Practice of Generosity: Transformer of Consciousness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:12

Do good, avoid evil, purify the mind. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas. You find this teaching in all the different areas of Buddhist instruction: cultivate the wholesome, abandon suffering states. That's what purifying the mind means.

Of course, this is what we've been talking about with our whole awareness and mindfulness practice—how the steadiness of awareness naturally allows wisdom to arise. As Steve has said, it's the wisdom that ultimately purifies the mind. We've been talking about that a lot.

But I also want to talk tonight about the fact that purification of heart and mind comes not only from meditation. The way the Buddha spread out his sasana, his teaching, is that all aspects of our life, all aspects of his teaching, are really partaking of this purification of mind and heart, of cultivating the wholesome and helping to change the habits of our mind and heart from our so comfortable ones—so comfortable and friendly with wanting and aversion and delusion—to change those to pure, wholesome ones, which actually are much more happiness-producing, even in the moment.

Even though my first training in Vipassana came in Asia, in the Goenka system, for some years it was mostly in the form of retreats, with no cultural container for it. In retreats like this, we learned the bhavana, the meditation, the cultivation of awareness, which really is the strongest, most powerful, most direct route to awakening, to purification, to happiness—no question. But it doesn't exist alone, as if separate from the rest of our life.

Even though we'd hear about the three pillars of the Buddha's teaching—dana, or generosity; the practice of sila, or non-harming behavior, which we took up with the precepts; and bhavana, mental cultivation in all the different ways we've discussed—I never really learned dana and sila as practices in themselves. I never learned the beauty, the joy, the depth of embracing the practice of generosity and the practice of sila as a way of life, not just to do them so that I could meditate better, which is sort of how we would take them on in those days. We understood that we have to follow the precepts because then you don't feel remorse, which is true—that's in the suttas. And we thought, "I want to not feel remorse so I can have better meditation states." All that is true, just a little bit askew in the motivation.

So all the aspects of the teaching matter. Today in the groups, it makes me want to talk about this specifically. I'm going to talk about the practice of generosity as a practice of liberation, of awakening.

I also realized something about the steadiness of mindfulness and really starting to explore the defilements, as Steve was talking about, with incredible interest. I was so proud to see that from everybody—so happy to see the defilements! "I can't wait for the next one, right?" Once in a while, you might really feel like that when you're bored. But here's what's important: while the steadiness of awareness will of course reveal the conditions that come together to create a kalesha, a defilement arising in the moment—how it comes together, how it falls apart—it's equally important to keep the steadiness of awareness to notice the moments when there's not defilement. Yes, there are such moments. We can get so afraid of seeing the pleasant, saying "the pleasant leads to clinging," so we pull back from it, and we're so interested in the defilements that we get a little skewed. It's important to recognize that the steadiness of awareness sees all of it. All of it. I just wanted to bring that out.

Purifying the mind is both seeing how the unwholesome creates suffering—not by hating it, but by being with it—and also recognizing how simple, attentive awareness with the wholesome actually strengthens it and helps it grow. This is natural. It's just a natural effect.

Here is a quote from the Dalai Lama: "When the mind is completely free of negative emotions and tendencies, it understands and knows all phenomena. It is only because there are obscuring veils between the mind and its object that we are unable to know all things. Once these veils have been removed, no new power is needed. Seeing and being aware is the nature of the mind itself. As long as the mind exists, it has the ability to know. But this ability does not reveal itself until all obscurations have been removed. This is what it means to attain enlightenment."

What we can experience and what is important to recognize, as well as how the defilements work to obscure, is that we can experience moments when those obscurations aren't there—moments with the natural nature of the mind to see and know. And no new power is needed. It's just nature. It's what we've been saying all along.

So the three pillars of the Buddha's teaching—dana, sila, bhavana—are all about transforming our suffering habits of mind.

Purifying the mind, strengthening the wholesome habits—these are not secondary practices.

But again, it's important as I talk about generosity: I'll be talking about it from the point of view of the quality in the mind, in the heart, because that's really what matters. The mind is what leads to speech and action. It's not so much that we have to give this or that, but what's going on inside of us. And so we learn to trust in the steady awareness of the wholesome, of the beautiful—or just recognizing those moments. It doesn't have to be generosity. When it is, it's a little glimpse of nibbana, heading in the direction of pure mind. It's important to recognize that.

This is from Ajahn Buddhadasa. Someone reminded me of him today. He was a great Thai forest monk who died at the end of the last century. I spent some time with him when I was a nun. He was a bit of a

radical within the Thai Theravada Buddhist tradition—and the Burmese tradition too—which are, you know, rather restricted. Within that context, he was very radical. You might not find what he says particularly radical, but within that tradition at that time, he was very radical.

This is from a short article of his where he's talking about nibbana for everyone. Already that was radical at that time. He says, "It may be summed up that nibbana is the coolness—coolness of mind resulting from the extinction of defilements. And when we look into the fact that defilements are compounded things, conditioned experience, things that have birth and death—this shows that defilements occur when the causal conditions come together. And when those causal conditions are not present, defilements simply cease to exist."

So this is a moment-to-moment experience. Have you noticed a moment when a defilement simply ceases to exist? It's important to stay aware in that moment, not to assume. We often look away and think, "Well, that defilement just went underground." And when a similar looking one emerges later, we say, "Well, that's been hanging around all day. Here it is again. This is how I always am." We get really worn down by it, not giving equal attention or weight to those moments when the defilement wasn't there. Somehow we think, "Okay, that's a fluke, that's whatever, but here it is again."

As Poonjaji, a teacher I knew in India, said: it's like we take the past and put it on our shoulder and drag it around with us like a corpse. And that's what we're doing sometimes with our stories, with our sense of "this is what I'm suffering from so much." We might ask ourselves, "Well, is it happening now?" "No, it's not, but it was, and it will..." Notice those moments of coolness.

Here Buddhadasa goes on—he was kind of funny: "Anyone can see that if defilements are with us all day and night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand it?" It's true, isn't it? "Under such conditions, living things must either die or become insane and die anyway." So you get a sense he's in there. He knows what he's talking about.

"So let us consider well the fact that one survives because there are periods when the fires of defilement are not burning. As a matter of fact, we could say that these periods last longer than when the fires are burning."

That's a task: check it out.

He calls this periodical nibbana, or momentary nibbana. "We have periods of rest, physically and mentally, which refresh us. Why don't we know or feel thankful for this kind of nibbana?"

He's saying: pay attention to it, be appreciative. Not grasping, but feel how those moments affect us. I would call it the steadiness of awareness—though we can be aware and the awareness is clear and pure even while aware of defilements. It won't have quite that same pure feeling as when the mind, the citta, really doesn't have a defilement in it at that moment, and there's awareness.

We tend to think, "Oh, that's such a lovely moment. Everything is so beautiful." But notice just how the mind, the heart feels. Just this—I don't know how to say it—purity. Someone said to me once, and I really liked the way she put it: "It's like the mind and heart feel squeaky clean." Just for that moment. On retreat, you tend to have many such moments, and we often think it's because the perceptions are so vivid. They do get more vivid—the flowers are so beautiful, the deer walking by, whatever.

And that's true, but then turn around and just notice—just like we want to notice how the defilements are coloring perception and the resultant thought and action—notice how the purity in that moment of mind and heart feels. Just get familiar with it. Don't take it personally, but just get familiar with it so we recognize it more, so we can start to trust it more. And steady sati, steady mindfulness and awareness, is what naturally reveals this, just as it reveals how the defilements fool us all the time.

So from that perspective, I want to talk about the actual deliberate practice, or cultivation, or recognition of the quality of generosity as a transformer of our habits of consciousness.

The Buddha, as I said, knew the three pillars of his teaching: generosity, conscious conduct, and mental cultivation. But almost whenever he'd start teaching, he would tend to start by talking about generosity to people. So it wasn't just some kind of throwaway thing. And in fact, he set up his whole Sangha, the Sangha of monks and nuns, based on working together with the lay people through generosity. It is said that the sasana consists of four types of people: ordained women, ordained men, and lay women and lay men. And you need all four types to work together. He set them up to be connected with one another, and it still works today in countries where there are ordained men and women in the Buddhist tradition. It's working. Sometimes it's working better than others, but what binds them together is generosity.

He says, "Monks, the householders are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicine in times of sickness. And you, oh bhikkhus"—so this is nuns and monks—"are very helpful to the householders, as you teach and share with them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. Thus, monks, the spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

So he set it up. Lay men and women and ordained women and men mutually support one another for their mutual crossing of the flood and freedom from suffering. And it was set up, and it still is so in Buddhist countries, that monks—and at that time also nuns, bhikkhunis—in terms of food, would go out every day with an alms bowl to whatever community they were in. And the food is just offered. It's not specific to that monk. You don't ask a specific person. They just walk with their eyes down. And they still do this today. Early in the morning, they go out in a line with their alms bowl, eyes down, barefoot—always barefoot. And the lay people, not everyone, but whoever wants to, they know when it's going to be. They come running out and they're standing there, often it's just with a little bowl of rice. That's all they can afford, at least in places I've been in Burma. Little bowls of rice, or sometimes a curry, or whatever. And as the monks come, they just put some into each bowl and then the monks walk on.

It's really—I don't know—I must have somehow been there years ago in another lifetime, because there's something about the early morning, watching the line of monks go out silently and the lay people lining up to offer, that is just really beautiful. It touches my heart.

But anyway, it's set up so they can only eat the food for the day. On eight precepts, nuns and monks don't eat after the noon meal and don't keep the food over. So back in the time of the Buddha, that meant that really the monks and nuns couldn't just go off and disappear and become complete hermits. They had to stay near a town, had to stay in connection with lay people. It's really, I think, quite interesting. There could be times when one would go off on a retreat and maybe other monks would support, but generally, for your whole life, the connection was there. It wasn't like making a community of ordained people who live completely separate, out of this world. They're in this world. And the basis of that is generosity.

And so when we look at the quality of generosity in our hearts—and this isn't just intellectual, though obviously we can think this—when we look at not what you give or why, but what is going on in the heart, in the mind, that makes an expression of generous offering possible, whatever it is... It can just be the generous offering of loving-kindness that you don't even say. There's this outward movement of giving. So what's going on in the mind and heart at that time? Why is it so powerful and transformative?

And of course, some of that's obvious. When you're offering something, it's the opposite of greed and possessiveness. It's the actual movement of letting go, of renunciation, of really letting something go.

It counters ill will, quite interestingly. If you're really doing it as real generosity, try to give something wholeheartedly and feel a lot of ill will towards the person at the same time. Maybe we could throw the thing at them and say, "There, take it!" But that's not really generosity in terms of the wholesomeness in the mind and heart.

And it counters our self-cherishing, covetousness tendency. Because in the movement of a generous action of mind, speech, or body, there's a way of abandoning our self-centered, self-cherishing nature. It's this reciprocal mutuality where connectedness and non-separation are actually what's emphasized, what's experienced, as we act from generosity over and over.

Shantideva, who wrote the *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, has this one little quatrain I like so much about this: "Even when I have done things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises. It is like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return."

It is like having fed myself. That's the sense of the mutuality of real generosity. It's not about the thing or whatever is given. And the inner experience is one of actually a lot of happiness, contentment, even gratitude.

Ajahn Sumedho once said—and I liked this throwaway remark of his, at least it seemed like one when I heard it—"Oh, contentment and gratitude are very supportive states of mind for awakening." That's nice, isn't it? Try it, see for yourself. Contentment. Gratitude. These are states that generosity deepens and

fosters because it opens us out of sense of self, greed, and ill will into contentment and presence in this moment. So generosity is actually part of the path of liberating our minds and hearts.

I spent that year in Thailand, and I've spent quite a fair amount of time in Burma in the last ten years or so—about a month a year or more. I think I mentioned the other night the nun Mei-Chi Rung and how her spontaneous generosity of offering her kuti as head nun as soon as any other nuns came kind of touched me. First, it just confused me, befuddled me. I thought, "What? Shouldn't she be looking for perks?" So it touched me, but I didn't quite get the depth of what was really going on.

The more time I've spent in Burma—and don't get me wrong, I am not idealizing this culture; there's a lot of stuff wrong, as in everywhere—but the majority of the Burmese people are coming from the Buddhist tradition. And deeply ingrained in the Buddhist tradition is this real commitment to generosity and to metta, but to generosity as a practice. Being in that culture, one is just surrounded by generosity.

What was the big surprise to me, what felt like a secret I had never really learned about in my life here, is this: we think generosity is good. We like it. We like to be generous. And we think if I have more, I should give to someone who has less. It kind of tends to go in that way. We can feel good about it, but if we feel too good, that's just being a little egotistical.

So what's the big surprise to me is how joyful—really joyful—this practice of generosity is, both for the giver and for the receiver, and how contagious this is. It's a joy that isn't just "Oh, I feel good," a kind of joy that you cling to. It's the happiness of the heart that's released its holding for that moment, of the mind that in that moment is really touching the wholesomeness of non-clinging, the wholesomeness of non-self-referencing.

And so what I have really come to love, one of the things that feeds my heart every time I go to Burma, is that whatever else goes on, there are these generous actions of giving and receiving spontaneously happening all the time—little ways, big ways—and the appreciation of it on both sides. People are looking for what they call "opportunities for generosity." That's what they say: "This is an opportunity for generosity." And they get really happy.

They have their eyes out for opportunities for generosity, not only with the nuns and monks, but also with regular people. It's just part of the culture, and so it starts to seep in. You start to feel and appreciate more and more the generosity, and actually the heart, the mind, gets happier and happier. And again, it's not the happiness of holding on. I mean, one can twist anything. A defilement can slip in anywhere and twist anything—you could get into competitive generosity. But mostly it's not that.

They say generosity gives us happiness in three times. When the motivation first arises—here's an opportunity for generosity, wow—that's the kind of happiness, the purity of mind and heart. We can feel that. Then in the actual offering, being really present, that's another moment or more of happiness in the doing. And later, in the recollection of it. At the end I'll read a sutta from the Buddha where he

recommends this as a way to consciously turn the mind towards the wholesome. And that can be really useful to us at times when we're just drowning in the kilesas and the mindfulness isn't strong enough. You know, those times when we say we need to do skillful means. But there's enough wisdom to make the choice to say, okay, maybe I can just turn the mind to the wholesome. You can recollect your generous acts.

So just right now, remember some generous thing you did. See if you can do that without your mind clocking through and going, "That's not generous enough." Just any little generous thing. You opened the door for somebody with a generous heart—not like "hurry up," you know—with a generous heart. Any little generous thing you did. Just remember it. Take a moment and remember it, and let yourself feel it in a wholesome way. Let yourself appreciate it. And if you really can't think of anything, think of something someone did that was generous to you, and appreciate it in the same way. Just let it in for a minute.

This joyful, contagious quality—I feel I've learned so much about generosity as a practice, and I'll give you some little examples. There are a million. What I have to do when I prepare this talk is figure out which ones I want to use, which ones pop into my mind. Just to give you a sense of how—it may or may not work for you—but how sometimes just hearing about it awakens the same happiness and generous spirit in ourselves. That's what's so beautiful about the wholesome qualities. How can it awaken that in us? Because it's a natural effect of the pure heart and mind. It's not some weird different thing. They're contagious, and we can let that in.

Just tiny little things. I was up in Northern Burma one time years ago, and there was a Western monk who was living in the area. He was doing a kind of ascetic practice—he would always go barefoot. He wouldn't wear slippers, trying to be tough. He liked it. And I was riding in a little pony cart with the pony driver. This was years before they had motorcycles and such. There was another friend who spoke Burmese. And the pony cart driver—he knew this monk who came, and he said, "Oh, I feel so sorry for him. He doesn't have any slippers. I really want to go and give him some slippers." He didn't even know this guy. He just saw him walking around. And this kind of immediate wanting to help, to offer—it's just so lovely.

This year, in some monasteries or nunneries where they're able to, there's a place where I stay often where somebody donated money to build a building for a free clinic for the local poor villagers. It just works on the weekend. It doesn't have much in the way of supplies at all. People donate the supplies, send them from Malaysia or bring them when they visit. And the way it works is on Saturday, doctors come—Burmese doctors come on their one day off and donate their time. They work all day; a hundred or two hundred villagers come every day. And on Sunday, it's dentistry day. All these young dentists—and I swear they look about thirteen—all these young dentists come and donate their time. And it's intense, you know? In the free clinic, they really can't do very sophisticated dentistry. Let's leave it at that. But still, no one comes until it hurts so much, but they're there. And these young people, they're donating their one day off. This is not an uncommon phenomenon.

So just last month, over at the meditation center, a friend of mine who's a Western nun—the scientific one who doesn't believe in deva lights, only now she does—she lives there and her job is taking care of the Western yogis who come, setting them up in rooms, helping them get toilet paper. It's actually quite a job, I must say.

One Sunday afternoon, one of the yogis had a filling fall out, or her tooth blew up—one of those things where it really hurts. She had just come to Burma for the first time, and you can get really scared in a foreign country when you don't know where to go and you're just settling in. So her tooth hurt, but her mind hurt more, let's put it that way.

Vera said, "Well, it's lucky it's Sunday. I'll take you over to talk to the dentist." So she took her over, and the dentist in charge was a little bit older, a really lovely man, Vera was telling me. He said, "Well, of course I can't treat you here, but when I'm finished here"—at like three in the afternoon—"follow me into town," which is like an hour's drive, "to my office, and I'll open it up and do what I can." It wasn't a matter of, "Let me see, can I fit this into my calendar? When will I have time?" It was immediate.

So they went in, and it was a whole big afternoon thing. They got to his office, he did a really great job, he had all the equipment, and it was quite a procedure—not just a little filling. And then, of course, he wouldn't take a cent. He wouldn't take any money.

The woman yogi noticed that there was a little shrine—a little Buddha, photographs of this man's particular Buddhist teachers. She looked around and said, "Oh, this is what dāna is, isn't it?" Because it was this joyful spirit of "I'm so happy to spend the rest of my afternoon fixing your teeth and I won't take a cent for it." And then he turned to Vera and said, "Now you sit down, let me check out your mouth."

This complete, open generosity, this immediacy of spirit—our first tendency may be to feel shy or embarrassed, but that shuts down the mutuality. And there's so much joy in the giving that you really don't stay shy and embarrassed. You kind of open up and think, "Wow, how beautiful. Thank you so much." And there's this appreciation.

It's not like you think, "Well, now I have to go out and do something good." Maybe you do. But what happens is the wholesomeness lights up our heart and mind. So she was looking and realizing, "Oh, this is what dāna means."

I've seen that happen so often with friends who haven't quite been in that situation before, in so many different ways. After a meal with some nuns who are really poor—they're running a school for six hundred kids that they have to raise the money for every single month, living all together crammed into one little building because they tore down their other buildings to build this school for poor children. And then they invite us and our friends to lunch and lay out this huge spread that they would never eat themselves. And they're so happy doing it.

Our friends go, "Oh, this is dāna." And you can see as the meal goes on, their smiles get bigger and bigger

and they get happier, and there's a sense of connection with the nuns, a happiness flowing both ways.

The next time, if you go back the next year to visit those nuns who did so much for you, they'll be so thrilled to see you. "Oh, you're the one I made mohinga for five years ago!" I mean, that just happened recently. "Yes, you're the one. I remember you. I made mohinga for you. I'm so happy to see you."

You can't not let it in. I mean, you'd have to really try hard. And as you start to let it in, you start to see: the happiness is the happiness. It feels like the mind and heart are being cleaned out, being purified. And there's a lot of other suffering, difficult stuff that goes on, but you feel like you can be more present with it, more open to it. It's really very powerful to see.

So I mentioned that nun who started the school. We're getting to know more and more of these amazing women—nuns who have probably been nuns since they were young girls, so their only education is from other nuns. They can read and write, they read the suttas, they read Pali, and they study the Buddhist texts.

And in some ways, the nunneries serve almost like a safety net for society, particularly for poor young girls who have nowhere else to go.

We've met at least eight such places now. There are many nunneries throughout the country, but among them you find these remarkable ones where the head nun or one of the women will suddenly have this vision that she needs to start a school to help these children.

Many of the nunneries take in very small little girls, either orphans or children whose parents come from the surrounding villages near Yangon and beg the nuns to take their daughters. They know the nuns can give them a better education, or at least make sure they have food. And so the nuns take them in.

One nunnery sits right next door to where we stay. It's packed, absolutely crowded. Four sisters run it. Two years ago they had about twenty little girls. The next year we visited, there were thirty. Where are you going to put them?

Every night they do their chanting for about half an hour—this is something all nuns and monks do. The sound carries over the wall from the same meditation center where I was staying. Some women yogis from Indonesia, I believe, were hearing these young voices chanting every night. One of them got so inspired that she went around to look, and she happened to be fairly wealthy. She saw these little girls and spoke with the head nuns through a translator. They told her, "Yes, and we're about to go back to our home village in the Delta, which has been devastated by the cyclone. We know they're going to ask us to take ten or fifteen more little girls. There's nowhere else for them to go."

And this woman said, "Well, you need a new building, don't you?" And she gave them the money to build one. That's how it works. That's how dāna works.

There are many places like that, and it's not even a school yet—just a nunnery. But there are many where

suddenly the head nun will just get it in her head: "I need to start a school." Amazing women doing all of this entirely on generosity.

Let me tell you about one: Daw Sumanacari from the Appamata School. She's actually the nun who made mohinga for me many years ago. She's been around where we stay for quite some time, living in a small nunnery with maybe fifteen women. Frankly, she always seemed a little depressed, to tell you the truth. We never really thought much about it, though I suppose I'd feel depressed too living like that.

Then maybe two or three years ago, she came over to speak with the two Western nuns I knew. Many friends had been sending money through these nuns, and we'd been offering it to other nuns in need. She knew about this—it had been going on for a few years. Usually people don't come asking for money. You simply go and offer. It's a beautiful thing.

But she came over toward the end of our time there, and she seemed very intense, very determined. She said, "I have to start a school. I really want to start a school. It's what I need to do. I've been meditating on it."

I honestly didn't think she could pull it together, but we offered what we could—enough to just get started, enough to build a little lean-to shack. You should see how it works. They build one structure, then add a small thatch roof, find a bunch of chairs, and the next thing you know there are a hundred children there. I'm not exaggerating. Somehow they find the money each month to hire regular teachers.

It's not a lot, God knows. So the next year we came back, and that's what she'd done. They'd torn down the building that all the nuns were living in, and they'd all moved into this one tiny other little building so that they could build this kind of thatched roof place. She had over a hundred young students. She decided to do it just for the little boys and girls both in the area who were too poor to go to the government school—the ones in grades one to four, because the others walked farther, like half an hour, to this other place I talked about. But in the rainy season, it's too hard for the little ones.

So she had started this, and then she'd found support from some other Burmese companies. There are some Burmese companies that actually have a specific wing that just goes around offering dāna to worthy causes—to start schools like this, to pay for teachers for three years in a row. Then in the fourth year, the nuns have to find funding themselves. They have to have community support. But it's like a whole company where half of what they do is that, and the rest is like being in a cosmetics import firm or something. It's really amazing.

So the next year, anyway, she came back and was talking to us again through Ayya Yani, who speaks Burmese, so we could really get the translation. She looked transformed, Daw Sumanichari. This was two years ago, I think. Her face was bright. She was beaming. And this is a translation of what she said. She said, "The idea to start the school last year was so urgent in my mind that I couldn't eat or sleep well. And now it's happening. And so I'm no longer worried, even though I now must work so hard"—you know, and

they demolished their building—"and we have to work so hard to find support every month for the teacher's salaries, for the equipment, to get wells, to get toilets, and take care of all the kids." She said, "But all the energy is for these children and for the school. And so my mind is calm and happy." And she looked it—her mind was calm and happy. She was radiant.

It's really interesting, the contagious quality of these wholesome states and their onward-leadingness. This is Ajahn Pasanno, writing in *The Island*, commenting on this sutta: "A naturalness to the training, to the cultivation of these basic qualities, leads naturally to deeper qualities. When one is generous and delights in giving, the heart tends to be satisfied and joyful. This supports the development of virtue, as a heart that is satisfied and contented easily inclines to restraint and composure. With this composure, together with the lack of remorse that virtue affords, the heart is easily settled and focused. Meditation progresses more smoothly, and the mind naturally brightens, making it suitable for seeing things as they truly are."

That's the difference in the quality of happiness, of upliftingness, of the wholesome mind—it's onward-leading. It makes it suitable. It sets the conditions for seeing things as they really are. Different from the happiness of getting what we want. It's just different. So much more contagious. And it is contagious, that happiness.

I guess last year, a group of people had brought in a bunch of money, like maybe twenty-five thousand dollars, and you had to go to money changers. Sometimes now you can change in banks, but then, no, there was no way. So you work it out. Friends we know would get the money changer in, and they would come with these stacks. I mean, because Burmese money is big, so at that point you'd have—I'm not kidding—giant stacks of money like this that they would bring in. And it's all counting it. It's a whole process. It takes half the day. And it just feels sleazy, you know. It feels like you're doing a drug deal or something. We're giving our money and they're looking at it, because if there's one little dot on the bill, forget it, they won't take it. So they're looking at it through eyeglasses and these machines. And then they give us these crummy bills that completely fall apart if you touch them. One time I tried to joke with them and said, "No, we want good ones too."

Anyway, you're there all day, and we're just doing it, but it's just normal—that's what happens. These kind of youngish men with their phones, every two minutes getting a phone call, going on, doing all their business and going through the thing. So okay, we did that and left.

At the bed and breakfast, the woman who was kind of hosting it does a lot for us. She and her family are very big supporters of many of the monasteries. So later she called Ayya Yani a couple days later and said, "Okay, I have the rest of the money that hadn't quite come through, and someone donated three hundred and fifty dollars to bring it up to a thousand."

We thought, oh, it's a bed and breakfast where many yogis stay when going to practice. It must have been someone staying there, but we didn't know who. We went back and asked her—we kind of had to pull it out of her—and she said, "Oh, it was the money changers."

They had been listening to us talking. We were just chatting back and forth about how this money was going to be building toilets for these nuns—just like that, ordinary conversation. And so they donated three hundred and fifty dollars.

Stuff like that blows us away. And you let it in, because it's like—we call it a little rapture moment, where we get a little chill. "Oh, that's just so beautiful." Let it in, because it also brightens the mind and heart. These things are happening all the time. I'll stop—I have ten million more examples, but I'll stop.

The most important aspect of generosity, again, is the quality in our mind and heart. It's the motivation, not the action. It's not like the more you give, the better the generosity is. It's not about that at all. It's about the open-handedness, the open-heartedness in the mind and heart.

There's a great story illustrating this about Anathapindika from the time of the Buddha. Anathapindika was known as the Buddha's most devoted and generous supporter. He's mentioned often in the suttas. He's the one who, when he first met the Buddha, was so overcome with faith that he went and bought at a huge price this beautiful park called the Jeta Grove. If you read the suttas, many, many of them take place in this Jeta Grove that he presented to the Buddha and his Sangha. Anathapindika is like the symbol of generosity for men—there's also an equivalent female figure.

This story about him illustrates how the importance of generosity lies in the motivation, not the outward appearance. One of the things Anathapindika did when monks were dwelling nearby was send rice gruel every morning, and then for lunch he would have "five hundred monks," they would say. Andy Olendzki, the scholar at BCBS, says five hundred means "a lot"—it just means a lot of monks and nuns. So every day he would invite all these monks to his home for the main meal, prepare this incredible offering, and serve it himself out of the generosity of his heart.

The king of that area, King Pasenadi, who was also a follower and disciple of the Buddha, heard of this and wanted to imitate him. If Anathapindika could do it, he could do it. So he also set up to offer alms every day to five hundred monks. But after a while, he learned from his servants that the monks would come and accept the offering, but then take the food into the city and give it to their supporters, who would then offer it back to them.

King Pasenadi wondered, "Why are they doing that? This food is very tasty—it's really better than his."

The Buddha explained to the king that in the palace, the courtiers and servants who distributed the food did it without any inner feeling. They were just following orders, as if they were cleaning out a barn or taking a thief to court or just doing anything. The Buddha said they lacked faith and had no love for the monks. Many of them even thought the monks were just parasites living by the labor of the working population. 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—the generous

woman—welcomed the monks, regarded them as spiritual friends, truly appreciated them. 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 real spirit of generosity.

One last little quotation from the Buddha about this: "Even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or cup into a village pool or pond, thinking, 'May whatever animals live here feed on this,' that would be an act of generosity, a source of merit."

I love that, because it captures the sense that generosity is just that spirit which connects and offers freely in whatever we're doing. And at times, when there's enough steadiness of wisdom to see, we can incline our mind toward the wholesome in this way—in ways that really strengthen the wholesome and help purify the mind from *kilesa*, just in little ways.

It has to be sincere. But even something like holding the door for someone—and I don't want to make things crazy around here the next few days, so don't get all worked up trying to do generous things for each other, okay? Giving each other generous silence is itself a great act of generosity, okay?

So I'll give a small example, a really small one. Just when you hold the door for someone—not the thing where you stand there for forty-five minutes and then they have to hurry because you're holding the door. I don't mean that. But when you do it spontaneously, having the awareness in your mind of just appreciation: "Oh yes, may this be helpful for that person." Something like that, rather than being thoughtless about it.

Do you see what I mean? It's such a source of happiness for us. It's not like you're looking at them saying, "See what I'm doing?" No, that's not it. Just little things, you know? You're standing in the food line and there's only two oranges and there's seven people behind you. You really want an orange, but you know, I can let it go, let them have an orange. No one else even knows. But you could have such a sense of appreciating that act of generosity. It's really an uplifting, a purification in the mind in that moment. It's a letting go of clinging and self-cherishing. It's so little, you know? But it brings happiness just to do it. And the more that we practice it, the more the mind inclines in that direction. It's a very active way of purifying.

So as I said, there's the three times that the act of generosity brings the happiness of purity, the happiness of upliftment. And that's in the first thought of it, the first motivation. Let it in, feel it. In the act of doing it, doing whatever act of generosity it is with awareness. Really doing it consciously, not making a big show—as I said, no one else knows—but just really bringing the same awareness to the generosity as we might bring to the craving or the aversion.

Don't be afraid you're going to get into egotism about it. You might. So what? Awareness will notice that. We don't have to be afraid of it because we'll notice and it'll feel different immediately. And this is one of the ways we see how kilesas cloud. So you don't take the orange and you just kind of feel a moment of

happiness in the recollection of the act of generosity. It's lovely. And then later, "I am so incredibly generous." It doesn't feel the same at all. You don't need to beat yourself up about it. Just pay attention. Wisdom will let you know the difference. You don't have to figure it out.

So this act of reflecting on past acts of your own generosity—and also your own conscious sila, non-harming conduct—is something the Buddha recommends. And I think maybe we don't do it that often. It's a real conscious use of wise thought, conscious contemplation.

In little ways, I think when I was in the last few years of my parents' lives, I spent a lot of time taking care of them. And it was easy to go into feelings of, you know, you can never do enough. Whatever you do, it's never going to be enough, because you can't make it better. So it could be easy to go into feelings of either exhaustion or just feeling bad I couldn't do enough, my mind settling on the times that I left instead of staying, and why couldn't I have moved to Atlanta and lived there—whatever. The mind can go there with our tendency to self-judge and self-blame.

But try the other. Try going to the sense of really acknowledging and appreciating all the actions of care and generosity. It's not the same thing as saying, "I'm so great." But it's just letting in, oh, those things that I did, those times—it brings in a sense of metta, a sense of upliftment. You can tell the difference, and it actually makes one happier and more willing to offer more, to do more. And it changes the whole dynamic. Just reflecting on it is really very powerful.

So this is the sutta—well, just this one aspect. The Buddha is talking about different reflections. But he says this about reflecting on your own past conscious virtuous actions. I'm going to read the one on generosity; it's the same. He's talking to lay people, talking to Mahanama, a layman. "There's the case where you recollect your own generosity."

"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, is not overcome with aversion, is not overcome with delusion.

I'll read it again because this is the immediate moment-to-moment practice: At any time when one is recollecting their own generosity, their mind at that moment is not overcome with greed, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. Her mind, her heart heads straight based on generosity. And when the mind 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.

"Mahanama, 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." Basically any time.

This can feel like cheating because it's such a happy practice. Sitting and thinking about how generous I've been—doesn't that kind of go the wrong way from what we think we should be doing? But try it and see what happens. In any moment, your mind then is not overcovered by greed, hatred, or delusion.

Amazing.

I think I'll end there. Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

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