Respecting the Defended Heart (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 42:19

There are many different ways to name the awakening practice. One traditional approach is through the practice of *dāna*, *sīla*, and *paññā*—the Pali words for generosity, virtue or non-harming or ethical living, and wisdom. I wanted to use this gateway as our entry point.

The Buddha said that generosity was one of the easiest ways to come to awakening because that movement of the heart in giving liberates us from clinging, holding, or attachment. When we reflect on how that energy lives inside of us, it's easy—when we turn our minds to it—to see the innumerable ways that we are generous: the simple expression of holding the door while others go through, or how gracious some of you are when we as teachers step into the lunch line. You're not like, "No, this is my place, you can't come in." You're like, "Yes, yes, step in." And there are countless other ways that you have expressed your generosity.

In acknowledging generosity, we also acknowledge its opposite: the holding on, the clinging and attachment, the contraction. It feels almost amazing when we consider that if generosity is a practice that leads to liberation, why is it actually so difficult? The Buddha pointed specifically and repeatedly to this particular force that lives inside of us—called clinging, greed, desire, or holding on.

In the Abhidharma, which is a compendium of mental states linked to the arising of consciousness, there are definitions and descriptions of all these mental factors. It's said that clinging is like when you're frying meat in a pan—interesting that they came up with this—and how sticky it is. You know how the meat sticks to the pan. Clinging is that stickiness when we feel the opposite of the open-hearted flow.

There's also another traditional story told in relationship to this, also culturally specific, about how farmers protect their crops from monkeys. I don't know if you've lived with monkeys. They're so smart. In South Africa, at the Cape of Good Hope, there are many wild monkeys, and as soon as you open your car door—there are lots of signs warning you—they are in the car. They are fearless, sniffing around for food, because most tourists going to that part of Africa have food in their cars.

So the farmers protected their crops by taking coconuts and cutting the top off so that there was this sweet flesh exposed. But they made the hole just small enough—or just large enough—for the monkey to put its hand in to grasp that sweet flesh. And even when seeing farmers coming to grab them, or maybe even do other things to them, the monkeys couldn't let go. They would hold on to that sweet meat.

This reminds me of how tenacious we all are, holding on in our different ways. When I reflect on my own holding on, and our holding on as it emerges through the group interviews, I am moved to acknowledge in one way *why* the holding on is happening.

Because over and over again, one thing this culture doesn't do—historically and continually, apart from in activist circles—is acknowledge the impact of what it means to live in a world driven by ignorance. Our experience of not feeling safe in the streets, in the fluid gender expressions that we have, living with that even in the Bay Area. All the increasing violence being targeted towards trans people, and especially trans people of color—there's more and more violence towards those of us in our community with that expression.

Or what it means to live in a country where the deepest striving is for profit, and the impoverishment of so many people, and the resulting struggle of so many of us. The impoverishment of those countries that have been colonized by large industries where wages are so low. Or when we hear about Harvey Weinstein and the sexual abuse of those women—sixty women—we're not surprised, because so many of us carry that in our lives. Young girls and women, and those of us who don't identify within the binary and are gender fluid or non-conforming, we carry that. It's no surprise to us. And how deep and profound it is to live in a culture where that's going on, and is going on.

Naming this is to acknowledge how understandable it is that each of us has grown the defenses that we have, and how we hold onto behaviors that express those defenses. Because in a world that didn't acknowledge our fragility and the tenderness of our hearts and beings, in a world that hasn't respected us—and that lack of respect is so pervasive—we have gathered whatever has been available to us to survive. We are survivors. And in some ways, those defenses worked, because we are here.

In acknowledging these defenses, it's easy—upon hearing the Dharma—to want to get rid of them. You remember in the sharing that Dal talked about judgment, and Larry said that while the practice might be not to judge the judging. Here, the practice might be not to judge the defense, or to want it not to be there, and to go into more of a cycle of wanting.

So perhaps, as communities, in acknowledging the conditions and how we have survived in those conditions, the practice is to honor and respect.

those defense mechanisms, and that holding. And this is a whole new way of talking about greed. So if you are a conservative Dharma practitioner, you might be thinking, what is she saying? But at least in this aspect of it, it makes sense to me. It makes sense in these conditions. If there's time, I'll go back to some of the more traditional understandings of this flow of energy.

So there is then this invitation to turn towards ourselves with understanding and respect. With the faith of knowing that those energies—caring, presence, understanding, respect—we are creating a new way of learning how to be safe. Because we sense and know, even if it's conceptual, that actually safety doesn't

come from shutting down. We understand why we have shut down. No blame, no shame. And we also want to offer a new way of relating to what our protective mechanism has asked of us. That new way of relating rests with these qualities of the heart and mind.

Let me tell another traditional story of the Buddha. It was during the rains retreat, the traditional three-month retreat. The Buddha said to the Sangha, go out into the forest and practice. And so the Sangha went out into the forest. Now, in Buddhist cosmology, there are different realms, and in these different realms there are different spirits and energies. Some of these spirits were living in the trees and were quite happy there—until they became rather upset when the Sangha arrived. Basically: "Hey, you're in our space. You're sitting in our forest." So they started making sounds that disturbed the Sangha, moving the trees, essentially irritating the practitioners. And the Sangha felt they couldn't practice there. It was horrible, and it was frightening.

So they went back to the Buddha and said, "No, we can't practice with all these scary energies." And the Buddha said, "Go back and offer wishes of kindness and well-being and happiness to the trees and the tree spirits."

The Sangha was at that point where we all find ourselves in relationship to these places of doubt: Can I trust that? Can I let go of my defense and fear for my safety to actually offer kindness and well-wishing—for themselves and for these tree spirits?

And the energy of that kindness, that love—we know it, don't we? We can feel it. When we enter into a space, or when we're with a friend or a partner or any expression of life, those moments when the love is palpable, the waves of it. We can feel it not just through an idea but physically. That energy becomes the field in which the heart opens. And so the hearts of these tree spirits opened, and in that touch, they moved from wanting to get rid of the Sangha to protecting the Sangha.

This reminds me of the Las Vegas shooting. Perhaps you heard that in all that chaos, a woman had fallen down. A young man, seeing her fall with the bullets pouring down from that high hotel room, lay on top of her to shield her. Those moments of caring and protection that come from love are, the Buddha says, the real safety and protection. And that's what this path is offering us.

So we are not to take this invitation to love as a way to bang and hammer ourselves. Not: "Look, defense, you're not loving! Look, I'm supposed to offer..." No. Because we are being called to honor our history and have faith that the offering of kindness and acceptance over time, because it's lawful, will bring about the opening of the heart and mind.

There are many physical laws in the universe. I'm an insomniac, and I have been listening recently—I listen to YouTube all the time through the night when I can't sleep. My big thing lately is listening to Brian Cox and others talk about the Big Bang, about two black holes fusing together 130 million years ago, and how over the multi-billion years since then, the gravitational waves traveling at the speed of light have

finally reached us. And that's how we know what happened.

That vastness operating according to physical laws—it feels very reassuring to me. Something about realizing I'm part of something so huge, spanning eons. Which actually the Buddha talked about. He said there have been eons and eons and eons, and we're just beginning to name that through science—through the Large Hadron Collider, that enormous reactor where they're shooting protons and neutrons at each other.

There are physical laws that govern the universe. And the Buddha said that there are laws that govern the mind.

And he named that very complex set of laws as the laws of karma.

One of the simplest dynamics in how karma operates is this: for any wholesome intention, for any wish or blessing that has as its root caring or patience or kindness or mindfulness or love, that will be the outcome. This is an immutable law of the mind. If we have an intention to care, an intention of respect for something, absolutely—we might not know when—but absolutely the consequence will be a flowering, a manifestation, an expression of that energy. We don't know exactly how or when, but it will happen.

It is this law, this law of conditionality, that can become the basis of faith, and has been the basis of my faith for years and years. When I touch those places of grasping and holding on, where I wish they would open and they're not, I can offer: "I understand why you're here. And I want you to know I'm learning how to care for you and be patient." As I reflect on that wish, there comes this faith and strength that maybe in the next second or moment, or maybe in the future, that energy will manifest in relationship to this tightness and holding.

And if I continue to offer it—which is what we do with the metta guidance that has been offered, or the coming back into mindfulness: "May I come back and be mindful and present. May I not abandon myself"—whatever those beautiful intentions you have been working with, each one of them is building the conditions for that opening. Because in the environment of presence and love, there is the opening. That's the law of the Dharma.

When Lisa asked the question in the group sharing, "How can I let go? How can I let go of holding on to wanting things to change? How can I let go of that wanting?"—then we explored different aspects of calling in the beautiful qualities to hold the experience, to hold what was underneath that wanting, to hold the wanting itself. And in generating that field, things begin to open.

It is a purification process. And the purification process means that in the opening and that sense of well-being, we feel the delight of it, and we're like, "I got that one!" We're grooving. And because when we feel open, when things have opened and it's so much more pleasant, it's easy to forget that we're in and on a journey, and that actually each opening at some time will lift the next layer of defense that is asking to be met in the same way. And so it is an ongoing process.

So then I want to address: what happens when there's an opening and then all that stuff comes up and it's huge and it's big? How do I hold it? I'm saying to myself, "May I respect you," and then there's just this total wave of everything, and there's no way that I can even say that because it's nauseating. What happens when we offer these beautiful energies and we find ourselves so contracted? What do we do to help create a little more rest in order to sustain that opening?

One of the most beautiful cultivations of rest for ourselves when we feel swamped in this process is the traditional contemplations from the Visuddhimagga on the cultivation of joy. And joy is one of the great qualities for bringing rest and strength to ourselves on our journeys.

The first is to contemplate wise attention, or mindfulness, or awareness. The second is remembering the virtues of the Buddha. The third is rejoicing in the Dharma. The fourth is rejoicing in the virtues of the Sangha. The fifth is considering your own virtue. The sixth is remembering your own generosity. The seventh is considering the virtue of those evolved beings in other realms. The eighth is reflecting on perfect peace. The ninth is avoiding persons overwhelmed with anger. The tenth is reflecting on the suttas. And the eleventh is inclining the mind towards joy.

Because there isn't a lot of time, I'm going to speak on just two of these. One is what it means to contemplate the virtue of the Buddha, because it's a very traditional contemplation. And I love this contemplation because I have known myself, my own mind, and so many of us—teachers and sangha and students—who have moments of insight, maybe more than moments of insight and awakening, and are still sometimes held in the grips of these defenses and attachments. And what it is to contemplate a mind that is far away from all of them.

There is a person, a human being, who practiced the practice that we're practicing, who has come to a place where nothing—nothing—can get close to the strength of that peace and open-heartedness.

So it's said, and I love this: He has abolished all hundred thousand kinds of trouble, anxiety, and defilement described as greed, hatred, and delusion, as misdirected attention, as consciousness, as anger, enmity, contempt, domineering, as envy, avarice, deceit, fraud, obduracy, presumption. As pride, he has abolished haughtiness, vanity, negligence, craving, ignorance, and the three roots of the unprofitable kinds of misconduct. All defilements, stains, fictitious perceptions, applied thoughts. And I am only reading a little bit of pages and pages and pages.

It is said the Buddha stands utterly remote and far away from all defilements. They can't come near. So beautiful—it feels like the equivalent of all those eons of life, how magnificent that is. And that mind that is so far away from the defilements, how that's for us too, not just for a remote statue or representation, but is the offering for us. Us saying to each other, one moment at a time, walking the path to become remote from all those energies.

It might be that the Buddha doesn't do it for you—too far away, you've never been to, you know, just

haven't read any of the stuff I'm talking about, and it's like, nope. So then I wanted to talk about Dipa Ma, who was considered an Arahant. She died in 1984, and a lot of our teachers studied with her. I'm going to read a little bit about her because she also, her mind ended up being far away and remote from all these defilements.

In ten years, Dipa Ma lost two children, her husband, and her health. In her mid-forties, she was a widow with a seven-year-old daughter to bring up on her own. Both her parents were dead. India was far away—she was living in Burma. And she was overwhelmed with grief and confusion. "I didn't know what to do, where to go, or how to live," she said. "I had nothing and no one to call my own." Months went by and all she could do was cry, holding a photo of Rajini, her son, in her lap.

During the next few years, her health continued to decline and her condition became so serious that she felt her only hope of survival was to practice meditation. She reflected on the irony of her situation. When she was young and healthy, she had wanted to meditate and been prevented from doing so by her husband. Now responsible for a child, totally exhausted and in despair—facing death, her doctor had said—she felt there was no other option. She would die of a broken heart unless she did something about the state of her mind.

She asked herself, "What can I take with me when I die?" She looked around at her dowry, her silk saris, and even her daughter. "As much as I loved her, I knew I couldn't take her. So I said, let me go to the meditation center. Maybe I can find something there I can take with me when I die."

At the lowest point in her life, the Buddha appeared to her in a dream, a luminous presence. He softly chanted a verse from the Dhammapada, one of the very early teachings: "Clinging to what is dear brings sorrow. Clinging to what is dear brings fear. To one who is entirely free from endearment, there is no sorrow or fear."

When Dipa Ma awoke, she felt clear and calm, and she knew she had to learn to meditate, no matter what the state of her health. She understood the Buddha's advice: if she wanted peace, she had to practice until she was free of all sorrow.

Joseph Goldstein tells a story of when he invited her to come to Insight Meditation Society. They were walking down the road, and in that part of Massachusetts there's this amazing color that happens in fall. The pond close to the center was reflecting all these colors, and Joseph said to Dipa Ma, "Isn't this exquisite?" She didn't say much, so he turned to her and asked, "What is in your mind right now, Dipa Ma?" And she said, "Only equanimity and mindfulness, wisdom and loving-kindness. Just that."

There's something so beautiful about contemplating what one of us has opened to, and that this is possible for all of us. So that is one of the contemplations—resting the mind in. Maybe not the Buddha, maybe not Dipa Ma, but someone who has touched you or inspired you. That one quality, perhaps, that's like, yes, that touches my heart and I want to contemplate it and keep it close by.

And then to contemplate our generosity, which is what we began this exploration with. In our culture, we are not really supported to think about what we have achieved or what we're able to give. But in this practice, there is this invitation: every time we give—

to take time to reflect—not to think conceptually, but to open to the blessing of that generosity, how it felt in the body, and the gift that it was.

The Buddha said you can contemplate the same generosity over and over again. If there's just one time you have been generous, you can contemplate that. If it's simply that you held the door open for someone behind you to walk through—to contemplate: yes, that beautiful quality that is living inside of me. Can I acknowledge it? Can I bow down to it? Can I respect it? And in doing so, strengthen it so that I have the strength to hold the process that sometimes feels so difficult.

So here is a contemplation by one of my favorite poets, Joy Harjo, and one of my favorite poems. It's called "Eagle Poem."

To pray you open your whole self to sky, to earth, to sun, to moon, to one whole voice that is you. And know there is more that you can't see, can't hear, can't know except in moments steadily growing and in languages that aren't always sound but rather circles of motion. Like eagle that Sunday morning over Salt River, circled in blue sky, in wind, swept our hearts clean with sacred wings. We see you, see ourselves and know that we must take the utmost care and kindness in all things. Breathe in knowing we are made of all this. Breathe knowing we are truly blessed because we were born and die soon within a true circle of motion like eagle rounding out the morning inside us. We pray it will be done in beauty, in beauty.

So acknowledging our generosity, bowing down to it. Acknowledging our resistance and defense, bowing down to it. And calling in this amazing capacity—through the power of intention—to create the conditions to strengthen what is beautiful and to heal what is grasping and closed and defended.

In this way, may we grow together in beauty.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.