but also for what's accessible here and now. What we learn, hopefully, and what many people are already coming to trust more and more, is how to recognize when, in a moment, your consciousness has cleared from being identified with aversion or confusion or wanting.

Several people have given this example of noticing aversion in the mind and experiencing that shift—that Tai Chi move to awareness of aversion, which is itself not averse. It sounds nice, but when you really experience it, there's a sense of "oh." There's a happiness in that. Aversion is still the object, and there's a happiness in that. It's not incredible bliss where you're dancing around—just a little kind of piece of happiness. If you're not looking so hard for the big bang, you'll notice. This happiness, this joy almost, or calmness, is the happiness of the wholesome heart-mind. Just a moment of it reveals the peace of the purified mind.

There's a saying—I don't really think it's a Buddhist saying—but: there's no way to happiness; happiness is the way. And that's really what I feel in all of the different ways that the Buddha taught, as different approaches to purifying our heart and mind, experiencing this happiness, joy, and peace here and now, while also strengthening the habits so that this will continue in our mind and heart stream in the future.

Being here on a meditation retreat, of course our emphasis is on meditation, on bhavana. But in my first years of practice, I didn't really understand this so much, and I'm still learning about it. Meditation, bhavana—it's like the most interesting thing. It's as if we get really deeply pure in our heart and mind, we'll understand, we'll see the truth. But it's not all about bhavana. All the different aspects of the way we

live our life are equally purifying, ennobling, and important. They all work together.

The practice, the way of life, is often described as generosity, sila (conscious conduct, moral conduct), and bhavana (the word for mental cultivation, development)—all the different kinds of meditation with their various techniques. They come from different angles, but at their core, they still share this quality of purifying the habits of mind.

I want to offer that framework as context for sharing some of my own reflections about the habit, the way of life, the happiness of generosity. Calling it a "practice" makes it sound too automatic, too dull—something you have to do. But I've really begun to imbibe, kind of by osmosis, from spending time in cultures that are primarily Buddhist, in Thailand and Burma. Not everyone there is walking around enlightened, of course—it's as messed up as anywhere, just in different ways. But one aspect I've really absorbed, the more time I spend there, is that the teachings of the Buddha are simply more inculcated in the culture, sometimes with real understanding and sometimes not, like anywhere. But generosity as a value, as a way of life, is just so woven through the culture with such a sense of joy that whenever I spend time in Thailand or lately Burma, I can't help but pick it up, even if at first I don't quite notice what's going on.

Generosity is really the foundational quality, the foundational ennobling quality at the heart of our awakening path, at the heart of the Buddha's teaching. Many, many times in the suttas, when the Buddha begins to unfold his teachings to people, he begins with generosity—bringing in, brightening the heart and mind, purifying the heart and mind, even in the listening. It turns the mind and heart in a wholesome direction.

Even on an intellectual level, this isn't surprising. If you just think about generosity, it seems quite understandable that as a practice, as something we continue to strengthen in how we relate to our lives, ourselves, our things, and others, it naturally counters greed and possessiveness of objects, of time, of views—whatever.

It counters ill will, interestingly enough. Try giving something wholeheartedly to someone while feeling ill will toward them at the same time. It doesn't work. When there's truly a wholesome mind state, wholesome and unwholesome cannot exist simultaneously.

And of course, generosity counteracts self-cherishing, the sense of separation and alienation that arises when there's a sense of "me" holding on to whatever. The act of generosity of mind, speech, and body is an expression of non-separation. It also, I find, strengthens that understanding—you feel it in different ways, this sense of our non-separation.

And I found that the more the mind inclines toward generosity, it also strengthens a sense of inner contentment. In a way, we can't give anything if there's not some sense of inner abundance, of inner non-clinging—that's clear. But also in the giving itself, in the circle of giving and receiving and joy and

non-separation that comes from that, I find the sense of inner contentment is strengthened and the neediness really just weakens. The happiness of generosity is so much more enticing than the unpleasantness of neediness that the mind starts to incline toward the wholesome.

I don't know who figured it out, because even though we say awareness doesn't care—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—it turns out that the kilesas are unpleasant and wholesome states are generally pleasant. So our job is not to cultivate more aversion and clinging to those, but it's a good situation that as the mind inclines more toward wholesome states, there's much more inner happiness and peace. So generosity—it's great. I recommend it, practicing it.

The Buddha, as you probably know, when he had to set up his way of living with the monks and the nuns, was of course in India at a time when there were lots of different sects and probably lots of different ascetics, more men than women. Still, the Buddha was setting up his own group of monks and nuns with his own rules. This is from Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator, a quotation from the Buddha describing how he set up his monks and nuns, how they would relate to laymen and women—all on the basis of generosity, the mutuality that comes from generosity:

"Bhikkhus, householders and Brahmins are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicines in times of sickness." Those are the four requisites that nuns and monks are allowed and need to have. "And you bhikkhus are very helpful to Brahmins and householders, as you teach them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, the middle, and the end, and you proclaim the spiritual life in its fulfillment and complete purity. Thus, monks, this spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

As you probably know, he really set it up so that monks and nuns are not allowed to keep food overnight. Not only can they not eat after noon, but they can't keep food overnight. So the monks and nuns had to go out every day with their alms bowl—as in the story of Bahiya last night—every day, eat the food that they receive, and that's it. Then the next day again. So even though there's a great emphasis with the monks and nuns on meditation and seclusion—"here are these roots of trees, go meditate"—they also couldn't completely isolate themselves from the lay people because there was this mutual support. The lay people were generous if they felt inspired by faith, and the monks and nuns were generous in offering the Dhamma, not only through their lives but through sharing in whatever way with any lay people who came. He set it up so that you couldn't just live in isolation, because these four groups of people—ordained women and men, and lay women and men—are all necessary. It's said even now that these four groups are necessary for this particular Buddhist sasana to stay alive. We need all four.

So he set it up that way. And in Buddhist countries, as I mentioned, it still exists, especially with the monks. They still go out every day on alms round. They can't keep food. But the peace that I mentioned before—this has been a revelation to me—comes from being immersed in a culture where generosity is such a deeply ingrained way of being, such a value that it soaks in by osmosis. And it's not just the monks

and nuns and Buddhists. The revelation to me is the incredible joy and happiness involved in most acts of generosity, in the giving and the receiving. It's not only monks and nuns; it's lay people. It's really in the culture. And it's contagious.

Of course, I grew up in this culture, and people are very generous. I'm not saying only Buddhist countries are generous—please don't get me wrong about that. It's just that this is where a lot of my learning as a Buddhist practitioner and the joy of it comes from. But there's a slight difference. The way I grew up, sort of Christian, more or less Christian, there's certainly a sense of love and compassion and sharing what one has, usually with people who are needy. Well, of course, you tend not to give to people who have more than you—but time or effort, whatever. There could often be, at least the way I learned it, a slight sense of levels, of subtle superiority in giving. That's not always the case, but it could be. And one could feel good about it—nothing wrong with feeling good about it—but the sense of real joy and dignity in it? Sometimes, I didn't really grow up with that sense. Even if I was offering something to a homeless person, I would tend to feel more embarrassed or ashamed rather than a sense of joy and dignity.

And if the person receiving it accepted it in this really open, dignified way, that was like a wonderful gift. But it wasn't often happening that way.

When I first began to get a sense of this, it was a long time ago when I was at a forest nunnery monastery in Thailand. There were just maybe a few little huts for the nuns, for the women to stay in. I had a little hut, and there was a head nun who was a young woman around thirty, a very strong practitioner.

In nunneries and monasteries in Thailand, people just show up and come. You could have three nuns one day, and then fifteen nuns could just show up the next day, and you have to find somewhere to put them. It's just like that. It's not like you advertise ahead of time, "No, there's no room, you can't come." People just come. That's how it is.

So whenever there were more people than there were kutis, the first person to move was always the head nun. She was happy to give. She'd go stay in this cave filled with bat guano—I'm not exaggerating—up high. I think she liked it a little bit for the aesthetic idea. But still, there was this great joyful generosity of moving out.

I had just come from my early years on staff here, where there's what we would call the room game—what room would the staff people get to live in? And believe me, it doesn't work that the most senior person happily gives up their place to the most junior person who comes. It doesn't work that way. It's all seniority, and we all accept that. So this sense of the most senior being most happy to give—I just kept noticing that over and over, and I was quite touched by it.

Then quite some years later, the first time I went to sit at a monastery, a meditation center in Burma, I didn't really know anyone there. I was just doing my practice, and I was there for quite some weeks. You're in your own world, getting yourself all settled, and finally, after however long, you manage to come

out of your own world a little bit to kind of notice what's going on around.

Like, do you notice how lovely the flowers are? That's somebody's generous mettā heart, someone in particular, who made it so lovely. She could have just thrown a couple of daisies in there, but no, she made it really beautiful. And then she changes the water when it's funky, even though it's a drag for her, out of generosity. Well, noticing that—we can let it in. There's a joy in seeing that, in appreciating the small generous acts around.

So I started to notice this in the meditation center. For example, the way most of them are set up, you come in to eat and have a certain set seat at a table—about four or five women at a table, the monks at other tables—and food would be put on the table. There are young women who work there, not nuns, who come and work. Really, they're hardly paid. Some of them aren't paid at all. They just volunteer their time and work a full week's work. They're just kind of waiting, making sure there's food and all.

I started to notice that some of the meditator women, even nuns—foreign nuns—were incredibly demanding, asking the young women, "Well, I want some hot chilies. I want more salt. I want this. I want that." And with me watching, I'm thinking, "My God, you're a nun. Aren't you supposed to be renunciant?" I had, quietly, a little bit of an attitude. But I was just sitting there watching.

The women who were working really hard—first they would try to meet each of these requests. They'd go to a lot of trouble to try and meet them. They'd go out to the garden and come back so happy they could pick a few little fresh chilies. Happy—that's the key. They were so happy to try and do whatever was asked, to try and offer that generosity. It felt really unfeigned, because I was sitting watching it for weeks.

After a while I thought, well, which is better? Sitting here grumpy and judging, or kind of opening to the joy of that heartfelt generosity about little things?

I mean, it doesn't really work to think, "I should be appreciating this." But it just starts to come in through osmosis. You simply start to notice it. And the wholesome qualities, if we're not completely covered in delusion in that moment, they're contagious. We feel them. They light us up—our heart and mind. It's really a gift just to sit there and watch the generosity of these young women.

So that's when I first started to get a sense of how uplifting that was, because I was having a difficult time. Some of those periods were difficult in my practice. And without having been told to do so, I just started to notice that when my mind was in a dark funk, if I simply did something like notice, "Oh, look at those flowers—that's somebody's generosity," something would shift. It wasn't a false thing, but the generosity and the mettā behind it would uphold me. It would bring some brightness, some faith into my mind and heart. And that would give me the strength to keep going.

So overall, the wholesomeness, the happiness of the wholesome mind shows us that our happiness really is not at all dependent on external circumstances. But it doesn't mean we can't recognize our mutuality, our non-separation—and that's one of the great things about sangha here. Of course, you're projecting.

You don't really know what each other is feeling. But sometimes you just get a sense. Someone's walking by, and they seem really mindful. You just get this hit of happiness or mettā from them. Great. Don't go into big thinking about it. Let it touch you. Let it be contagious. We're not so separate.

So that's when I first started to get a sense of it. And now I'll share a few stories about how the mutuality of generosity is so imbued in the culture and how much I just kept watching. I keep watching. I just have to think about being in Burma, and believe me, this is a place with incredible poverty—much of it government-induced—incredible oppression, lots of fear. So it's not like a paradise at all. And yet, there's so much joy of generosity and kindness, a kind of generosity of heart, mettā, in the culture, in so many people—not everybody, but in so many—that I just start to think about it. Memories start popping up, and my heart just gets really open and happy. It's interesting.

Let me give a couple of examples of seeing this. One time I was staying at a meditation center right after the big cyclone a few years ago, which was like a hurricane, similar to Katrina. It had an even more devastating effect on a whole area in the southwest of Yangon and on Yangon itself. So we were staying at a meditation center just outside of Yangon. All around it was a relatively poor village. Many of the houses, which were just little bamboo shacks, had been destroyed. A lot of the crops had been destroyed, both down in the delta and in this area. So poor people were even a lot poorer.

This was a time when the government, of course, didn't do anything and actively tried to stop other people from helping down in the delta—not in Yangon—where the generosity of the average Burmese people was so manifest. So many Burmese would actually brook danger or jailing by the government to gather food together and somehow sneak down to the delta on boats or whatever to pass it out. Just your normal person, any of us—but a lot of people did this, because the government wasn't doing anything.

Anyway, at this time, a few months after the cyclone, some friends and I had gone to Burma. Other friends had known about the difficulties and had sent money with us to share with people who needed it. The Sayadaw, the abbot of this monastery, said, "Why don't we buy a lot of rice and offer a big bag of rice to each household in this village? Because that's the staple, and now it's so expensive." And he organized the whole thing. We gave the money, and he organized everything—he's a great organizer. It was something like eight hundred households.

And again, the way the generosity is done there is different from how we would do it. We would say, "Okay everybody, bag of rice here. Come get it. Bye." But there it's done really face to face and with great dignity. So they brought in trucks of rice. There's this whole room piled with rice. And then the monks in the monastery, who can't offer money, offered their time and bagged all the rice in big bags.

And then Sayadaw came and got us—me and my friend, the Westerners—and said, "You have to come and offer it. You can't just give the money and go away. That's got no heart in it." He didn't say it quite that way. He said, "You have to stand here, and each person that comes, you hand them the bag of rice."

So this was an all-day affair. The bags of rice—we're talking fifty-pound bags of rice. It would take two of us, me and my friend, to carry them. We're struggling, I can hardly lift the thing. And this little lady would come, and we're going *ugh*, straining with the weight. She takes the rice, throws it on her head, and goes walking out. They all do. The women carry it on their heads. The men throw it on their shoulder. Some of the women—and I have photos, I'm not exaggerating—a kid in both arms, the rice on the head, and they go off.

But there's this face-to-face exchange. It has a sense of dignity, a sense of immediacy to it. And the cycle of the joy of generosity and the joy of receiving goes both ways.

This, of course, is the area where the monks go on their *piṇḍapāta*, their alms round, every morning. They go on the same little routine. So one of the monks—there are only about twelve in this monastery—one of the monks, a friend of ours, a guy from Mexico, told us the next day what happened. He came back from the alms round that morning and said, "We go the same round every day, and more or less the same people come out and offer us rice. They're poor, so mostly they only offer rice. It's pretty much always the same families, the same little ladies."

He said the next day, after this rice offering, so many more families came out and offered rice—because they had a little bit extra, and the first thing they did was offer it to the monks. And then there were a few places where the families brought out their little kids, because it goes down through the generations. It was like a real treat for the little ones to be able to take a spoon of rice and put it in each monk's bowl. Just so touching, the cycle of generosity, and so normal there in that culture.

But the cycle of the happiness of generosity really runs not only within that culture, but from any kind of giving, any kind of receiving.

Another example: some other friends had, a few years before, come and visited one of the nearby nunneries, which I'll describe in a moment. They went back home, and the next year they sent a check to offer to these nuns who were trying to build a decent building to live in.

The nuns—just to describe—there are many, many nunneries around this area. More since the cyclone, when groups of two or three or four nuns would move up from the Delta because they couldn't live there anymore. Somehow they would get a little tiny plot of land, and they would build these little platted bamboo structures—like a woven wall of bamboo. You can make it in about three hours if you know how, and it lasts four or five months. The floor is just bamboo poles laid out with big holes in between. That's common. So many nunneries are like that.

This particular one was two sisters. Some years ago they had come up from the Delta and were living and studying. Many nuns study Pāli and Buddhism, and these two had been studying for some years. They were in their early forties, with a younger sister in her late thirties. At some point, the Sayadaw who was their teacher down in the Delta said to them, "There are these ten little girls, orphan little girls, and I can't

take care of them anymore. I'm sending them to you."

Now, as it turned out, they told us later, they didn't have any way to take care of these little girls. They were living in a study monastery, and their plans were to go the next year and meditate, to really dedicate the next few years to their practice. But instead, they got the news: here come ten little girls.

Many nuns take on little girls—orphans, or children whose parents are really poor—and they educate them, clothe them, feed them, completely take care of them. And that's what these two sisters did. When we went to visit, they had found this little plot of land. They had built themselves this little crummy shack. And they were living there with ten little girls, describing it all while filled with light.

They didn't tell us until quite some time later that they'd really wanted to go off and meditate. We were talking through a friend who speaks Burmese, just so we could understand this properly. And they were just describing how dedicated they felt to giving these little girls the possibility of knowing what a good life is, what a life of virtue is, what a life of generosity is. They said, "If they decide not to be nuns when they're older, that's fine. That's up to them. But at least they'll know good values. They'll know how to live as a human being." Plus, they're rescued from the street, rescued from some kind of servitude.

They would laugh about how everything they have is on dāna, their food, everything. If they're given clothes, the head nun was saying, "Well, if someone gives me robes, that's wonderful. I can cut it up and make fifteen little tiny robes" — for these little cute girls in their little pink robes. They're very cute. And she was laughing, saying, "If someone gives us a little money, we can buy fifteen little sets of slippers." And these little sets of slippers are lined up. There was so much affection and dedication. She was teaching them Pali in the morning, and they all get up and chant.

At the end it came out that they really hadn't wanted to go off and meditate. So they just did a 180-degree turn for the next ten years of their lives — with joy, with so much lightness and happiness. It was really amazing to see.

So anyway, when these friends gave the check and I came back the next year, I had gone to California where they were, and I had some photos of these nuns receiving the money. You can't just hand it over — you have to put it in piles. It's like huge piles of money worth not very much, so you put it on these trays. It's always face-to-face, a very dignified offering, and there's chanting. If you offer, the nuns will all chant — a whole mettā chant, a gratitude chant, a blessing chant. It's really very beautiful and formal.

So there were photos of that. And then the next day, we ran into the nun. She'd run out, and they'd bought concrete and bricks. She was coming back sitting in a truck filled with all the building supplies they'd just bought. We could take a photo to show our friends. When I showed them the photo, it was like the completion of the circle, because they were so happy. I was just watching them. "Here's the photo. This is what we did." And their faces just lit up with the happiness of generosity.

So you're happy when you think about being generous, when you're doing it, and afterwards, reflecting on

it. The Buddha really talked about this as a wholesome act. It's really beautiful, quite catchy. As I said, it's really in the culture.

I'm mostly giving monks and nuns examples because that's where I've been hanging out. But here's a simple example. Last year — it's complicated with the money, bringing in money and changing it, it's just complicated. The way it worked out, it came through a bank and a money changer. The money changing is like pseudo-black market, just put it that way. Now it's changing, but you didn't go into a bank and change money. That didn't even exist. So a guy, a money changer, would come with — and I'm not kidding — huge mounds of these kyat, and look at every single foreign bill. If it's a little bit wrinkled or has one red dot on it, they won't take it. So it takes hours. They're going through everything.

This is going on, and it's not quite like a drug deal. There's a little sleazy quality. It's not like the room is filled with light and devas, really. But it's also not illegal — it's what everyone does. One time we were doing it right in the office in the middle of the monastery.

And he said they were kind of hanging out. They were monks, but they didn't really know what to do with themselves. They had been there a while. And so Upanyaloka said, "Look, why don't you do something? You guys both have an education. There's all these poor kids around."

The way school works in Burma—elementary and even high school—even if you can go to the government schools, which have a lot of fees so many kids can't, but even if you can, you don't learn enough to pass the exams. And everything is predicated on the exams. So kids basically have to hire the teachers for tutoring in the evening. The teachers, that's how they make enough money to live, because they're paid almost nothing. And so poor kids, even if they can barely scratch together enough to go to school, they can't afford to hire anyone for tutoring.

So Upanyaloka said to these two monks, "Look, you have an education. You're just sitting around here. Why don't you start tutoring? There's a lot of poor kids around." And so they had started doing that. And now maybe a hundred kids came every evening to get tutoring.

But the thing that was so touching was what they said when we sat with them. What happened, they told us, was that when they first became monks, they were just there. They became monks and they didn't really know what to do with themselves. They didn't have a lot of purpose. But when they started working with these kids, when they started giving, their whole experience of being a monk changed. They said the joy that arose in them from giving was so much greater than anything they had known in lay life. The businessman, the captain in the military—both of them said this was happiness on a completely different order.

So we went over to see them. And it was really a great teaching in assumptions and also the happiness and the transformative quality of generosity.

You walk in—and you don't really walk in, there's no "in"—but it's just this barren, dusty land with a kind

of shelter, a lean-to. That's what a lot of places are. We went in the afternoon and there really were a hundred kids there, these two monks tutoring them, and the older kids helping the younger kids. It all felt very friendly and jovial.

The two monks were... not impressive looking, shall I say. They just looked kind of schlumpy. They had clearly been chewing betel nut all their life. If you've seen that, it's this somewhat addictive thing, and if you chew it for long, it dyes your mouth and your teeth red, it rots your teeth, and you're always spitting this red. It's not really a happy sight, but it's very common. A good monk or nun wouldn't chew betel nut—and women chew it too just as much. So these guys have betel nut, just kind of standing there. Uwe Bassa and Uwe Bola.

But we started talking to them, and the younger one, the businessman, turned out what he'd been in business in was beer and liquor. That was his trade. But he finally had to beg his parents when he was thirty-three to let him be a monk.

Anyway, he starts talking to us. They'd been doing this teaching now for some time, and he was like... born again, in a good way. He said he felt like he'd wasted—he was so bright, so happy as he was saying this—he felt like he'd wasted the first thirty-three years of his life. He said, "I feel like I have a new life now. I'm giving my energy and my life to helping others, to helping the children." He said, "Really, it's like I have a new life. I want to be able to do some form of helping for the rest of my life. This is it. And if it turns out there's nothing else to do here, I'll go somewhere else and help somewhere else."

He was just filled with happiness and joy from this helping others. It was so touching.

And for us also—one of us had quite a judgmental attitude toward monks. As soon as this person would see a monk with betel nut, it was like a door slammed shut in her mind. So this was really for all of us a reminder: "Oh, yeah, maybe I have to drop that." To see the purity of heart, and to see the transformation through simple acts of generosity.

One last story in that vein, about a nun at a different nunnery nearby. She had been there a few years, maybe thirty nuns living there, not particularly bringing up orphans or running a school—they study, but nothing in particular. The head nun, Daw Sumanachari, seemed nice. She made good mohinga soup but seemed a little bit depressive, maybe.

Then she came a year before last, just after I'd left, and she talked to Daw Aryanyani, who speaks Burmese. She knew that sometimes people funneled money through her and said, "You know, there's a school that a nun started ten minutes' drive away for poor kids who can't afford public school. Now five hundred kids are going to that school." I'm not kidding—all on dāna. They have to raise money every month to pay the teachers, to feed the kids, plus the nuns have to live on dāna too.

Anyway, this nun who came to see Aryanyani said, "But the little children around here have to walk half an hour, and in the rainy season it's too hard for them. So I want to start on my place a school for the

really littlest ones." She had a plot of land with two small buildings on it.

We kind of thought, "I don't know. Can she really get this together?" But what the heck? So we offered what we could.

We came back the next year, and she'd really done it. First, they pulled down, they demolished the main building that the thirty nuns were living in, and they all moved into the smaller building. That's all they have to live in. And they had the money to build a really long lean-to roof, hired several teachers, got blackboards. Then she got another company—a Burmese company, many Burmese companies support this—to build another lean-to. And she had a hundred and ten little kids coming.

And she'd hired really good, qualified lay teachers from outside. So when she came back to us, we were really impressed.

But the point is this: she came and was talking to us later that fall, describing everything that had happened. And her demeanor—even though I couldn't understand Burmese and she was speaking through a translator—her demeanor was completely different. She was radiant. She was just filled with light, so light and joyful.

What she was saying was that the year before, it was just eating at her. She couldn't sleep because she so wanted to start this school. It had just come to her that she had to do this, but she didn't know how. She was so worried about it. But now—and I wrote this down, I'm not making it up—she said, "Now the worry's all gone. Before I couldn't sleep or eat, but now I'm so happy because it's happening." She said that even though she has to work so hard to keep it going, to get the dana, to keep the teachers, to take care of the kids, and they all live in this little building, she's just so happy. She said, "All of my energy is for the children and the school, and so my mind is calm and happy."

And she looked like that. It was really quite transformative.

As the Buddha said—and the great story illustrating this comes through his disciple Anathapindika. I think someone mentioned that Anathapindika was one of the Buddha's most generous disciples. When he first met the Buddha, he had so much faith in the Dharma, in the Buddha, that he just became filled with appreciation and generosity. Right away, he offered the Jeta Grove, where many suttas that you read take place.

This story about Anathapindika is meant to show that the main aspect of generosity is not about what or how much. We tend to look at the result. But as with everything, it's the motivation. The heart of the generous act of mind, speech, or body is in the motivation, the intention to offer time, material goods, freedom from whatever—and the tuning into that, the non-clinging. That's where the joy comes from, and that's what gives generosity its power.

So Anathapindika, one of the things he started doing was every day he would invite all the monks from

the Sangha in the area—like five hundred monks, which means a lot. That's what Andy Olendzki says: when it says five hundred, it means a lot. Every day he would feed them with a great meal.

King Pasenadi of that area, who was also a disciple of the Buddha, heard about Anathapindika's generosity and wanted to imitate him—or probably do better than him. He said, "He can do it, I can do it." So he decided he wanted to give alms and food to five hundred monks every day, and he started doing that as well.

But then one day, as he was on his way to visit with the monks, he learned from his servants that they would give the monks the food, but then the monks would take the food and go into the city and give it to some of their personal supporters, and then the supporters would offer the food back. King Pasenadi said, "Why are they doing that? I'm giving great food. I'm giving better food. I'm giving really good food—why are they doing that?"

The Buddha explained that in the palace, the servants distributed the food without any inner feeling, just following orders as if they were cleaning out a barn or taking a thief to court. Some of them even thought that the monks were parasites, or had negative feelings. They lacked faith and had no love. The Buddha said that when anything is given in that spirit, no one can feel comfortable accepting it, even when the meal is of the most delicious food.

In contrast, in the households of Anathapindika and Visakha, another generous woman, they welcomed the monks and regarded them as spiritual friends. A humble meal provided by a friend is worth much more than the most sumptuous meal offered by someone who did not give in a really generous, open spirit.

So this is where you see it's about the joy and the purification of heart and mind, not just about giving a lot and being seen as generous. In fact, in another place the Buddha said that even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or a cup into a village pool or pond, and does so thinking, "May whatever animals live here feed on this"—that would be a great source of generosity, of merit. It's that movement of heart and mind. Sometimes you have water you're going to throw out, and if you just pour it on a plant and think, "May this be for the benefit of the plant," that's a mental act of generosity—something we're all quite able to do.

Once when Sayadaw U Pandita was here teaching, there was a monk teaching with him, U Nyanapannika, who was a Nepalese monk. I remember he gave a talk on generosity that I really liked—I mean, I took notes from it. I wouldn't remember one word if I hadn't taken notes. But it was a long time ago.

He talked about the practice of giving as a practice, and he gave six points. I'll just mention them, because sometimes that might be helpful. Not to make it too rigid, but just to illuminate the different aspects.

The first, of course, is that when the thought of giving anything arises, give attention to the motivation, to the volition. Really purify it. This goes together with the second point: whatever one is giving, see and

abandon the clinging to it. So that it's not just this casual, "Oh, here, take it."

I have a friend who once used this word in describing something I'd given him – something I hadn't wanted. I'd said, "I don't want this," and he replied, "Oh yeah, I'll take it." "Okay, here." So that didn't really feel like an act of generosity. I never gave it another thought. But some years later, he mentioned it. He said, "That thing – I use it all the time, your act of casual, thoughtless generosity." He wasn't being mean or critical; that was an accurate description. It was casual, thoughtless generosity. And so looking at it, okay, it's more generous than not giving, but it's not really the generosity of giving attention to the volition – not "I should be generous." That's not it. Rather, it's this openness.

I heard a Tibetan teacher once say, you know, there's generosity of mind, of speech, and of body. So perhaps the thought comes up, "I'd like to give this," but then, "Oh, I just can't." He said: practice in your mind. Practice giving it in your mind. If you can't even do that, then no, okay – so we just practice there. Out of loving-kindness, out of generosity, not out of a should.

Another Tibetan teacher suggested practicing by taking a rock and giving it from one hand to the other. Just practice letting go. It's the act of letting go. We can play with it. We start to see what holding on and letting go feels like viscerally and in our mind. Sooner or later, we notice the letting go feels better. But it's not a should. So we can practice that.

Or another way of thinking about this – just of the mind, with whatever one does. I read this from Geshe Rapton, who was a teacher of one of my good friends, Fred Von Allman, and he's been dead a long time. A generous action of mind is simply this: with whatever you're doing – turning on the water, making some tea, washing your hands – just thinking, "With this act, may all beings be free from suffering." That's just an act of generosity of heart and mind. So simple. So many different ways to practice – with mind, with speech, with body. See and abandon the clinging. And whether that's time or service, it's not just about things.

The third point is to give when possible. It's not possible here when you're on retreat in silence, but when it's appropriate, to give face to face. That's the way they do it.

And the fourth is to give mindfully, with the mind focused. We're really collected, attentive to both the motivation and the act of giving. It really gives it a power and a beauty.

That face-to-face aspect – that's again something I've learned from the way it's done when you're offering to monks and nuns in Asia, and not just to them, to lay people too. It's this very formal thing. The giving is done with a real sense of appreciation, and the receiving is done with great dignity, great respect for the whole process. I find it quite ennobling on both sides, as well as joyful.

I remember one time when Sayadaw U Pandita was here, and he had been – I was on retreat – he had been talking about wanting to study Christianity and wanting to practice his English. So I got a friend to buy this very simple English book about Jesus's life or something like that. And then I'm shy – giving face

to face. There's this sense of self and shyness, and "What do they think?" and all this stuff that isn't the happiness of generosity, this whole kind of self-cherishing that's rather strange. Why is it like that when it's such a joyful thing?

So I had this friend give it, and I went on my retreat here. Weeks later, when the retreat ended and I went to say my goodbye bows, he said, "Wait." And he had someone go get that book.

And he gave it back to me. He said, "Now give it to me face to face."

It was really far out. And I was like a little nervous wreck. But he was really present in the receiving, very formal. And then they say, like a blessing. Even with lay people—when he gives us some little thing, they go, "May this be a cause for your complete attainment of nirvana in this lifetime."

Imagine you give somebody a little towel and they say, "May this be a cause for your attaining nirvana in this lifetime." I mean, it's beautiful. We just go, "OK, thanks." Or, "Do you have a better one?" No—"May you attain nirvana in this lifetime." Try it. It's really a wonderful thing.

So this sense of giving with the mind focused on the giving—it ennobles both the giver and the receiver.

Another example with lay people: someone had sent money to rebuild some houses after the cyclone. And these neighbors, really poor neighbors with their own tumbledown houses, came to us and said, "There's this elderly couple with a son who's off and doesn't take care of them, and they don't have enough to eat, and their house is falling down. Could you help them?"

So we went, and they were in their 80s. The woman was almost deaf, and the man was almost blind. He can't really work, but she grows things. Their house was spick and span, so clean, so tidy. She grew little plants outside and in back. And on the days that she was well enough to walk, she would take these plants to the market to sell. That was their only income. It wasn't enough, and neighbors would give them rice and such.

So we gave money to build a house, which is not much—it can be done in a day. Then we found out they didn't have enough money for the rent. In Burma, poor people own the house, but you rent the land. And if you get kicked off, you have to leave—take the house with you. Their rent was a year overdue. This was like sixty dollars for a year, this rent. I mean, that was nothing, right? So we paid that.

Then we went back—the neighbors all said, "You come back." We went and paid the landlord, came back. And they were so dignified and elegant, really, but also happy. The man had this greatest smile, and he had a kind of homemade mandolin that he took down and was playing and singing for us. The wife isn't so smiley, but very serious. And he was doing some kind of dance. It was just this appreciation of the whole situation, this great sense of happiness and dignity.

There's no space for that shyness of giving or the shyness of receiving, or saying, "Oh, I'm not worthy to give or receive." That cuts the mutuality. It cuts the circle. But to give or receive with this dignity and this

face-to-face presence is really ennobling, and it really strengthens the joy.

The fifth factor is: after giving, to continue to be mindful of our motivation. Have you ever had a time when you give and then later you go, "Ah, damn, why did I give that away?" So keep on being mindful. Remind yourself when that happens. You don't want to go there. Re-immerse yourself in the happiness of the generosity while you did it. That's really quite accessible.

And this is important: having a clear comprehension of the broader context. In other words, if an alcoholic comes and wants help, you give the help you can, but you don't give them twenty dollars to go down to the liquor store and buy more.

But generosity with intelligence applies to everything.

And I added the seventh quality, which is also receiving with the same openness. Because when someone gives and we respond, "Oh no, I'm not worthy. I have so much more than you. Don't give me anything" — that creates its own problem. Every time you offer something to people in Burma, no matter how poor they are, they're going to come and offer you something back with huge joy and dignity. And not to take it is a lack of generosity. To say, "No, no, I have so much more, don't give me that" — that doesn't work. And it's not happiness producing.

So just the last thing I want to say: there's the happiness of contemplating generosity, there's the happiness of the act itself, and there's the happiness of contemplating our past acts of generosity. This is something we don't do so much in this culture — not only with generosity but also with our wholesome sīla.

At times, when you're in a difficult space and you look around and think, "Well, looking at the flowers isn't doing it for me. Nobody's walking by filled with mettā. The leaves are falling and they're all brown and dead. I need something to bring some light in. I can't find one moment of mettā. What could there possibly be to brighten the mind and the heart?" You could contemplate your past acts of generosity of mind, speech, and body. You have to have done at least one, right? Somewhere? If you haven't, go wash your hands and think, "May this act be for the benefit and well-being of all beings everywhere." And then you can contemplate that later.

But this is from the Buddha himself. And it's a wise use of thought, a wise use of contemplation. He's talking to a layman, and it's embedded in a sutta where he gives other contemplations. But I'm just going to share the dāna one because we're running out of time.

So this is the case where you recollect your own generosity: "It is a 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 — and that's all of you, whether you like it or not — at any

time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, her mind is not overcome with greed, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. So just the recollection of generosity wholeheartedly is a moment of purification of heart and mind.

And when the mind is not overcome with aversion, delusion, or greed, her mind heads straight, her heart heads straight, based in 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, and experiences joy connected with the Dhamma. And in one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calm experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.

Thus, Mahānāma, thus the person 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, no excuse not to. And it makes us happy, so why not?

Let's just sit for a moment. Thank you for listening.

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