Dāna/Sīla Transforms The Habits Of The Mind

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:23

So I mentioned this afternoon that I wanted to talk a little bit more about dāna tonight, but it's kind of embedded in the whole talk. It's not just about that.

Sometimes it can sound, from the instructions we're giving—the steady awareness, the complete non-interference, really being totally present without changing anything to see how the mind and body work—it can give one the impression that really the culmination of this practice would be somehow abdicating involvement with life, abdicating engagement with life. You know that's not true, right? But that's what I'm going to talk about tonight.

Often people really think, well, if you never get involved, if you never change what's happening, how do we do anything in the world? And of course, that's not the point, but it works in a different way from what we think.

Another thing that people say to me frequently—and I think I mentioned this in one or two of the groups—but people have often said this as we're talking more and they're discovering how much greed and aversion are arising in the heart and mind, and how much they kind of lead us to action. And we keep hammering about the unwholesome aspect of that. People have said quite seriously, literally, "Well, if I don't act from greed and aversion, what do I do—just sit in my room for the rest of my life?" Very seriously. Which is to me really saddening, because that's the implication that these are the motivators of the world, these are the drivers of action—greed and aversion.

We were exploring it in one of the groups about strong aversion. Greed too can feel very enlivening, can't it? It gives us a sense of purpose; it kind of wakes us up from calm. Let's have some aversion going on, some greed—we feel really much more alive, and much more "me" too, which is really to the point. But it kind of overlooks the fact that there are many other impulses to speech and action than greed and aversion, which is of course all the wholesome qualities that we've been talking about.

But just to say from the Buddha, just so you know, that the point of awareness, the point of wisdom isn't to let us just be so cooled out that we don't engage in the world at all. This is one of the statements from the Buddha:

In what way is one a wise person of great wisdom? A wise person of great wisdom does not intend for their own affliction or for the affliction of others or of both. Rather, when they think, they think only of their own welfare, the welfare of others and of both, and the welfare of the whole world. It is in this way that one is a wise person of great wisdom.

So a wise person is known by the intentions of caring for the welfare. And you notice he also says the welfare of oneself—all equal. Sometimes we think, if I'm really wise and compassionate, thinking about my own welfare is somehow greedy. But the Buddha is saying we're all in this together. My own welfare is as important as the welfare of another and the welfare of both.

And in another place, he says a wise person is known by their actions. It is through the activities of one's life that one's wisdom, one's discernment shines. So he's definitely saying the understanding, the opening of heart and mind, the real wisdom, is going to manifest in how we are in the world, how we are with ourselves, how we are with each other.

So wisdom and this awareness practice—it's not about abandoning acts in the world, but it's to allow the wisdom to grow that gives us the choice, the space to allow wisdom to choose, to act from wisdom, from compassion, from appropriateness in the face of any situation, instead of being so automatically seduced by the call of craving or the vitality of aversion. The steady awareness, the wisdom that arises, just gives that space to see more clearly, and the appropriate response can naturally arise.

But I want to go a little more into what the Buddha means by action, which many of you are aware of. He's very specific. And this is where looking at these habits of mind, the wholesome and the unwholesome, is so key. Because for most of us, when we think of action, we think of the actual act as being good or bad or wholesome, or the actual words we say. But the Buddha was very clear.

The word kamma just means action. So he says, "Intention or volition, I tell you, is action. Intending, one does action, one does kamma by way of body, speech, and mind."

And so what he's putting out—and this is what's so interesting and so helpful and accessible in seeing why cultivating and transforming the habits of mind is so key to waking up and to how we are in the world with one another—is that the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of any action, as the Buddha talks about it, is in the intention. That movement of mind, that cetanā is the word in Pali, that little movement of mind that gives rise to action. There would be no action without that movement of mind. We're not going to always notice it arising in every moment.

So that movement of mind arises together with whatever particular qualities are in the mind. Does that sound familiar? We've been hammering on it all week, right? Notice what are the qualities arising in the mind as you're being present, as you're eating, whatever. This is because these qualities in a moment leading to speech or action are going to be the motivation.

Again, this will be very familiar to some of you from the Dhammapada. This is Gil Fronsdal's translation:

All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a corrupted mind and suffering follows as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a peaceful mind and

happiness follows like a never departing shadow.

So obviously, corrupted mind means with greed, hatred, confusion. And a peaceful mind means with any of the wholesome qualities, with calmness. Or as Dingo Kensey Rinpoche said, actions are the servants of the mind.

This is really very essential. It's clear—this verse is like the second verse in the whole Dhammapada. It's that important.

So the time that we've spent here seemingly just watching what's going on in the mind and the body, not engaging, just letting it all be—this is so essential to really coming to understand how the mind works, how it feeds motivations, and how motivations lead to action. It's essential even just to get in the habit of tuning into what's going on in our mind.

What leads to speech and action? Of course we're not going to notice that a lot of the time, but that's why there's so much emphasis on this steady awareness, recognizing what qualities are arising in consciousness right now. Because that's what leads to action, rather than focusing on the results.

You can see how the same seeming action—we can't really evaluate if it's helpful. We can't evaluate from the outside, if it's not us, what's the quality of the action, since it lies in the intention.

Speech is a really good place to explore that. You can say something that you think will be for the good of another, but you can say it with total irritation. "I'm telling you this"—but your motivation is so they'll fix themselves and stop bugging you. I mean, totally. We can kid ourselves, but if we're really paying attention, we know. And frankly, they always know too. You really can't hide it.

Or you can say the same thing with a lot of care and loving-kindness. Or you can say it kind of negligently—you meant to say it before and you knew it would be helpful, but right now you're just tired and you want to say it, so you just blurt it out without paying any attention to what's going on with the person, whether they're tired or they just got some bad news. Just completely oblivious—a kind of delusion. Or it can be done with real care. Same words, same words.

This is just a very simple example, but we can start to explore and recognize for ourselves that the intention matters. When the Buddha talks about suffering or happiness coming from speaking or acting with a corrupted mind or a peaceful mind, of course he's talking about the suffering or the peace in our own mind and heart. It's not that, as we all know, if we do an act that's really kind and good, then everything good always comes back. Not immediately, sometimes.

So if we're always looking at the external as the evaluator, as the assessment, we're going to get really confused and disappointed sometimes. But when we're tuning into ourselves—if you've done something from the clearest, kindest motivation you could, and it just doesn't land with the other person, and you're willing to hear that if it doesn't land and you want to know why, you keep on going with it. Or it could be

something where they're just not interested. They're off somewhere else and they just brush you aside. But still, you have that clarity and kindness of your own motivation. And that's really where the peace is, where the ease is. It doesn't mean we can fix the world.

So that's why the quality arising in the heart and mind in this moment—which can lead to thought, speech, action—is the key. It's the key to really understanding suffering and happiness.

When we talk about purifying the habits of mind—have we used that term much here? Sometimes we do. Let's say *transforming*, in case purity is not a happy word for you. We're transforming the habits of our mind. Really, you could say in a way, we're not uprooting, but wisdom dissolves the habits of greed, hatred, delusion.

In some ways, I've been feeling and sensing more and more, the more I practice, that actually everything the Buddha taught—all aspects of what he taught, not just sitting, not just meditation—is about transforming these habits of mind. That's it. All of it.

And so when we think, "I'm just watching greed, greed, greed, greed, greed, greed—can't I do something more interesting?" This is it. This is it. Until wisdom comes in and you have a moment of non-greed. Then you can watch non-greed, non-greed, non-greed. This is the key. The Buddha said over and over that he discovered the liberation of heart, of mind, through non-clinging. Other times he said that Nibbāna is directly visible.

When? When the heart-mind is not obsessed with greed, or obsessed with ill will and hatred, or obsessed with delusion. So really, it's not just a sidebar—everything he taught, I truly believe, was in service of transforming these habits of mind and heart.

Meditation, the steady awareness we've been cultivating, and other forms too—this is the Dāna-Sīla-Bhāvanā. These are the three pillars the Buddha taught. Dāna: generosity. Sīla: non-harming behavior. Bhāvanā: mental cultivation, cultivation of heart and mind. We've had sīla and dāna embedded in this retreat, but the focus, of course, has been more on bhāvanā. Yet all of it—all of it—is working together. It's not just about bhāvanā.

So this may be the most direct way to insight: the steady, steady awareness that sees clearly until suddenly, ah, it lets go. But these other qualities of working with dāna and sīla, really embracing them as part of the path, are also very key, very supportive in transforming these habits.

There's a statement I read from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche that I really like. This is how it feels to me when the habits are transforming through what we're doing in all aspects of our life. He says, "We're mingling our minds with the Dharma until it permeates our whole being." That's what I feel we're doing. If it's just meditation, we're mingling our mind with the Dharma only in meditation—then we go out and we can't continue to find awareness, so we have to wait until the next retreat. But it's everything, everything in our life: mingling our minds with the Dharma until it permeates our whole being. That just makes me so

happy, just thinking that.

And it's not like it's an act of will doing it, but it's the willingness to incline the heart and mind toward the wholesome. That's what I want to keep talking about tonight: transforming these habits of heart and mind.

In terms of the meditation practice here, we've talked a lot the last couple of nights about recognizing the wholesome qualities, because that's equally important. But I know it's been coming up in the groups—one or two people have noticed that greed arises more frequently than they might have realized. And once or twice, people have noticed, "Gee, judgment and ill will and aversion seem to come up once in a while. They seem to be driving things, and I didn't even know they were here."

Sometimes when we start to see this—not only start, but actually when we've been continuing to see it over years—we realize: let go. It takes years. It's not a couple of retreats, as people who have been sitting a long time know. These habits have been reinforced through so many mind moments. We've practiced them so much. But they are habits.

People can get a little despondent. It can at times feel overwhelming. Has it ever felt overwhelming? Just like, "Oh my God, look how much greed there is. There's no way." Because if you think you've got to get out the pickaxe and uproot each moment of greed, that's endless, right? You uproot one and then another one comes up. You uproot one and think, "Have I done it yet?" Oh, that was greed—I've got to uproot another one. That can seem a little overwhelming, and that's not how it works, thank goodness.

The wisdom does transform, and you may have noticed how sometimes it seems to happen quite naturally. Mark mentioned—or maybe both Mark and Alexis—what the Buddha called the three wise intentions: how greed transforms into non-greed, or generosity. You can see in the first one how ill will transforms into non-ill will, into friendliness; and how harmfulness transforms into compassion, into caring.

Many people have named or mentioned little moments here. They may seem insignificant, but it's important to recognize where just the steady awareness—and the wisdom that arises from that—naturally chooses the wholesome. These unwholesome motivations, in that moment, either dissolve away without seeming like an act of will, just by themselves, or they don't arise at all.

Simple things. People say, going to the meal and noticing greed, and then just not acting on it, and it drops away. Wow. Or going in at some time in the evening, expecting to have greed, and there isn't any. It just doesn't come up. It's just a little moment, but it's really significant to notice these things. This strengthens the confidence—not in your own ability, but in the fact that steady awareness leads to wisdom, and wisdom really does let go of these qualities, doesn't feed them.

With ill will too. Maybe you've been noticing how much your mind tends to judge.

This is a really common thing. You sit there in the dining room on retreat and everybody that walks by –

everybody – gets some negative judgment. "I can't believe they're wearing socks like that. I can't believe that – they must have had that on yesterday. I can't believe they're making that much noise when they're walking. I can't believe they're going so slow." And on and on.

And finally you notice: maybe it's not them. It's possible. It's a possibility that there's aversion distorting the perception. And then, okay, this is what my mind does. I'm so aversive. You get used to it. You're making peace with it.

And then one day you're sitting there, and the person walks by, and nothing comes up. Just friendliness. "Oh, yeah, look at them. They're doing the best they can. Isn't that lovely?" You go, "Who was that? That's not familiar."

Let it in. Let it in. You notice it's not fake – you're not faking it. It's not pretending: "May you be happy, you schlump." No, you're really feeling it. The judgment doesn't come up. It's really different.

It's familiar, isn't it – the faking? We try. We're trying with the best of intentions, but that's delusion. We don't know what we're doing. But when it really doesn't come up, feel that spacious heart and mind that's empty of ill will. It really is, as Mark says, non-ill will. It may not be boundless metta, but it's non-ill will. Feel that.

Or consider cruelty. Here on retreat, hopefully we're not really being cruel to each other, but what kind of stuff does your mind say to yourself when things are going on that are difficult? Or when aspects of your personality come up that you're familiar with and you really don't like and you think should be really over by now – how friendly, how kind is your mind with that sometimes? There's this real harshness, why meditation is so hard often, because we're just so cruel to ourselves.

But then, have you noticed a moment when the same thing comes up, the mind maybe starts to get tight, and then: "Oh, yeah, that's really hard. It's okay. It's like this now." And that happens naturally. Again, let it just be perceived with awareness – the emptiness of cruelty, the space of compassion, just that simplicity of being with what is. It's not an act of personal will or forcing. It's natural.

And so the power of awareness-wisdom is really, in some ways you could say, maybe the most direct way of transforming the habits of mind. We know it's one moment at a time, but each moment like that, when the awareness is steady and you really notice the dissolving or the non-arising of the torment, it's a powerful moment. It's really transforming the habits. And they are habits, these difficult qualities. It's not inevitable. It can seem like it's inevitable sometimes.

I heard just a snippet of a talk by Bishop Desmond Tutu to some young men and women in their early twenties, living in a really difficult part of town, an area where there's a lot of violence. And he was telling them that no, it's really up to you. He turned to them and said very forcefully, "We learn to hate. Hate isn't natural. You don't have to hate. We learn to hate."

And as much as there's so much violence and hatred in the world, and how much the news often seems to feed that, giving us more examples of it, we can also always find examples of the opposite – where people in circumstances I can't imagine being in respond in a different way. Respond with compassion.

Respond with kindness. It just is a great thing to take in. Because I feel like when I look inside my own heart and mind, I'm seeing all the aspects of suffering and the potential for beauty, for wholesomeness, for love, for compassion. And I'm this microcosm of human beings. We all are. So we look in ourselves, we see the difficulty, but also the beauty, also the potential—and the same out in the world. So when I hear something like that, somebody saying something that's just inspiring, I just take it in and really appreciate it because it brings up faith in me. It brightens the heart and mind.

The latest one I heard was a couple of weeks ago on the BBC. It was the day after the attacks on the mosques in New Zealand. The BBC reporters were down there interviewing survivors—I don't know how they can do that. They were talking to one man who had been in the mosque with his wife, and she had been killed. He was an elderly man living in a wheelchair, and she had been his main caretaker. So they're interviewing him, asking the kinds of questions like, "Who do you blame?" But he was just saying—I wrote it down because I really liked it—he was saying, "Perhaps someone who acts like this person did is hoping that there will be retaliating violence from other Muslims, but that's not going to happen here." He said, "We are one people." He was talking about all the people in New Zealand, not only the people in the mosque. "We are one people. We don't want vengeance. We need to change within ourselves to be able to live together."

I just thought that was so beautiful—his wife had just been killed, and he says we have to change within ourselves to live together. And that's true. It's out there in the world. There are many, many people cultivating and committed to waking up in whatever way, to transforming their hearts and minds, to developing the wholesome. Sometimes we can see it in ourselves, and that can strengthen faith. But when we see it in others, that can also strengthen faith, because in a way, we are one humanity—different stories, but the same way that the heart and mind and body work.

So I want to speak a little about dāna and sīla as the Buddha taught them—as aspects, as ways to embrace transforming the habits of our heart and mind. As most of you know, whenever the Buddha would begin a teaching, always to lay people especially, he would talk about generosity first.

I have to say, just to be honest, in the beginning of my practice—it started in India, but then here—the emphasis and the interest was very much on bhāvanā, on meditation, for all the different reasons. And of course, generosity is always, "Yeah, generosity is good, you know." And sīla is also, "You need sīla so you can practice better"—as foundational. But I never really got it, and I'm not blaming my teachers. After my first retreat, I didn't even know it was Buddhism. I'm sure the teacher might have mentioned it. So I'm not really blaming the teachers. It changed my life. I didn't know why. I didn't know what was going on. It just shows we don't have to know that much—we just do it.

Growing up here too, generosity was always presented as a good thing. And I think my family was generous. People in this country are generous. But the sense tends to be focused on what was given and how much. People would say about someone, "Oh, they're so incredibly generous," and it's usually about someone who has a lot to give. It doesn't have to be, but it often is. But generosity, just as with everything else, is actually about the motivation in the heart, in the mind.

That opening of heart and mind that doesn't hold on to whatever it is—whether it's time or a smile or just a willingness to connect, or a flower, or money, whatever it is. At the heart of generosity, it's not about a "should," that you have to give because that's the right thing to do. It's because the act of generosity, the motivational act of it, is a source of real happiness. It's a source of real connectedness and happiness.

And I really didn't understand this until I spent a lot of time in Thailand and Burma, practicing in the Buddhist parts of those countries. There, it's a very deeply ingrained understanding. And it can get warped, because we can warp everything. But the sense of it—in Burma, they'll say, "Oh, this is an opportunity for dāna." And they get excited. "Oh, look at this, an opportunity for dāna!" They'll get really happy and go find whatever way they can offer food or whatever it is.

So in the moment of a generous act, whatever it is, tuning into the motivation—you can feel how in that moment of sharing, it counters ill will. There's not ill will in that moment. In fact, it was said somewhere that the Buddha suggested if you're feeling ill will towards someone, you should give them a gift. Before I understood the motivational aspect, I didn't understand what that was about. You'd get paranoid if someone gives you a gift. But it's not that. If you're really moving from generosity, in that moment there's not ill will. In that moment it's really an open-hearted connectedness, and it brings a happiness to the mind. It isn't ill will. So it's actually countering the ill will. And of course it counters greed and possessiveness, whether it's your time or a thing, whatever. And also self-cherishing. It strengthens the sense of connectedness, the recognition of non-separation.

You don't have to get all intellectual about it. I'm talking about it, but this is all happening in one moment when you're actually giving anything—to really do it with fullness of presence and a sense of appreciation and dignity. Sometimes I would feel a little abashed to be offering something. What if they don't like it? I'd feel a little self-conscious. And that really cuts the mutuality. The thing that really feeds and strengthens the happiness of generosity is the mutuality—the giving with dignity and mindful attention, and the receiving in the same way. Really conscious.

So when you give, really tune into the motivation to offer. And when you're actually doing it, stay present with that, really present. And then afterwards, later, you can actually reflect on the act of generosity. The Buddha suggests this. And that brightens the mind and heart. So there are three moments of brightness, of happiness, from an act of generosity: the motivation, the actual doing, and the reflection afterwards. And it's not happiness like, "Oh, it feels good, la la la," like eating chocolate. It's a way that it brightens the heart and mind. It's countering ill will.

One time when Sayadaw U Pandita was here and I was practicing with him for a couple of months, I'd heard he wanted a specific book. So I wrote a friend of mine who was on staff while I was sitting, asking if he would get this for me and give it to Sayadaw, which he did. He said it was from Carol and so on. When the retreat ended and I was just paying my respects to Sayadaw, he told someone to go get this book. He brings it out and hands it to me and says, "Okay, now give it to me directly."

It was really interesting. And I was nervous, you know. He could be intimidating. So I was handing it to him, and he's fully present. "Give it to him directly." And he said—I'm not sure he said this exactly, but it's what Burmese people say a lot. He said something similar.

And they mean it. Even just a little gift to a laywoman in a monastery—you give it and they receive it with full presence and say something to the effect of, "May this be a cause for you to reach Nibbāna in the shortest possible time." Isn't that nice? You give somebody five dollars and they're saying, "May this be a cause for you to reach Nibbāna in the shortest possible time." It's a whole different feeling around the act of generosity and the act of receiving.

Something I really learned about this, the sense of mutuality, is that in giving, it's equally important to receive. Spending time in Burma—where I've spent more time, near where Shwe Oo Min is—there's another place I've spent some time. And there are many, many small nunneries around there. Tons of them, and some of them really poor. Nunneries tend to get less support than monks, and these nuns live completely on dāna. They're not out there earning a living. Everything comes from generosity—building the buildings, getting their food, having toilets, digging a well, all of it.

A few friends have been giving us donations when we go over in the winter, and then we offer it to certain nunneries. They need a well. They need a toilet. So we offer, and we say, "This is from hundreds of friends. We're just carrying it and offering it." And then the beauty with which it's received—not like, "Oh, thank you, we're so poor, this is embarrassing." No, it's received with real appreciation, and then they get together and do a whole mettā chant, a whole blessing chant. It's a very formal ceremony.

And then—this is what I had to really learn—the nuns would want to invite us back and give us lunch. They would give us a lunch that was like twenty-five different curries for three people, and then another whole table of desserts. They don't eat like that. They're not eating any of that. And what we could leave over, which was most of it, they'd probably live on for a week. They wouldn't eat with us. But if we said, "No, no, no, we're well taken care of. You keep this. Eat it yourselves"—that completely cuts the mutuality, the sharing, the back and forth. They were so happy to watch us eat. It's really hard because they urge you to eat and eat and eat until you can't stand another minute. Finally, after a couple of years, we said, "Okay, we're just saying no to everybody because it's really too much."

But the sense of mutuality and not saying, "Oh, I have more than you, so you shouldn't give me anything"—saying that shuts off the oneness. It shuts it all off. The dignity and beauty in receiving actually brings joy and happiness to the heart. So it's really transforming a kind of holding separate into

wholesomeness, into generosity, into mettā. Not compassion at that point—it's more mettā and generosity. And then the whole cycle of generosity becomes contagious. It just keeps on going.

I'll tell you one little story because I thought of it today—a friend who's practicing here started it years ago. Again, it was at Shwe Oo Min. I don't know, was it ten years ago or something? She had been sitting there and had gone over, and I hadn't been there before. I didn't know any of the nuns or anything around. She had wandered around and met a nun in a small nunnery that didn't have much, kind of made friends with her, and then offered her money to get electricity. She didn't have electricity, and you needed a few hundred dollars or something—it was complicated then. So she offered that, and she was really, really happy to be able to offer. And then she became friends with this nun—Daw Sumanacari is her name. And the nun would invite her for mohinga, which is this fish soup that's like one of the special dishes of Yangon. To make mohinga is a real gift. And then this friend invited me to come along. So I met her and had that great mohinga.

Anyway, so over the years, going every year, we'd meet this nun. This is just one example—I could give a hundred. We'd meet this nun, and she had a little nunnery that was slowly growing, maybe twenty nuns there. Frankly, she always seemed a little bit depressive. But one year, maybe... Well, just normal people, you know, just seemed a little pulled in.

One year she came, maybe four years ago, knowing that we had a little money to offer, but she said, "You know, I've just been not able to sleep. I'm so feeling that there's so many poor kids in this area that couldn't afford to go to the government schools." I mean, a lot. And she said, "I just want to start a school for these poor kids." Quite a few nuns do that, which is amazing considering what it entails. So she said, "I just want to do this, you know?"

And we thought, well, we can offer something and see what happens.

We came back the next year and she'd taken down one... She had two small buildings, and the twenty-five nuns lived in one and ate in the other. So she'd taken down one of the buildings, and they'd all moved and crammed into the other one. This is common. And she had a school—like a hundred kids were coming. She had a kind of lean-to. Now there's actually companies that come from Japan and build school buildings. But at that time she just had a lean-to, and these kids coming.

To do this means she's getting all of this on dāna, hiring teachers—regular lay teachers that you have to pay their salary every month—all of that on dāna.

And then she came to talk about it to us at the end of that visit. She was shining. Her face was shining. She was saying—wait, I wrote it down. I mean, I can't speak Burmese, but our friend Aria can. She said, "Even though now I must work so hard"—because really it's the head nun who ends up having to hold it all together, and that's her—"I have to work so hard to find support every month for the teacher's salaries, for the equipment. We still have to have food. We need more toilets. We need desks." And all of this is true.

"Even though I have to work so hard to do this, all the energy is for the children and the school, and so my mind is so calm and happy."

And she really looked like that. She said, "I'm so happy if I can do this for the rest of my life."

And she's still doing it. It keeps getting bigger. And it's no exaggeration—she's working like crazy. She looks really tired, I have to say. But she's really happy at being able to help all these kids. And so it kind of keeps going around, going around. The generosity to her, and then her generosity to the kids.

And then one year—was it two years ago?—garbage pickup wasn't really a concept anymore. It's like you dump it on the ground or you burn it over there. It's just starting to happen, but at this time, not. One day we went out for a walk, and there was Dōsuman Ācāri with a whole group of the older kids. It was like the last day of school or something. And she had organized down the street, down Shwayumen Road—she had organized that these kids were going down with trash bags and picking up all the trash.

That might not seem like a big deal to you, but that's like an unheard of thing. We were so amazed. We were so impressed to see that. She looked around and said, "Okay, let's clean up the trash here." Of course, there's nowhere to take it. There's nowhere to take it. But it was wonderful. She's training the kids, you know—that you don't just throw your trash on the ground.

She's cleaning up this road that involves hundreds of people who live on it. And I don't know, the generosity just keeps cycling, cycling. This is how it transforms the habits in our mind, and it's contagious. Wholesomeness is contagious. It inspires us internally and externally.

So that's what I want to say about generosity. I could go on and on. I love talking about it because it makes me happy. Just contemplating your own generosity or your own sīla, as the Buddha talked about, really can brighten the mind.

In fact, there are various suttas where the Buddha arrives and sits down to talk to just a motley group of people. He doesn't know them—they're not his nuns and monks. And it was said that he could look around and simply tell what was in anybody's mind. So he would look around and see who in this gathering could hear the Dhamma, could really hear it, could let it in. Then he would zero in on whoever he thought it was.

It's often said he would begin with what he called a graduated teaching. He didn't just jump in and start talking about impermanence. In a graduated teaching, you talk about dāna, you talk about sīla, you talk about refuge, you talk about kamma—action and result—the joy of renunciation. And then, when he saw that the mind of the person was ready, pliable, uplifted, serene, bright, then he would talk about the deep Dhamma.

So it's all going together, transforming the habits. There's a great sutta where there's a man with leprosy named Suppabuddha, a beggar, and he sees this whole group around the Buddha and thinks, "Oh, maybe

they have some food over there." So he goes over to get some food, and there's no food. He thinks, "Well, I might as well just sit and listen." And the Buddha looks out, and Suppabuddha is the one the Buddha sees who could hear the Dhamma. You never know. So the Buddha did this graduated teaching. And when the mind, the heart, was bright, pliable, uplifted, then he taught the Dhamma, and Suppabuddha got it.

This is what we can do for ourselves. When we're feeling down or lost—thinking, "I haven't been aware for three weeks, I haven't sat, I can't possibly do it, I'm no good"—just go give somebody a bunch of flowers. Just call a friend who you know is down. Send a check to your favorite charity, but do it really with clarity, knowing what you're doing. Or simply contemplate, through recollection, previous acts of generosity. And it really, as the Buddha said, sets the mind and the heart straight. When one is contemplating one's acts of generosity or non-harming, at that time there is not greed, hatred, or delusion in the mind. The heart-mind is set straight on the Dhamma.

So explore that. Don't say, "That's not really generous. All I did was give somebody a piece of fudge." It doesn't matter what it was. That might have been the best thing they had that whole week. Don't buy into this kind of negativity we get into, thinking, "Oh, that's just being egotistical." If it's egotistical, it won't brighten the mind and heart. You'll feel the difference. But I think I never really learned to sit and just think about, or call up, or let come up, times when there was generosity, times when there was mettā, times when there was non-harming. It really does make you happy. Just thinking about it makes you happy.

Okay, a little bit about sīla. Again, it works in the same way. At the most basic level, of course, the Buddha talked about non-harming behavior as the five precepts—the ones we took on the opening night, except the third one isn't celibacy but rather not harming oneself or others through one's sexual energy. So that's the basic sīla.

But again, even if we just set it as a rule—you don't do this—and you come up against it without much self-reflection and simply say, "Okay, don't steal," and you don't steal, that's already great, because that's transforming some motivation. Even if you want to steal, want to take something that isn't yours, but you come up against the rule and you don't do it, that refraining is actually a wholesome act.

We tend to just say, "Well, I wanted to do it. I just didn't because of the rule, but I'm such a bad person." But you didn't do it. That's the wholesome act. In that moment, that transformed the motivation from taking to restraint. And restraint is actually wholesome.

But as we look more deeply, really examining what's going on in the heart and mind around our actions in reference to non-harming behavior, we see it's actually quite profound. We begin exploring the movements, the motivations in our heart and mind that come up even in the thought of wanting to do or not wanting to do what keeping the precepts requires.

We read from Ajahn Sucitto talking about the five precepts. The transcendent point is not what they look

like—not just "don't do this, don't do that"—but what they call forth in our heart and mind, what it takes to keep them, the efforts involved, and the effects that keeping the precepts have on your life. Really exploring what happens when we pay attention.

He says sila, like dana, is based in a sense of empathy. It's not a one-time thing—"Okay, I didn't lie today." It's making non-harming a way of life. The precepts are to be protected with a sense of truly valuing one's own mind, one's own body, and the context of the people one lives with. With these precepts, we extend that sense of respect and regard from our own mind and body towards all creatures, so that we impart value to this realm that we share with others.

Tuning into the motivations that help us keep the precepts is really profound. If we just kept attending to this, it would completely transform the habits of our mind. Because as we pay attention to see what effect just moving towards harsh speech has—just the effect of thinking of doing it—we notice the reverberations in our own heart and mind when we're tuning in. And then if we actually act on it, as Tejaniya says, even when we act on the unwholesome, bring awareness along with you. So we see, we learn the effects. That's how we learn.

I know now when I've said something thoughtless or harsh, it really reverberates with me. I can see it reverberate with the other person, but it really reverberates with me. There's a sense that respect for one's own being and respect for other beings are totally interrelated.

So I do want to say again: really appreciating restraint as a wholesome act. Because some of you think that if you have these unwholesome ideas come up—you know, this mosquito is driving you crazy and you just really want to slap it. You kind of slap at it on the side, trying to miss it, but this is in the middle of the night during a bad mosquito season. The worst little habits come out in the middle of the night when you hear that sound in your mosquito net. This is one of the worst things. And you can see the aversion and this urge to kill. It's a horrible feeling if you really tune into it.

So we need to bring awareness along to see that—not just turn off the awareness. The precepts aren't meant as a vow where if you break it, you're going to hell. They're really meant to bring us to pay attention, to see what's going on, and to appreciate that even feeling that hatred and then restraining the hand and not killing the mosquito—that's an act of non-harming. Appreciate it, and that will feed the wholesome. If you just focus on "I was going to do it and I'm so bad," that's just more ill will. Instead, focus: "Oh yeah, okay, I managed not to do it. Non-ill will came up." Let's appreciate that. That strengthens the wholesome.

This is Ajahn Sucitto again: "Morality carries with it the strength of restraint, the empathy of concern for how one's actions affect oneself and others, and the clarity of discerning the difference between short-term happy feelings and long-term well-being."

I love that—discerning the difference between short-term happy feelings and long-term well-being.

Getting rid of the mosquito: short-term happy feeling. I don't have to hear that buzzing anymore. But not long-term well-being for the mosquito or for me. As the Buddha said, the wisdom to be able to be momentarily with the unpleasant but for a wholesome outcome—that's one aspect of wisdom.

There's something very interesting about the precepts. Being around people who really have strong sila is to me enormously inspiring. You can feel the purity. I was telling the group the other day—we were talking about sila—I remember the time when Sayadaw U Pandita was here teaching with a couple of other monks. He was a very strong teacher, but he was also a very strong holder of sila. All the monks' rules, but all the aspects of sila.

He was very strong in it. I remember one day—they were just eating, you know, they would eat in their own room and be fed. I don't know what I was doing. I must have been on staff at the time because I just kind of walked into the room. I wasn't a yogi. I came in to give something or take something. I wasn't really thinking about anything in particular, I just walked in. And I felt—I still remember this—the sense of purity in that room was palpable. It kind of knocked me back because I wasn't thinking about it or expecting it at all. It's an amazing thing, the kind of power that comes from non-harming, from really committing to that. It transforms your heart and mind, and you're going to see more clearly. This is the freedom of non-clinging.

So notice for yourself—it's a lovely feeling when you start to have more confidence in the wholesomeness in your heart and mind, in the wholesomeness of your sila. We're going to blow it, but there's more confidence that you can trust that, more confidence in the wholesome instead of thinking we're always going to fall into the negative.

A simple story I tell: I was with a friend at Spirit Rock, not on retreat, and I wanted to go buy a little White Tara statue from their bookstore. If you've been to Spirit Rock, you know the Jikundo bookstore with ten million things in it—my goodness. So I wanted this statue, and it's self-service, so we went in and looked all around but couldn't find it. My friend had sometimes volunteered working there, and she said, "I know where the closet is where they keep them all."

So we went, and she knew where the special magnet opener was, and we opened the closet. It's this huge closet with all these shelves just packed with statues—hundreds of statues, all different ones. No one's around. We're taking out different statues to look for the one I wanted. They were all organized, the same ones together. So we both took out at the same time a Manjushri statue. Manjushri has this little sword of wisdom. And at the same time, we just barely touched them and that sword broke for both of us. We're each holding one and both go, "Oh no!"

Later we dissected this. We both momentarily—in each of us—the thought came up, "I could put it back and no one will know." The thought came, and there was no way it landed in either of us. We'd never even thought about it. We both looked at each other and said, "I guess we have to go tell Marianne," who runs the bookstore and is a friend of ours. Like kids going to the principal, you know—we broke the statue.

But it was interesting because we both felt so good about that, really—that we could have put it back and no one would have known, and the thought never even landed. The thought came and just went nowhere because it was so obvious we weren't going to steal. It's just a little thing. It doesn't mean you're perfect with sila, but let stuff like that in. It really strengthens one's faith and confidence in the Dhamma, in the fact that it really works, that the habits of mind are being transformed. We don't have to just live in the inevitability of these difficult habits.

Just a couple of last suggestions to end. There are times when, as we're tuning into our motivation before acting, we can see that it's unwholesome. Take a moment, reflect on it. The Buddha gave this very famous talk to his son, Rahula, that before you do any action, reflect on the motivation. Is it for your own good, the good of another? Then do it. If it's not, don't do it. Or if you don't remember, in the middle of the action, reflect on the motivation. Is it for your own good, the good of another? Do it. If not, stop doing it. Or when it's over, reflect on what the motivation was.

We can do that ourselves. I'm learning to do it when answering emails, which is really a great place—especially if you think there's a little bit of aversion in there. "I've just got to tell them how to do this right."

And I really see it. The answer comes up really quick and I have all this energy and I'm typing the email. I'm learning to recognize that energy isn't discriminating wisdom. That energy is aversion. Don't hit the send button. Close the computer. Send it another day. And you read it the next day and you go, "Whoa, good thing I didn't send that."

We can reflect, find ways to reflect on what you're doing. Sister Chân Không, who is the nun who has been with Thich Nhat Hanh for years and years, she's really very committed to this. In her autobiography, which was written quite a few years ago, she's talking about when they were living in France. They'd been not allowed to come back to Vietnam during the Vietnam War because they were peace activists and weren't taking sides with either side, North or South Vietnam. So neither side trusted them and exiled them.

At this time, living in France, she's still a peace activist. I'll just read this from her:

"Many people were being arrested—nuns, monks, artists. Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry. And I knew that I had to do walking meditation." Is that what you do when you become angry? "I'm angry. I better do some walking meditation." "Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to rediscover my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to let my heartbeat relax, knowing how unfairly the authorities had acted in arresting such a wonderful monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

She spent her life being a real peace activist and a deep practitioner of mindfulness meditation. And you

can see that willingness to tune into the motivation first, always first, with all these tools to help transform the habits.

To me, this is the work of our lifetime, and all of our life is part of it. There's nothing outside of it. Every time we speak, every time we act—we're going to blow it ten million times, but it's always an opportunity to see what's going on.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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