Purifying Our Minds/Hearts in All Aspects of Practice

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:01

I know what I'm about to say may be quite obvious to all of you, but somehow in the last few years it has become crystal clear to me. It gave me a whole picture of the path in a different way.

What we've been cultivating here is really bringing awareness to the habits of our mind and purifying and transforming those habits. It's become clear to me that all the different practices, all the different parts of the path that the Buddha taught—all of them are coming from different angles of purifying and transforming the habits of our mind.

Somehow that just makes it accessible. Simple—not easy, but simple. Straightforward. It becomes a thread that unites all of the different forms of practice, instead of having to set one against the other, or thinking this is the inferior practice and eventually you get to the superior one. They're all coming from different angles of purifying these habits of our mind. I want to talk in a broad way about that tonight.

The definition the Buddha gives of the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, is this: the cessation of dukkha is the remainderless cessation and relinquishment of craving—craving being the cause of suffering, of dukkha, in the second noble truth. For craving you can read the three kilesa: greed, hatred, delusion. The remainderless cessation. Fading away.

In that way, freedom from suffering is defined as the purified heart-mind, or as is often spoken of, the supreme state of sublime peace discovered by the Tathagata—namely, liberation of mind through non-clinging. This is what we can explore the whole way along in our practice. It's something really tangible, workable, discoverable on a moment-to-moment basis. That's what's so far out about the way things work.

I really find it quite helpful and energizing in practice when I recognize the fact that everything's changing on a moment-to-moment basis, especially in terms of looking at our mind, our heart. As Andrew Olendzki describes it—the Pali scholar and friend—he says that in Buddhism, the mind is not a subject that has objects as content. It's not a thing, but rather the activity or process of cognizing, a flow of events. When we talk about "the mind," we think of something there with things happening in it. But it's really just this process of cognition. Sayadaw U Tejaniya says the way you recognize the mind is simply by the activity, not by turning around and seeing something.

So it's changing every moment. We've recognized this, right? This is the only thing that makes cultivation

and transforming the habits possible. But it's also what makes it so that we can be lost in a moment and really quite awake in another moment. It's not that we have to wait until we get to the total, ultimate, complete, remainderless, never-again-going-to-arise moment of greed, delusion, or aversion in the mind. You don't have to wait for that. That's good news.

To me, that's what makes practice not overwhelmingly discouraging. I'm serious. Because if we think in terms of having to uproot all the kilesa—every time they come we've got to get out that shovel and dig them up, and until they're all gone we're just going to be mucking around in this hopeless mess—you see how many kilesa come up in a day in your mind, right? You're not alone. None of us are alone. If we're thinking they've all got to go and we're waiting for that, it's a little demoralizing.

But if we can really get a sense of how all the different aspects of the path comprise our whole life—if that's our motivation, if that's our aspiration—then all aspects of our life become part of the path of purifying and transforming these habits of mind.

We can't control this, but the arising of greed, hatred, delusion, the arising of wisdom, the arising of wholesome states—it's out of our control, but it's not random. We've talked about that a lot. The classic line from the Buddha: what the mind frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the natural inclination of the mind, the habit.

So we come in with what we naturally think and ponder upon. You've seen all too clearly what the habits are. But all the time that you put in during this retreat—and for almost everybody here, in other retreats and in your life—all the moments that the mind is inclining to awareness, to non-greed, to non-ill will, to compassion, to interest, to samadhi—all those times are also feeding into the habits of what the mind naturally inclines towards. This is the only thing that makes it workable.

You remember when Steve read the sutta about how the mind is naturally radiant and pure. This purity, this radiance, is simply obscured by the visiting torments, the visiting kilesa. Partly they're obscured because we get so fascinated—either getting sucked into the kilesa or fighting against them, caught in the reaction and onto the object—that we forget to even notice the radiance. Sometimes it would be quite noticeable if we would remember. Same as our awareness: we don't even remember it's there, and when we do, it's just there. It's so normal.

So in a way, you could say the habits—the unwholesome habits—are learned.

Desmond Tutu, the Archbishop from South Africa, the Nobel Peace Prize winner who was one of the main architects of the whole peace and reconciliation process there. I heard just a brief snippet of him on the radio. He was in Boston meeting with a bunch of students—it sounded like they were late adolescents, maybe eighteen or nineteen-year-old young men and women from a very poor, difficult section of town. And he was saying to them, "We learn to hate. It's not our natural state. We learn to hate."

One of the students said to him, "But how can we—we live in the middle of a culture of violence. How can

we possibly learn how to love?" And he just—you could hear him on the radio, couldn't see him, but you could hear him—he just turned to that young man and said, "You. You can make a difference. It starts with you, and you, and you, and you. One person can make a difference. And just know that hate isn't our natural state and it's not the only response. We don't have to just give in to that for ourselves."

I found that really inspiring from him.

There's a place in the suttas where the Buddha is talking about cultivating skillful, wholesome habits and abandoning unskillful, unwholesome habits. And he says, "If it were not possible, I would not tell you to do so. But because it is possible, I say: abandon the unskillful, cultivate the skillful." He said, "If abandoning the unskillful led to your further suffering and unhappiness, I wouldn't tell you to do so. But it doesn't." I see I don't have the right words—I shouldn't put words in the Buddha's mouth. Although, I mean, he wasn't speaking English, was he? You get the drift. "If cultivating the wholesome led to greater suffering, to unhappiness, I wouldn't tell you to do so. But it doesn't. It leads to freedom from suffering and happiness and ease. Therefore, because it is possible, I tell you to do so."

I really take that in. Really take it in. If it were not possible, I wouldn't ask you to do so.

But it takes—I feel, certainly in my limited experience and everything I've seen—it takes, as you see, how hard just on a nine-day retreat where we've cleared the decks and that's all we're doing here, how hard it is even to be aware, never mind not getting all caught up in the unwholesome.

And also maybe you've noticed how often we don't recognize the wholesome. We get so focused on getting rid of the unwholesome, which of course isn't what awareness is doing, right? We all know awareness is not getting rid of the unwholesome. It's simply being present with things as they are and allowing the clear seeing.

And what's so cool—and we've said this before—is the wisdom that comes from steady awareness, simply from recognizing accurately. That's all. The wisdom that arises when we recognize accurately: in that moment, the unwholesome is abandoned because it doesn't make any sense.

But it takes a continual renewing, I think, for each of us in our own way, of our own internal commitment, our own internal aspiration to do so. I'm sure you know how easy it is, even on retreat, but when we leave retreat—and this isn't, that's why we love this style of practice, it's not just about retreat—but there's so many more things to go and do and see. Someone was saying, how hard is it to be aware? Not very. How often do we think, "Okay, I'll be aware later"—right now, as if you can't be aware whatever you're doing—"I'll be aware later." It's so easy.

There's another place—which I searched, I wrote it down years ago and could not find the reference, so don't ask me, I'm telling you right now—where the Buddha said at one point, speaking about his own practice, that the two things he never lost sight of were not to be lax in his effort—in other words, not to just coast, which I find myself doing a lot until there's enough suffering that it kind of wakes me up

again—and never to be satisfied simply with wholesome states of mind.

I find that really interesting. The way I read that is, when the kilesas are completely uprooted, that's okay, you can be satisfied then. But along the way, when it's kind of the same complacency—"it's good enough." The habits come and go, but we're not as bothered, they're not as strong. We really see a lot more wholesomeness, and this is true. A lot more generosity, a lot less aversion, a lot less getting caught in stuff. We think, "That's pretty good."

And never to be satisfied until we really, really see our hearts and minds are free. This is, to me, the aspiration that keeps renewing itself in my heart and mind in different ways.

And it's not a negative judgment. It's like an onward-leading aspiration.

I'll just give an example. Different things bring it up in me from time to time over my life of practice. I'll go for a while, and then something will inspire me into another gear, sort of like Steve said about his retreat—something really inspired him into another gear. Different times, different things.

But a few years ago—this is the one that sticks with me in this context of really purifying the mind stream, the heart stream. Not that long ago. When I was in Munich for a while, I went to visit Dachau. It's been made into a museum where the concentration camp was. All the years I've spent time in Germany, I somehow never got around to doing that.

That was the effect it had on me. It was very well set out as a museum, with lots of placards and photos of all the different aspects, all the different kinds of people involved, all the different strands. Coming through it, seeing the site—it was so big. When I went back to see my friends in Munich, they said, "Oh, but that's one of the small ones." I thought, my God, it's huge. So you get the sense of the vastness of this kind of unimaginable horror in my mind.

The placards showed all the different groups of people who were interned there—Jews and Roma and gay people and Catholics, on and on—with photos of different individuals. But also photos of guards, people who made the bread, people who brought in supplies. All the different people.

By the end of it, what hit me was: there were so many people involved. And this is just Dachau, and this is just World War II Germany. Pick your place in the world of all the horrors. There were so many people involved. There's no way my mind could make it separate and say, "Well, all of these people were some kind of inhuman monsters." It's just not possible. Mostly ordinary people—doctors, or people who lived in the village and brought in the food, or people who were interned in the camp and acted in all different kinds of ways: noble and base and normal. The whole range of humanity.

I think of any other memorial to unspeakable horrors. I read that they just opened, on the UN Plaza, the Permanent Memorial to Honor the Victims of Slavery in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It took so long to make that. I haven't been there; I just looked at it online. Again, how many people over hundreds of years

were involved? They can't all be some kind of inhuman monsters. Or Srebrenica, or Rwanda, or the killing fields in Cambodia—on and on.

This might sound strange, but this actually really inspired me in my own practice. Because what I realized is: we don't really know, until we're in a really difficult situation, how we're going to behave. We don't really know. When we don't know how our minds work, we don't really know.

I've never been in a situation even close to what any of these people were in. And I couldn't just look and say, "Well, I know I would never do that." Do what? You don't know. You make a small decision. You don't know all the ramifications. You don't know what went into it. Maybe someone comes and says, "Do this, or some harm might come to your children," and you do it out of fear. How do I know what I would do?

Looking at my own life—when we say, "Okay, I'm going to make an aspiration. I'm going to sit every day"—you really think you mean it, don't you? With your whole heart, you mean it: I'm going to sit every day. How long does that last? Some people do sit every day. I'm always really amazed when I meet those people in their daily life. Or, "I'm not going to get angry at my mother anymore." All this stuff, and we mean it. But because we don't really know how our minds are working, because we're not really present with awareness, the habits surface when the conditions are present for them.

Like some people were saying in the little talking exercise today—I thought it was really interesting—quite a few people said that with the awareness in the talking, they noticed their habits: personality habits, habits of how they tend to engage in conversation coming up. The awareness really starts to see it.

And that doesn't mean you don't do it. It doesn't mean you naturally stop, and it doesn't mean you bring in more aversion to yourself, because that's just aversion. But you say, "I really want to see."

Many people have said at different times in our groups that they're starting to notice the big dramas that used to happen on retreat aren't happening so much. But they're noticing how much more subtle craving is showing up, or more subtle aversion is showing up. And I think that's great, because it's the subtle ones where we think, "No, that's a little aversion that doesn't really matter." And then the next thing you know, you're tapping out an email that's filled with all this stuff, and you think, "Oh, I just thought it was funny," and the person on the other end is like, "Oh, God."

So really turning around and watching what's going on in our mind—that's what we can do. We don't know what the effect is going to be of many of our choices and actions. We don't know the whole circumstance. That we can't always know. But the place we can bring awareness is to the quality in the mind that's motivating this speech, this action. And a lot of times it's complex, and a lot of times we can't tell, sure. But we keep having the interest, the willingness to look.

So it's better now. When I get an email and I can feel something—"No, that's just not right. Let me tell them"—and I'm supposed to answer and give my opinion, I'm actually supposed to do that. So I start to go, but now I can feel this kind of, "But I know I'm right." And then most of the time I manage to say, "Write it

tomorrow, write it tomorrow," because I can feel the aversion in my mind, even though it's masquerading as my appropriate informed opinion.

The next day, I may have the same appropriate informed opinion. Because let's face it, the aversion's there because you know you're right. And of course, the flip side of the aversive type is discriminating wisdom. That's true. But the next day, even when I have the same opinion, that aversive tinge is gone and it feels so completely different. I can write it so completely differently.

And it's the same with craving. You write something because you really want this thing to happen. The next day, when it's not so much craving, you can see the whole picture. You can see the other person's point of view. You can write the email from a much more clear comprehension perspective, not just my perspective.

So it's in the little things like that—that we bring this awareness of our motivation, of the habits of mind, into our practice.

From that I want to move into talking a little bit about the Third Noble Truth. Remembering, we're talking not about the remainderless forever, but the moment-to-moment possibility of really recognizing a sense, the flavor, of the heart-mind that's pure in that moment, that's free from clinging—the quality of mind. It's not a distant state, or a state at all. In a moment of the process of mind, heart, consciousness arising with awareness, the five faculties and no clinging, aversion, or greed—that's a moment of purity.

This is from Ajahn Buddhadasa. I've talked about him before, the Thai forest monk who was quite a scholar, and also, for the Thai Theravada system, a little bit of a rebel in his scholarship and the way he talked about things. For example, in his center near Surat Thani on the southeast coast of Thailand, a forest monastery, he had a big statue of Avalokiteshvara. That may seem like, so what?

But in Thai Theravada Buddhist monasteries, you don't have statues of Avalokiteshvara. It's from a whole different tradition. They don't mix. So just for that gesture alone, you can see he had a much broader view.

I want to share a few things from a talk he gave, translated from Thai, speaking to lay people, not to monks and nuns. The talk is called "Nibbana for Everyone." It's quite long, but I just want to make a few points relevant to what we're exploring here.

He says, "Nibbana means cool. Cool." And "Nibbana is a natural condition. It is the cool state of mind." In Thai, as in Pali, mind-heart is the same word: citta. "It is the cool state of mind without any kilesa." So in any moment, he's saying, when there's no kilesa in the heart, in the mind, it's cooled out. It's cool.

He goes on to say, "It could be summed up that nibbana is the coolness resulting from the extinction of defilements, of torments. Now as we look further, we see that the kilesa—greed, hatred, delusion—are also sankharas, compounded things. All compounded things that arise will cease." So they're subject to birth and death. "This shows that the defilements occur when the causal conditions are present. And when

those causal conditions are not present—and they will go away because every conditioned thing arises and ceases—when those causal conditions go away, the defilements simply become extinct in that moment."

I'm sure you've experienced this. When you're wanting, or you're in aversion, if you keep paying attention, suddenly it's just gone. Have you noticed that? That's the moment. It became extinct in that moment.

Buddhadasa continues, "Although the extinction is temporary—or in other words, the coolness takes place temporarily—the phenomenon has a real sense of Nibbana, even though it's not the lasting one."

I'm talking about this not from an Abhidhamma scholastic perspective, but really as a teaching tool to help us, to urge us all to keep recognizing these moments. We don't need to get lost in thinking, "But it's not really Nibbana, it's not really cessation." Just start to recognize these moments of coolness.

He says, "Temporary nibbana does exist for those who unavoidably have some impurities left." But then he says, "This temporary nibbana is that which nourishes sentient beings. Anyone can see that if defilements are with us all day and night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand them?" Right? We couldn't really. He says we'd go crazy. Or we'd die. Or both.

"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 are more than when the fires are burning. This nourishing condition is thus normal to what may be called life or mind."

So he asks, why don't we appreciate it more? Why aren't we grateful for these moments of temporary nibbana?

If you think of it simply as moments of coolness, when the fires of defilement are not burning—these are just little moments that we can really bring into awareness. Of course, awareness is key to all of this. Awareness plays a part in every practice, in every technique, in everything we do in our life.

With this awareness, we've really been looking at the torments, the patterns that emerge, and also wholesome qualities like the five spiritual faculties. But I just want to highlight that this is a normal, natural moment of coolness, freedom from defilement. And awareness recognizing it—just recognizing, not making some big production out of it—is important. Remember, wisdom is this: when wisdom recognizes the wholesome, it strengthens the wholesome. That's just the nature of things. We don't have to hold on to that strength. That's what happens. It's so far out.

When wisdom recognizes the unskillful, the unwholesome, it doesn't feed it, because it doesn't make sense. That's just natural.

That's far out.

So this is just on the intellectual level I'm talking about, but we can start to notice it—that it's a natural, normal aspect of our mind.

The Dalai Lama, talking about the negative emotions and tendencies, says: "Once these veils, the negative emotions and tendencies, 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 are removed. That is what it means to attain enlightenment."

So again, take it down to one moment. In one moment—there are many moments when the obscurations are not there. And no new power is needed then, just to recognize this purity of heart-mind.

Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche writes: "This is one's birthright, one's true nature. It's not something missing to be sought for and obtained, but is the very heart of our original existential being. It is actually inseparable from our uncontrived everyday awareness, beyond willful alteration, free from conceptualizing. Unfabricated ordinary awareness, unadulterated by effort and modification."

Does that sound familiar? Only slightly different Tibetan language. "Unfabricated ordinary awareness, naked, fresh, vivid, and totally natural. What could be simpler than this? To rest at home and at ease in total naturalness."

So that's a different language, but it's just the same thing—starting to just rest at ease in natural awareness. And so, again, not looking for something but just having it in mind to notice little moments that are cool because the fire of torment isn't burning.

It could be in any moment. There's nothing special going on most of the time. You know how on retreat you'll have moments where maybe you're outside and everything—it's just the is-ness. Everything just is. You're not making up any stories. Maybe there could be thoughts or not, but you're not referencing it back to what does it mean about me, and what am I going to tell people about this, and how can I hold it. Just little kind of perfect moments.

And it could be seeing a lizard. Okay, that isn't here, right? That's in California. Here it could be seeing an icicle. That image I just said—that's an image from a retreat I did in 1975. I remember I was just sitting in a chair and this little blue lizard went by, and it was one of those perfect moments.

But so often we notice it, and we impute the purity, the perfectness, whatever it is, to the particular situation. "Oh, it's so beautiful out. The ice crystals are so incredible." Or that lizard and the quietness—"I'm on retreat." Or drinking this tea, and then you go and buy seven gallons of that tea because that was like the perfect thing. You try to go back to the same place. We impute it to that. Again, focusing on the object.

It's got nothing to do with the object. It could be any object. It's the quality of mind-heart in that moment, with awareness that the defilements aren't there burning.

So we have lots of little is-ness moments, some stronger than others. When it happens, don't stop—you can't stop and grab, because then it's gone. But just noticing more than the object, just kind of feeling what that simple quality of pure mind-heart feels like in that moment. However it is, don't put words to it or anything. It's not like you're trying to name it or call it out, but it's just kind of letting awareness come to it. It becomes recognizable. We see it is really normal and natural. It is part of our everyday experience.

But as with our tendency for intensity, we so much overlook it, just as we overlook the simplicity of awareness. We overlook it because it's so always available and so normal that we just don't even see it.

One friend of mine was describing her experience: it's like the mind and heart feel squeaky clean—like when you're cleaning a window and it's just so squeaky clean.

There's nothing there, nothing in the way. I don't know if that works for you, but I like it. You get the sense it's almost tangible.

So just start to let that in. It's really part of our life. The world doesn't change. It's not about the object. It's more this quality of mind, the cool mind, free from klesha. Readily available, it comes and goes. But if we don't even notice it—if we don't even notice it, or if we do notice it and it's like, "So what?"—okay, then maybe this isn't your path.

No, mostly we don't notice it. We overlook it because we're still looking for the big, you know, whatever it is. We're still in that somehow it's got to be really transformative, really pleasant—okay, let's face it, really *something*. But the world doesn't change. The Buddha woke up into this same world, you know. The way our heart and mind relates, responds—that changes because we understand differently. And we understand differently because the lens of awareness is clear. It's clean. All those moments of not being with burning defilement, what's also going on is clear and accurate recognition.

So this isn't to think about it. I just want to offer different ways of recognizing, just when it's there. Because just as you've been learning over this time—in the beginning maybe you didn't know what the heck we were talking about with awareness—it gets more and more a sense of what it is, although you can't touch it or see it or really describe it to your friends when you go home. But there's a way you know when there's awareness and when there's not. Right? Please say yes. At least sometimes. We know. It's more familiar.

And then we start to be able to really tell when there's torment coloring the awareness and when there's not. Just as we get more and more familiar with how greed and aversion and delusion feel and affect our perception, we get more familiar with the thoughts and the actions, we also get more and more familiar and at home when they're not there. So that's really key to let in. Not separate from our everyday awareness. It's not lying somewhere else.

This is from Ajahn Tate, who was a Thai forest master too, talking about this. He says: "Water in its natural state is a pure, transparent fluid. But if dye is added, it will change color accordingly. If red dye is added, it

will be red. If blue, it will turn blue. But even though the water may change its color in accordance with the substances introduced into it, it does not forsake its innate purity and colorlessness. If a wise person is able to distill the colored water, it will resume its natural state. This is the same for the pure mind and the kaleshas that visit it."

So just in different traditions, different ways of pointing to the same really natural, actually very simple and accessible aspect, experience over and over of our mind and heart.

At the heart of all the practices, of course, is this moment-to-moment awareness, as we've been doing it here. As Ajahn Sumedho says, the practice of freedom is awareness. Well, it's a way of looking—I'm sure he'd go there. Anyway, awareness. But we've talked about that the whole time, so I'm not going to say more about that now.

What I want to mention—and I can only just touch on these, because each of these things is at least one whole dharma talk, don't worry, it's not going to be—is all the different practices, all the different aspects that the Buddha talks about on the path.

Of course, awareness is the overarching quality, and awareness is included with all of these practices, accompanying all of them. But they're all ways, again, of shifting, transforming the tormented habits of our mind and heart toward the wholesome. And that's not just so we feel better—that's actually what sets the conditions for the arising of moments of freedom. So it's not merely, "Oh, this is a good thing and then later you'll be better." These are, in themselves, absolutely essential aspects of freeing our heart-mind.

You see, there are different meditation practices, and also, as Steve has said, the three pillars: generosity and moral conduct, and all the different forms of mental cultivation—all important. All aspects of our life.

I know Steve talked a lot about generosity today. We usually try to give a whole talk about it, more and more, because it's so key to cultivating the heart-mind of relinquishment, of counteracting clinging. But the only thing I want to say about generosity and sīla, restraint, is to recognize that they're not heavy-duty, difficult renunciation practices. The practices themselves—moments of generosity, moments of conscious moral conduct—bring so much joy and happiness, wholesome joy, wholesome happiness. It's not like we've got to practice and practice just to have a moment, please, when there's no collation and we can appreciate something. The practices themselves are cultivating a lightness of heart, a lightness of mind.

In moments of generosity, whether it's just giving a smile, some time, listening, a flower, whatever it is—it's not the thing itself. It's the motivation, the intention in our heart. And connecting to be generous also needs a generous receiver. That's the circle.

I've spent a lot of time in Burma over the last fourteen years, going there every year. Generosity is a large part of the Buddhist teaching, and since much of the culture is Buddhist, it's quite inculcated throughout. I do mostly hang out in monasteries and nunneries, but it's not only there—it's really all through the culture, this appreciation of generosity as a practice. Everywhere you go, it just comes at you from all

directions. And there's this joy, a happiness, from people. You go to a little village, and they're poor fisher people, and they come and give you this big dried fish. "Please take this, and give part of it to our friend who's in Thailand." As if we could take a big dried fish to Thailand! Impossible, but this is such full-hearted generosity, and there's this happiness in it.

I see in myself how, before, sometimes I would want to be generous but I might feel a little ashamed—it's not a good enough thing to give, or what if they don't appreciate it? That's so self-centered, really. When you're truly giving, there's just this happiness: "Please, this is what I have, this dried fish, and I want to give it to you." And so you take it in the same spirit. The alternative—"No, no, don't give me your fish, you're too poor, I don't want to take your fish"—that's so ungenerous. That's how we feel at first. But there's this sense of letting in the joy, and then it becomes catching.

There's a phrase you hear: "opportunity for dāna." That's very common—"Oh, this is another opportunity for dāna." People always have that in their mind. And just to have that awareness—"This is a chance I can offer something, this is a chance I can be generous"—it's such a lovely thing.

So we take that fish and we go away, and obviously we can't take it to Thailand. So we find a nunnery and offer it to the nuns. And it keeps going like that. Generosity moves to the next place, to the next place.

Once I was staying at a meditation center where we often stay, right after the cyclone in 2008. The cyclone hit the southwest of Myanmar but also extended up into the area near Yangon—great destruction. Many people were killed, houses were down, people really didn't have food. Much of the rice production was destroyed. We'd brought some money from friends to try and help, and the sayadaw where we were staying said, "Well, the village just around this meditation center—the people really don't have enough food." He said if we would offer the money, he would organize what he called a rice dāna.

This meant for every house in the village—and it's all very carefully tracked there, they know which houses and how many people live in each one. So we paid for it, and a whole building was filled with rice. Then the monks, who of course can't offer or use money, went in and spent their time filling all the bags with rice, because that's what they could do, and they really wanted to help too. Then each villager from each house would come and we'd offer them a bag of rice. And you always do it face to face. It's not like you make a pile and they come and take it.

The Sayadaw insisted that we come and stand there to hand them the rice personally. These were big, heavy, fifty-pound bags of rice. Ryan and I together were heaving these bags up, and then a little lady would come, go "plop," put it on her head, take a kid in each hand, and walk off. I'm not exaggerating. So all along the way, it was very personal, face to face.

The next morning, the monks went out on alms round. They still do that in Buddhist countries. Every morning, the monks go out with their alms bowls following a set itinerary in the village. Each monastery has its own route, and the village people know when they're coming. Whoever wants to offer comes out

and gives whatever they have.

A friend of ours from Mexico was a monk there at the time and went out on alms round every day. He came back that next day deeply moved. He said that they go the same route every day, and pretty much the same people come out to offer. Usually they just offer a little rice—that's all they can afford, which is fine. The rest of the food is cooked for them at the monastery. In some places, still today in Thailand and Burma, the only food the monks get—and in some cases nuns—is what they receive on alms round. Up in Sagaing in the north, it's like that.

Raoul said that this day when they went out, after the rice dana, there were many, many more people out there giving rice. Some people had brought their little kids out, training them. The children would take a little spoonful of rice and put it in the bowl. Because the families had gotten rice, now they could offer some to the monks. Before, they weren't able to because they didn't have enough. And that's the first thing they did with it. That's just the flow, how it goes. And it's really happiness-producing.

So in the moment of generosity, with awareness, you can notice how the habit is being transformed in that very moment. It's not that if I give enough, I'll store up merit and then later on something good will happen. That's one way of looking at it. But in terms of our awareness in the immediacy of the moment—which is all there is—you can feel this. Let yourself appreciate it. Enjoy the happiness of generosity, and also be happy in receiving and happy for the generosity of the other person. In that moment, you can start to feel some transformation. You can see a shift from the old habits.

Similarly with sīla, with non-harming conduct—it's not just that we don't do these things. You might notice every time, even in a little way, that the motivation or the impulse comes up to transgress: to take something that's not yours, to squash a mosquito, whatever. And you don't do it.

I don't know about you, but a lot of our Western tendencies run toward self-criticism: "Oh God, I was so bad. What's the matter with me? I wanted to take that thing." Instead, you could actually notice that restraint—conscious restraint—is a wholesome movement of non-harming. In that moment, appreciate that shift of habit.

The more we pay attention to sīla and notice when the habits come up of wanting to harm or steal, when we say something harmful, we can notice how that feels. Notice the burning of the defilements. When we don't do it, notice how that's a wholesome quality of restraint. And it starts to arise more naturally, more easily. I'm sure you've noticed this.

It becomes natural and easy, and in fact the Buddha says it's not an act of will. It is normal and natural that freedom from remorse arises in one endowed with virtue. It is in the nature of things—freedom from remorse and really a kind of happiness.

I'll give you another little simple example. The simple little ones are what's important to notice. I was with a good friend of mine at Spirit Rock, a meditation center like this in California. If you haven't been, it has

this giant bookstore that sells every dharma tchotchke you could ever want, all kinds of stuff. They had all kinds of little statues, and I wanted a particular one that I had seen. I wanted to go back and get it. So my friend and I went there. It's a self-service bookstore, but I didn't see this particular statue out on display. My friend had sometimes helped out there.

She knew how to get into the storage closets, let's put it that way. So we went into the storage closet, and there was one that was just row after row after row of statues. The woman who supplies this is really good at buying things and getting a lot of them. So we were going through all these shelves looking for this particular statue, taking out the ones ahead and getting to it. It was a White Tara statue I wanted.

We were being very careful. They were kind of like—not glass, some kind of plastic or something. Anyway, we're pulling them out, and at almost the same moment, we each took out a different kind of statue, a head of Manjushri with a little sword up like this. And both had—we barely touched them and the swords just snapped off, for both of us, in each hand. We both went, "Oh no!" We each broke one.

Later we discussed this. It went through both of our minds—which we didn't say at the time—we could just put them back and no one would ever know. That thought went through both of our minds. And it was so clear: it just went through and there was no temptation whatsoever. It was so clear we wouldn't do that, even though the statues weren't cheap.

So we went and got the one I wanted, and then we took the broken statues. Actually, the woman who runs the bookstore is a good friend, so we went to her office with our two broken statues, like two little kids. She wasn't there, so we're writing out a note—okay, we broke the statues, what do we owe? She comes in: "Carol! What are you doing here?" "We broke the statues. What do we owe?" She goes, "Ah, that happens all the time. We just glue it back on and sell it half price." Oh, great!

So it worked out. But later we realized how really happy it made us both that there was not even for a fraction of a second a thought that either of us would really put that back and hide it. We would have totally gotten away with it. No one would have known. But that's not what it's about. That's the freedom from remorse.

Recognizing that in yourself, rather than "Oh, I'm so bad, I had that thought"—recognize the space that doesn't act on it, the natural honesty, the natural restraint from harmful behavior, and really appreciate that. This is also an act of changing the habits of our mind, and it requires awareness.

I want to read one sutta, and then I won't go so much into the meditation practices. They all, of course, are purifying the mind—samādhi, all the different forms of samādhi, and the different forms of vipassanā. But we've talked about that here, and time is running out.

This is something I've really found helpful in terms of conscious contemplation. It's not only that our habits are purified in the acts of generosity, in the acts of non-harming behavior, but that actually we can consciously reflect later on our wholesome actions as a source of shifting and transforming the habits, of

purifying the heart and mind.

So I'm reading just part of a sutta in which the Buddha is giving a long talk to a layman who has come and asked, "Where should we lay people dwell in our minds for awakening?" He says, "This is a great question, Mahānāma. And the first place we dwell is the five spiritual faculties."

Remember them? Faith, perseverance, mindfulness, samadhi, and wisdom. So they're not just for people in deep retreat. That's the first thing.

And then he talks about some conscious reflections. I just want to read what he says about reflecting on your virtues—and then on your generosity, which is exactly the same.

Furthermore, Mahanama, there is the case where you recollect your own virtues. They are unbroken, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, conducive to concentration.

Now this is the important part, I think:

At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting their own virtue, her mind is not overcome with greed, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. Her mind heads straight based on virtue. And when the mind is headed straight, the disciple of the noble one gains a sense of the goal, gains a sense of the Dhamma, gains joy connected with the Dhamma. In one who is joyful, piti arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calmed experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.

It's always one leads to the next, to the next—and it's just the nature of things.

So, Mahanama, you should develop this recollection of virtue 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.

He's not just saying once in a while. This is an active act with awareness of purifying our heart and mind and bringing in joy, leading to the mind and heart free from defilements in any moment.

The same with recollecting your generosity:

It is great for me that among people overcome with a stain of possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness, freely generous, open-handed, responsive to requests.

And the same thing—at any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting her generosity, her mind is not overcome with passion, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. Her mind heads straight based on generosity.

I'll end with this:

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.

So the big picture: take care of your awareness in all aspects of our life.

Thank you for listening to the Dhamma.

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