Generosity: Transforming the Heart

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

Sometimes in the middle of a meditation retreat, with all our talks and discussions, everything is naturally about meditation—that's what we're here for. But we can forget, we too sometimes can forget, that everything the Buddha taught, as far as we understand, was for the purpose of really transforming our consciousness. Purifying our heart and mind, inclining to the wholesome, abandoning the unwholesome mind states, the suffering mind states.

And it's not only meditation. Meditation is like the central tool, a wonderful tool, a really powerful tool. But in the Buddha's teachings, meditation is not a complete path. It doesn't exist in isolation.

As I think we've said earlier, often when the Buddha would start to teach somebody, he wouldn't just begin with, "Okay, this is dependent origination, get it"—unless he knew they could, and occasionally someone could. But he would usually start with dana, or generosity, and talk about sila, morality, and talk about bhavana, mental cultivation. Tonight I want to talk about the first of these—generosity—as a training, a transformative quality of heart and mind, as part of the teaching and as a way of life.

I suppose the secret for me was this: we always think generosity is a good idea, right? Probably no one dismisses it outright. Sometimes you even hear, "I'll be generous because I can't meditate, but meditation is really where it's at." As if generosity were a lesser practice. But really, generosity as a practice is not about what it looks like, or what you give, or being appreciated. This quality of open-hearted sharing is, in the moment of generosity, a deep source of happiness, of joy, of transformation of heart and mind.

Obviously it counters greed—that's apparent. If you're being generous, unless it's something you really don't want (which doesn't actually count as generosity), you're working against that grasping tendency. But also, when one is truly generous in the moment, there's a sense of contentment, of sufficiency. It fosters and strengthens the sense of connectedness. When the heart is generous, it's not filled with ill will or separation. Generosity counters the false sense of separation and neediness. It's really very powerful.

What I mostly want to communicate tonight is something I didn't realize—almost like it was a secret—until I spent a lot of time practicing in Thailand and Burma. In those countries, where the teachings of Buddhism are woven into the culture and the majority of people are Buddhist to varying degrees of practice, generosity has a particular presence. It's in the culture in a profound way.

I don't mean to say we're not generous in this country. There's enormous generosity in the West—this real sense of volunteering, of offering our time and energy, not only during crises but at other times too. There's great philanthropy here. I certainly grew up with the sense that generosity is wonderful.

But for me—and I'm only speaking for myself—there was often a little bit of a "should" attached to generosity. One should be generous to those less fortunate. Just a little hint of differentiation: I can give because I have more. Which is fine, but what I didn't understand until I spent a lot of time on the receiving end in these countries is the incredible happiness and joy that arises in the mutuality of giving and receiving as a natural way of life.

I don't mean everybody in Thailand or Burma embodies this perfectly, but it's simply a way that exists there. I've learned so much and imbibed a great deal about it. Tonight I'll share some little stories as a way of communicating how contagious this is—the sense of joy in generosity of time, of small things, of food—and then the sense of joy and dignity in receiving. Both go together. It's not that the generous person is generous because they have more while the poor person who receives is lesser. Not at all. The sense of dignity, joy, and mutuality is an essential aspect of generosity.

The Buddha actually set up his sangha of nuns and monks and laymen and laywomen with the idea of sharing, of generosity, as a central connecting principle. This is a quotation from the Buddha:

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

Mutual support. The way he set up the bhikkhu sangha—the community of nuns and monks—was such that they had to live near lay people, so that every single day they would go out to receive alms for food.

And you can't keep food overnight. Completely reliant on the generosity of the lay community for the requisites of food, lodging, medicine, and robes. You couldn't just live a completely separate life, collect everything you need, and go off and isolate yourself. There's this sense of mutual generosity. As lay people are generous to support the Sangha, the Sangha comes and shares with lay people—both their sila, their conduct, and the generosity of sharing the dhamma—so that laymen and women, ordained men and women, support one another, not living in isolation. He really set up his sangha in this way. And to some extent, it still works like that, a little bit, in the Buddhist countries—in Thailand and in Burma.

I've spent more time in Burma these last years. I just love seeing in the morning, if you're in a meditation center, monastery, or nunnery—the nuns only go out twice a week, but the monks go out every morning—early in the morning, in a line, barefoot, with the alms bowl and eyes downcast, walking around the local villages. There's a little novice boy who runs ahead ringing a bell, so the people in the village know the monks are coming. If they choose—no one has to do anything—if they choose, they come out and offer some rice, some food, whatever little food they can offer. And it's not in a personal way. The monks don't look up and say, "Oh, hi, thanks so much, nice to see you again." It isn't personal. It's offering

to the Sangha for the continuation of the Dhamma and the Sangha.

There's just something about it—early in the morning at dawn, walking barefoot in silence, people coming out. I don't know, I must have been there in a previous life. I don't really know if there are previous lives. But there's something about it that is just so touching, walking across the fields.

The nuns go out in Burma twice a week, and you can see—because sometimes you can trail along after them, they let you do that—you can see there's a happiness in the people who are offering. They choose to get up early and come running out just to offer, take off their shoes, offer their rice, bow and go away, one handful in each bowl, and that's it. There's this real happiness that comes from that, a kind of mutuality.

Just to give a sense of how it works both ways: a few years ago I was staying in a monastery slash meditation center, where lay people could be there meditating. It was right after a big cyclone had hit part of the area southwest of Yangon. This was in Yangon. Thousands and thousands of people were killed, lost their lives and their land. It came into Yangon too, so this whole area was quite affected. Around this village, it's already very poor, but people were even worse off than usual. Crops couldn't grow, rice couldn't grow because the salt water had ruined the rice fields.

In this monastery where we were staying, some people donated money, and the Sayadaw, the head of the monastery, organized what's called a rice dana for every family in the village. He was offered the money, and he organized and brought huge truckloads of rice. There was a whole building filled with rice in the monastery. Then all the monks—because monks don't handle money, they can't go and purchase things, but they can work—all the monks who wanted to help would get bags and fill them with rice and sew them up. In Burma everyone has to be registered, so they actually know the name of every family in the village. Every family got a little chit, and then they would all come on this one particular day. A few of us who were there practicing were enlisted to kind of hand it over.

One beautiful thing is it's not done anonymously. It's not this sense of "We don't want you to know who's giving, and you should just take it and be ashamed that you need anything." It's all this sense of really valuing both the offering and the receiving as an aspect of happiness and purifying our heart and mind.

Everyone would line up from the village, come forward, and we would each take turns heaving these fifty-pound bags of rice to each person. These little ladies would come. It would take two of us—another friend and I—to lift this bag. We're handing it to her, and she goes plop, puts it on her head, and goes running off. I'm exaggerating. But every time, she'd have a kid on each hand, or one kid, and plop the rice on and off she'd go. Everyone was different. Some people really looking at you. Some people you could see felt maybe a little funny.

But anyway, we at first felt awkward. We didn't want to think, "Oh, we're so wonderful, giving you rice." But then you start to just feel so happy at the mutuality.

So people went off with their rice. And the next morning, the monks went out on their alms round. There's

always the same trajectory—each monastery has its regular route. Another monastery nearby would have a slightly different path, so the same houses don't have to choose which monastery to support.

The next morning the monks went out, and they know which houses usually offer. There was a friend of ours who was a monk at the time—not a Burmese guy, actually a Mexican guy. He came back that morning and he was really touched. He said, "We went out and now there were so many other people offering rice." Because they'd received rice yesterday, now they had rice, so they could offer some back. And that's the first thing they did with it. They came out in the morning, and they brought their little kids, having their children give the offering of rice back to the monks.

He was so touched. I was so touched when I heard it. Just that sense of how—and it's so often that way—when people in Burma get something, the first thing they think is, "How can I share this? Who can I offer some of this food to? Who can I help with my time?" It's just so deeply embedded. That kind of mutuality—I've run into it ten million times.

Sometimes being a foreigner coming, I go with some friends, and other people have offered us money to take to nunneries that are poor, that are just trying to get going, or that have forty young orphan girls they're supporting on their dāna. So we have some money from friends that we give. It's not a lot. And when we first started doing this, many of the nuns would insist—they'd come back to our meditation center in a few days and insist that we, about four or five of us, whoever was there, come and let them offer us lunch.

We'd think, "No, no, you hardly have enough." We felt abashed, ashamed. We didn't want to take the little they have. But that cuts the whole cycle of mutuality. This sense of shutting down to receiving is actually a lack of generosity of heart.

So we realized we should go. And we really would be offered these amazing meals. I have some photos of round tables just completely filled with twenty, twenty-five little bowls of different curries and sweets and fruits for four of us. It's embarrassing as heck. And then you see—this is what the thirty women and little girls in the monastery have, more than they'd have to eat in a week. We know that. Whatever we don't eat, at one place we're pretty good friends with, they take it and parcel a little bit out to the little girls, who are all so happy. They're saving it. They're going to parcel it out for days, what we didn't eat.

But to go and not eat, or not go—that's so ungenerous. It's a whole different energy. Say, no, we go and try not to eat? You cannot. You cannot go and not eat. They sit there: "Eat. Eat. Have some of this. Have some of this." It gets to where it's almost a nightmare. "You have to eat this. You have to eat this." You learn how to eat really a lot, three times more than you want, and then actually stop while there's still some left—it's more than you can ever eat—but to really stop being abashed, stop feeling bad about it, and just feel the happiness of receiving the generosity, seeing how happy the nuns are to be able to offer.

It's really contagious. After a while, it's not a sense of "I should be generous." It kind of started like that for

me: "Oh, everyone's so generous. I should really try to ramp it up a little bit." But after a while, it really is contagious.

And I'm saying this because it's a sense of the heart, the mind becoming happy, not feeling so separate, not feeling so isolated, not trying to find a parity—well, did I give as much as they gave, or is it equal, or whatever. It really doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all. It's this movement of open-hearted connection that's really incredibly powerful.

And I want to say it's not just a thing with ordained people. I mean, I hang out mostly in monasteries or meditation centers because that's where I go. I'm not saying everybody in Burma or Thailand is amazingly generous, just like not everyone here is. But it's amazing how often it pops up.

So this is another story from maybe two years ago. Again, I was with a couple of friends, and some people had offered money, and we were going to a money changer. It's a whole palaver that's changing now, but you couldn't change money at banks—that's unheard of. So you'd go and find a money changer through friends, and we're in this room and the money changers come. We were changing quite some money. And in Burma, the money they give you is big notes—a thousand note is equal to about a dollar, and they're big. So it's like this huge pile in the middle of the room, and you feel like you're doing a drug deal or something. It's really weird, except we're in an office in the middle of the monastery. It's still technically illegal, but this is what everyone does.

So anyway, these guys are really professional, these young guys, counting and calling up: what is it for Australian dollars? What is it for euros? What is it for dollars? And they have these little glasses. If there's the tiniest little dot, they won't take the dollar bills. And then they give you these chat notes that are falling apart in your hand—they won't take a hundred dollar bill with a little dot, but anyway. So they're looking at it, there's this pile in the middle of the room, and we were talking to our Burmese friend who was organizing it for us. Because it takes a long time, an hour or two, we're just hanging out. She's someone who's a big supporter of many monasteries and nunneries, so we were just talking about that and what we were doing, and how mostly this money was probably going to go to build toilets in nunneries or to help support these nun schools.

Then a couple days later, the woman who had been there called us up and said, "Oh, a new donation came in—like four hundred dollars." We asked who, and she just said, "Anonymous." We didn't know. We thought—she runs a B&B—maybe some friend, some meditator had come through. But when we went to collect it, she said, "No, it was the money changers." They had heard what we were talking about. They heard what the money was being spent for—for nuns. And then they just gave four hundred dollars.

It's so cool. Because you think of these sleazy guys, you know—and that's my total projection. It was just so touching. It's a thing that kind of gets in there. And I'm just telling these stories because I find it contagious.

It's not just Burma, so I want to tell a couple other stories. This one from the States. I cut it out of a magazine, the New York Times, ages ago—it must be at least ten years ago; I don't have the date on it. From Detroit. Talking about a man named Matt Dawson, who at that point had worked for the Ford Motor Company for fifty-nine years. He's seventy-eight years old. He could have retired a long time ago, but he drives a forklift. He does as much overtime as possible—seventy-eight years old. He earns about a hundred thousand dollars a year so he can give most of it away. He said he's given more than a million dollars to schools and charities since 1994.

"I get joy, happiness out of this," he said at a news conference. "I can go home and sleep good."

Matt Dawson only went through the seventh grade in Shreveport, Louisiana, before he came to Detroit. And all he's done is work, work overtime. He's divorced, has a grown daughter. He says, "You know, I was raised like that—to help others. I have more than enough." For Dawson, more than enough doesn't include vacations.

He drives a 1985 Ford Escort and has a little one-bedroom apartment. "A big house, a big car, that doesn't excite me," he says.

The first recipient of his money was the United Negro College Fund, which got $50,000 in 1994 and has received $180,000 since then. He's given $200,000 to Louisiana State University, $112,000 to churches in Detroit and Louisiana, $20,000 to the NAACP, $10,000 to community colleges, and now he just gave $431,000 to Wayne State University for scholarships. Amazing. "Because it makes me happy. I can go home and sleep good."

So don't go thinking, "Oh, I should be better than I am." Let in just a kind of appreciation for how these wholesome states are contagious, because it touches that same inclination to the wholesome in us. When we can tune into this—when we talk about the pleasant, it's not that we're trying to avoid pleasant. Wholesome states often have a quality of pleasantness that's onward leading. As we can really appreciate it, whether it's our own generosity or receiving generosity, even just hearing about it can brighten the heart and mind. That's a kind of wholesomeness that is quite useful just to soak in, you could say. If you turn to grasping, that's completely different. But this is a kind of wholesomeness that really is onward leading and strengthening—strengthening our mind and heart and transforming the habits of our mind.

Another story, this one from a letter. I'll keep it anonymous—from an American woman. She's writing while donating some money to a particular cause, and she says, "I've been on the verge of quitting a job I no longer need, and I've been wondering if or how this job serves me. I've decided to keep the job for five or six more months and give all the earnings away to causes that I love. This is the first of many. So thank you. This gift brings me great joy." She's thanking the people she's giving money to! "This gift brings me great joy and opens a whole new chapter of work as dāna, work as generosity to the world."

It stops feeling like who's giving and who's receiving. It really stops having that sense of "I'm the giver,

you're the receiver" or vice versa. It's just that mutual action of generosity, which takes two sides—that brightens and uplifts the heart and mind of all those involved, that lets go of clinging, that opens to connectedness.

One other story I just read off the BBC two days ago. It's called "A Strong Woman in Muzaffarnagar in India." I'll paraphrase it. Apparently in this town of Muzaffarnagar, there was fighting between Hindus and Muslims last month. Some dozens were killed. The BBC reporter Joanna Jolly went there with her local colleague and translator, Joydeep. There was a lot of anger, neighbor pitted against neighbor. But she'd heard of a Muslim woman who had adopted a little abandoned Hindu baby, and she just wanted to meet her. She's going as a news person.

She said they went there, and as they were walking toward this woman's home—this was a place where Hindus and Muslims had lived together peacefully for years, but now there was all this violence and fear—a crowd of maybe a hundred men formed around them. They pressed in close. It felt really threatening, but she wanted to go. Her colleague whispered that he was worried. "Let's hurry," he said.

What they found was, in the arms of this tiny woman, a tiny baby. The men said this little baby girl had been found ten days ago in a ditch, newborn, being mauled by dogs. This really poor Muslim woman had taken her in. They were convinced the child was Hindu, but it was only the generosity of this good Muslim woman that had kept her alive—even though she had eight children of her own.

The newswoman wanted to meet this woman. She said the woman was thirty-six but looked decades older. As they sat talking, the child was really tiny, didn't look very healthy, but the woman was just holding her in her arms and said, "I hope she'll grow up and go to school and get a government job. Then she can take care of me."

The newswoman said she wondered if this little girl could survive at all. She couldn't see any food in the courtyard, nor anything suggesting there was any money to look after her. "We have a rule as journalists not to give anything to the people we interview."

And it's a rule I've always followed. But the thought of the baby not having food was too much for me.

So she said to her translator, "I want to give some money." And she had to do it very secretively, of course, because there's this crowd of a hundred men crowding around, kind of threatening. So she hid it in her hand and went to shake hands with the woman, which is unusual—women don't shake hands in India. But the woman did it and could feel the money.

And so then they went to leave. She said the crowd of men came around, they were shouting in her face, they were demanding money, and she was really scared. They were trying to push their way back to the car. She said, "Just as I was beginning to wonder whether one of the men would hit me, I felt a warm touch around my stomach. It was the woman. She put her head on my shoulder, affectionately it seemed, and slowly but surely she guided me through the angry crowd. She would not let me go. Another man started

shouting in my face. She held me even closer and didn't let me go until I was safely inside our car."

"The money I had given her was nothing. Certainly it wouldn't make much difference. I wasn't expecting anything in return, but I felt she had repaid me a hundred times over, with a kindness and strength that humbled me."

It's that feeling of how just a little gift from the heart can evoke so much more strength. That gift of the woman's willingness to see her safely to the car had a really profound effect on the journalist, which hopefully will, as they say, pay it forward and keep on going. There's this sense that we never really know the effect generosity is going to have. It really can transform us.

So, last story from Burma about how generosity truly transforms our consciousness.

This is a story about two men who became monks in their thirties. Often in Burma, when people become monks, they ordain quite young for various reasons—they just grow up in that way. But these two men had become monks in their middle thirties.

The reason I know about them is that at the meditation center where we were staying, one of the resident monks—one of the things he likes to do is go out in the community, see who needs help, and facilitate something if he can. So he had met these two monks. They just had this little dusty plot of land with a little old crummy kuti on it. They weren't doing much. They were just kind of hanging out there, seeming a little lost. They weren't part of a big meditation center. They weren't particularly meditating. They didn't have a big teacher. They weren't particularly studying. So they were monks—they wanted to be monks—but they kind of didn't know what to do with themselves.

So U Nyanaloka, the monk at the center, said, "You know, you guys should do something." He suggested that the way schools work in Burma, if you go to the government school—if kids can afford that—in order to actually pass the exams, almost always the kids have to go back at night and pay the teachers for what's called tuition after school. Without this extra tuition, they don't learn enough to pass. That's the system. And this neighborhood was really poor. He said, "There are a lot of kids here that maybe go to the government schools, but they can't afford tuition. You guys are educated. Why don't you just start offering after-school tuition?"

And so they took it up. Then U Nyanaloka took us to meet these two monks—very interesting men, U Tena Basa and U Wepola. They didn't look like your typical spiritual monks. One had been a captain in the military, and the other one had been a businessman. When we asked him through a translator what kind of business, he said he'd been selling beer and things like that. Even so, his parents didn't want him to be a monk, but somehow they both wanted to quit their lives and become monks. They both chewed betel nut, which if you've ever seen it—your whole mouth turns red and disgusting and your teeth rot out.

It's not an uplifting look.

Men or women. And one of our friends has this real bias. If there's any monk or nun that's chewing betel nuts, he goes, "Betel nut chewing monk, betel nut chewing nun." And right away, it's really hard to see past it. So he says, "These are betel nut chewing monks."

But anyway, we went and they were having this after-school tuition. There were about a hundred kids coming and they were just teaching them to read and write, all ages up until about sixteen. We talked to the younger monk later, and this is more or less a direct quote from him. He said he felt like he'd wasted the first thirty-three years of his life just living a life, being a businessman. He said, "Now I'm giving my life and energy to helping others, to helping the children. I feel like I've been reborn." He was so uplifted when he was talking to us. He said, "I have a whole new life and I want to do some form of helping, some form of giving for the rest of my life. If it ends here, if there's no more way to help the children here, then I'll go somewhere else and do it for them there."

You could really see the transformation, the onward-leadingness. Whatever led him to become a monk, this everyday act of generosity, of offering what they can offer to these kids, was really changing his heart and mind. This is the Buddha's teaching. It's not just to be nice—it's really to purify. It's onward leading.

When one is generous and delights in giving, the heart tends to be satisfied and joyous. 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 generosity and virtue affords, the heart is easily settled and focused. So then meditation progresses more smoothly and the mind naturally brightens, making it suitable for seeing things as they truly are. This is from Ajahn Pasanno, but it's a paraphrase from things the Buddha says in many places.

At the heart of the practice of generosity—at the heart of all action—isn't how it looks or what someone else thinks or how much one gives or how much of one's time. It's all in the intention. All action, the seed of action, the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness, is in the intention of mind and heart.

Let me read a little story from the time of the Buddha. One of his most famous lay supporters was called Anathapindika. He was considered the most generous male lay supporter of the Buddha. You hear about him a lot. When he donated to the Buddha and the Sangha the monastery, the dwelling at Savatthi, the Jeta Grove—you see that in many suttas. They'll say, "On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Savatthi in Jetavana, the monastery of Anathapindika." The Buddha spent nineteen of his forty-five rains retreats there.

So Anathapindika was filled with faith, filled with happiness from when he first met the Buddha. He got so inspired and was incredibly generous throughout his life. This story about him gives a sense of how generosity isn't about how much you give or about merit, storing up merit for future lifetimes. Sometimes you hear that—not in the suttas, but sometimes I would hear it in Thailand or Burma. "Well, I can't practice, but I'll be generous." Which is great if we're cultivating and opening our own heart. But sometimes there's a sense that we're storing up merit in the merit bank for our next life. Every

open-hearted, generous act does create wholesome karma. But the Buddha's not saying, "Be generous so you'll have a happy life." For Anathapindika, it's really this sense of coming from love and the joy that it gives.

This one story gives a sense of the importance of intention—that it's not what's given, but the intention behind it.

Anathapindika supported the Sangha enormously. Besides giving the Jeta Grove, he would offer breakfast to all the hundreds of monks and nuns. He'd make sure they had their robes and their medicine. And every day, several hundred monks would come to his mansion and he would feed them a great meal.

So the king of the era, King Pasenadi—who you'll also often read about in the suttas—heard about Anathapindika's generosity and wanted to imitate him. It's kind of like the comparing mind we were talking about last night. "He's being generous, I can be generous too." So the king decided to supply alms every day for five hundred monks and had five hundred monks coming to his house and offering them food.

Andy Olendzki, the head scholar at the Center for Buddhist Studies, a Pali scholar, says that 500 usually means "a lot," basically. It's shorthand for a lot.

So the monks were coming, but after a while, the king heard from his servants that the monks would come, get the food he offered, but then take it away with them instead of eating. They would go into the city and give it to their supporters, and then their supporters would offer the food back to them, and then they would eat it. The king was puzzled, saying, "Why? I'm giving you really good, tasty food. What's this all about?"

So the Buddha explained to the king that in the palace, he just had his servants distributing the food, and they did it without any inner feeling, just following orders as if they were cleaning out a barn or doing any other chore. In fact, they lacked faith and actually thought the monks were parasites. They had completely the wrong attitude. And so the Buddha said that when anything was given in that spirit, no one could feel comfortable accepting it, even when the meal was of the most delicious food.

In contrast, the faithful householders of the city, like Anathapindika and Visakha, who was the most generous woman, really welcomed the monks as spiritual friends. A humble meal provided by a friend would be worth much more than the most sumptuous meal offered by someone who did not give it in the right spirit.

So this is really where the purification of our habits, the purification of our heart is occurring. Not in the amount, but in just that willingness to share.

The Buddha again: even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or a cup—like when you rinse out a bowl of food just to wash it out—just throws the rinsings of a bowl into a village pool or a pond while

thinking, "May whatever animals live here feed on this," that would be an act of generosity. It's really this sense of how it is in our heart. So it's never a sense of "I can't be generous, I have nothing." It's not that at all.

In fact, one time we were in a small fishing village, a pretty poor fishing village, visiting, and a friend who had been there a couple of years before hadn't been able to get into Burma. But some of the people we met there remembered him. So this one pretty poor fisherman remembered him and said, "Oh, he's in Bangkok, he can't come?" And all he had was a big old dried fish. But he said, "Please, take this dried fish to your friend in Bangkok." So we were like, okay. But it's so touching, really. It's really so touching. It's so sincere. And that's all he has, the dried fish. Just this immediacy of giving.

So we took it. Of course, we weren't going to Bangkok for ages. So then we thought, okay, what do we do with the dried fish? And we took it to the next monastery we were at and offered it for a meal. And that's how it goes. It just keeps going on and on.

I say that like it's funny, but I could get into a kind of superior attitude, like, "Oh, dried fish is stupid." But it's so beautiful that one offers what one has. And that's just as much a deep generosity of heart as some billionaire giving a million dollars and writing a check without even thinking about it. Which one is the generosity the Buddha was pointing to? The generosity that's really transformative?

One time when Sayadaw U Pandita was here teaching, the translator, a monk from Nepal, gave a talk on the practice of giving, the practice of generosity. He had just a few steps to consider, so I want to mention them, because I really wrote it down and I've remembered it all these years. Don't go crazy thinking this is how you have to do things, but it just makes a few points.

So, the practice of giving. The first is, of course, when you first have your first thought of giving, take a moment and really give attention to the volition, to the intention in our heart and mind. So it's not just some thoughtless act. Even when we have the thought "I want to give" but can't quite do it. You know how it is sometimes?

The Tibetans have a wonderful teaching I love. When you want to give and you just can't do it, just practice. Take a stone in one hand and practice giving it into your other hand. Just practice letting it go and receiving. You can kind of keep upping the ante from stones to some good food to some money or whatever. But just practice.

So that's the beginning: just giving attention to the volition. Not about being perfect, but seeing what's true.

Then, whatever it is that one is deciding to offer—whether it's time, whether it's service, willingness to lend an ear to a friend, food, whatever it is—again, it's like purifying your volition. Try to put aside, to abandon, whatever clinging there may be to it.

You know, there's this sense of "I really don't want this anymore, I'll give it." We can even barely do that. And then there's something else—a thought comes up, "Let me offer this." And it's a really pure volition in the beginning, and then we're about to offer and this voice says, "But maybe I might use this sometime in the next ten years. I really like this."

I'll see that sometimes. I want to give away clothes. Something is sitting there, hanging there—I haven't worn it for ten years. And I'll pick it up and go, "Yeah, but maybe..." And I think, "What is that about?" More than I could ever need. I don't mean beat yourself up, but just watching. This is like purifying the volition, abandoning attachment to it. So we're really giving.

And the third aspect—and this is interesting—when it's appropriate, which is not here on silent retreat, it's not appropriate. But when it's appropriate, there's something powerful about really giving and receiving very directly, face to face. I know we have this thing—I mean, we don't all, but somehow I get the sense in this country that to give anonymously is really a lovely thing because you're not getting all the credit for it. But there's also something very powerful about the simplicity of giving face to face, wholehearted giving and wholehearted receiving. Even with little things.

In Thailand and in Burma, where this is very much a part of the ordained culture, you go and offer flowers, you offer food, you offer support to the nuns or the monks. Whatever it is, a little thing or a big thing—if you go to a nunnery and offer even a big pile of money, it's like a little ceremony. You put it on a tray, and then you kneel, and you hold the tray, and the nuns that are receiving it hold the tray, and they'll do a whole chant of mettā, a blessing. They're blessing you for your generosity, wishing you mettā, wishing, "May you soon attain nibbāna."

People say that there. You offer something and they say, "May you attain nibbāna in the shortest possible time." Can you imagine?

A friend of mine was offering just the food dāna at a monastery—you know how we do here, that's where we got that. Every day people go and hand over money to buy the food for all the meditators that day. She had done this before, but she was blown away. She offered it to the woman who's the secretary at the monastery, just handed her the money, and the woman took it. Face to face, you look, you're both holding it, and she said, "May you attain nibbāna in this retreat." And my friend was like, "Wow."

Doesn't that really imbue it with a sense of respect and dignity? Not just, "Oh yeah, thanks, okay, here's the money, boom." But "May you attain nibbāna." It's an appreciation both ways.

And so that happens a lot. When Sayadaw U Pandita was here one time, and I was on retreat, I had heard about—I don't know—anyway, some book I wanted to offer him. And I was on retreat, so I had a friend buy the book and give it to him, and I was happy with that. I came out of retreat, and he said, "No, you have to hand it to me directly."

It was really interesting. I was embarrassed. I felt shy. I wasn't at all comfortable. I mean, I wanted to offer

the book. I was glad he had it. Let's be done with it. But he made me sit there and very formally hand it to him. And he received it very formally, really one hundred percent present.

It was such a powerful teaching for me. I don't know why I should be embarrassed to just offer a gift. It's really a strange thing—some weird sense of self. But just this appreciating of the act.

It's not about me. It's not about whether the gift is good enough. There's no judgment. It's just strengthening that movement of generosity of heart—that really completes the circle.

And that leads to the fourth quality: when we're giving, give with the heart and mind really present. Really in touch with the giving, really focused on the intention. Do it with 100% presence. Which, of course, we're doing with everything we do—I know. But to really do that.

I was thinking about how often I'll write a check to Amnesty or whatever, and that's nice. But it can become just another item on the list: pay the electric bill, pay this bill, pay Amnesty, pay that. Wait a minute—really do it with a sense of presence, with a sense of appreciating the generosity. That's very important, even when you can't get a return.

Or there's a place where you can put food for the food bank—every month, people bring canned goods. And I notice how sometimes I can just be in the supermarket and buy a few things, run in, throw them down, and go. It's so different to go buy the things with full awareness of the generosity. Not like, "I'm so generous, aren't I great?" It's not that. It's the sense of happiness you feel just being able to offer, just being able to move out of your own little world. And then when I go put the food down, just be present while I do it. That's all. There's no one there to see. There's no one there to know. But it really is very different from just doing it as another errand.

And then, of course, after the giving, continue to be mindful of volition. Because as we know, everything changes. You give something away and then think, "I wish I'd given fifty dollars less. What if I'm short at the end of the month?" Just notice that. That's all. Just notice it. You don't have to let it take over.

And have a clear comprehension—a broader awareness of the larger context. We can't always know everything, but it's not that you have to give just because someone asks, no matter what. There's such a thing as giving that could be damaging to you. It could be that you're giving to someone who's an alcoholic and you know they're just going to buy more vodka. You don't really want to support that. There could be another way to be generous to them. It's about really looking and seeing. It's not that you should give anything, anytime.

There's a story about this in the suttas with Anāthapiṇḍika again. He had a nephew who would come to him—and Anāthapiṇḍika was really wealthy, like Bill Gates today. He could give and give and give. So the nephew would come and ask for a whole bunch of money. Anāthapiṇḍika would give it to him, and the nephew would go gamble it away, squander it, then come back and ask for more. Anāthapiṇḍika would give more. The nephew would gamble it away, get into really bad straits, and come back again.

After the third or fourth time, Anāthapiṇḍika said, "Okay, this is the last time. I'm not giving you any more money. You're just wasting it and ruining your life."

Same thing happened. The nephew came back again. This time Anāthapiṇḍika gave him some clothes, gave him some food, and said, "I'm not giving you anything else after this."

The nephew went away. Same pattern. He came back again. And this time Anāthapiṇḍika really gave him nothing.

Sometime later, the nephew was found outside the walls of the city—dissolute, starved to death in the gutter, or died from drink.

So you can imagine Anathapindika felt horrible and went to the Buddha, saying, "Oh my God, what did I do? I should have..." And the Buddha said, in essence, "No, no, no, you did right." He said there are some people you cannot help. There are some people who, in a particular situation... Remember, he has the vision of lifetimes, so this isn't just about one lifetime. This person was simply so caught in negative mind states that he couldn't break out of them. Your giving and giving and giving wouldn't have helped him. I just find that interesting, to have a sense of the broader context.

The first time I went to India, there was just so much poverty, and coming from the States, never having traveled much before—when I first went, I was nineteen—I was like, "Oh my gosh," the suffering was just overwhelming. In a sense, I could have given away every single thing I had and all the money I had with me in the first hour, easily. And it would have helped people a little bit, but you can't touch the depth of it. How do you deal with that? It doesn't mean you have to give away everything or else you're not generous. You consider the whole context.

The seventh element I would add is for us to receive in that same open, present, mindful way. Because as I was saying, receiving is an essential part of giving. For me, I've found that I've learned so much from receiving joyously and appreciatively.

The last thing I want to mention about the practice of generosity is not from that talk anymore, but concerns not only the giving and the receiving. This is something the Buddha speaks about in the suttas—the value and importance, the use of wise thought, wise contemplation, of reflecting on your own generosity, and also reflecting on your own sila, your own moral conduct.

So at times when your mind is really caught in negativity—remember a few weeks ago I talked about what cultivates brightness of mind, confidence, faith—when you can't be mindful, when you can't find anything good, sit and actually contemplate your own generosity. Not your lack of generosity, but really incline the mind to tune into, to remember the wholeness. It's like previous kamma, previous intentions of generosity, ripening as appreciation and memory in the present moment.

A very simple example: if you've ever spent some years taking care of aging parents, you may know how,

however much you do, it's very easy to feel that you haven't done enough because there's always so much more one could do. At least that's my experience. I can think of all the ways I should have given everything I had, I should have stopped my life, I should have moved to Atlanta, I should have done this, I should have done that. The mind can really turn negative or guilty.

But try really inclining the mind to the beautiful. Actively contemplate all the acts of love and generosity. Just bring them up. Not "I'm so great"—that's an ego thing—but just let them start to come. And sila too. This is a very powerful aspect.

I want to close with a quotation from a sutta where the Buddha is talking about this. What I'm reading is about recollecting your own generosity—he says exactly the same thing for recollecting your own sila, your own non-harming conduct. He's talking to a layman:

"This is the case where you recollect your own generosity, thinking: 'It is 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.'"

So really thinking about that, thinking about the happiness of it.

"At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, at that time her mind is not overcome with greed, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion."

It's literally inclining to the wholesome. It's literally transforming our consciousness, the habits of our mind.

"Her mind heads straight based on generosity. And when the mind, the heart is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones has a sense of the meaning, has a sense of the Dhamma, experiences joy connected with the Dhamma."

And then the same thing I read before: "In one who is joyful, rapture 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."

"So, Mahanama, you could 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, any time.

And that's a really wholesome use of thought.

So I just encourage you all to recollect your generosity, recollect your wholesome conduct, and notice how in that moment your mind is freed from greed, hatred, and confusion.

This is the path the Buddha is teaching us.

Thank you for your attention. Let's just sit for a moment.

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