Mingling Our Minds with the Dhamma

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:35

So tonight I want to talk about motivation on two levels: our deep motivation, and also the moment-to-moment quality of intention, which is really how our purified consciousness manifests.

The essence of what I want to talk about comes from a line I read in a book by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, where he talks about how we need to mingle the teachings with our minds, mingling our minds with the Dharma until it permeates our whole being. I love that because it's really a little synopsis of the whole path of our life. It doesn't happen all at once, but all the different ways that we practice and work in our lives are ways of working towards mingling our minds with the Dharma until it permeates our whole beings.

In terms of the Eightfold Noble Path, the beginning of the path, the beginning of our spiritual journey—and it keeps on increasing really to the end of it—is wise understanding, right view. Each time we recognize more accurately anything—mundane, supramundane, in practice, a problem in life—when we recognize it differently, the patterns that have kept us in suffering from not seeing clearly let go. That's right view. And that can be just enough to see that something doesn't seem to be working in my life, that maybe there's some other way. That gets us started on a spiritual path. And then the right view just keeps deepening and deepening. How does that manifest in our life, in our choices? That's where intention comes in.

I want to read a passage because I love it, but also just to pique us with the possibility of a very deep expression of wise understanding. This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was one of the most beloved and well-practiced of the Tibetan teachers in the last century. He's dead now.

"What we normally call the mind is the deluded mind, a turbulent vortex of thoughts whipped up by attachment, anger, and ignorance. This mind, unlike enlightened awareness, is always being carried away by one delusion after another. Thoughts of hatred or attachment suddenly arise without warning"—can you relate to that?—"and triggered off by such circumstances as an unexpected meeting with a friend or a difficult person. And unless they are immediately seen through with proper awareness, they quickly take root and proliferate, reinforcing the habitual predominance of hatred or attachment in the mind and adding more and more karmic patterns."

So that's just a description of our normal mind.

"Yet, however strong"—this is the right view part now—"however strong these thoughts may seem, they are just thoughts and will eventually dissolve back into emptiness. Once you recognize the intrinsic nature

of the mind"—meaning the purity of consciousness—"these thoughts that seem to appear and disappear all the time can no longer fool you. Just as clouds form, last for a while, and then dissolve back into the empty sky, so deluded thoughts arise, remain for a while, and then vanish in the voidness of mind. In reality, nothing at all has happened."

I just love that. I'm sure in some ways you've all touched that sense of how mundane or wild a thought could be—attachment, aversion, confusion—and then it's just gone. And really, in some way, all of our mindfulness practice, our samādhi practice, all the different ways—effort, non-effort, all the million different ways we hear of practice—the essence of all of the path, all the techniques, and not just meditation practice but working with loving-kindness, working with sīla, with purity of conduct as Guy spoke of last night, with generosity: all of the path is for the releasing of these obsessive entrancements of attachment and aversion and all about "me." It's about our relationship to these entrancements, releasing these obsessive habits of mind. Not because they're bad, but because we see through them. And in that releasing of these habits, it allows the intrinsic nature, the natural great peace—the potential of how we can relate in life—the natural peace and ease of the heart and mind allows it to shine through.

So when we talk about these habits of greed, of aversion, of delusion, it's not like we hate them or you're evil. It's just that they hide the potential, that sense of ease that can come just when you hear Dilgo Khyentse say that all this vortex of thoughts dissolves back into emptiness and nothing at all has happened. Just nothing to get so upset about.

So that's one radical expression of wise understanding or right view.

A question that often comes up—whether it does or not, it's what I'm going to address tonight—is: how does this right view, this wisdom where we say nothing at all has happened, function in life? Often what can come is, "Well then, if nothing has happened, does that mean nothing matters? How do we function in life? Why even talk about purity of conduct? If nothing has happened, nothing matters." That way of looking is an aspect of delusion called falling into emptiness. Nothing matters, nothing's happened, I can do whatever I want. No, no, no—it's an attitude, it's not really wisdom.

So how does this right view show up in our life? This is where our motivation—both our deep purpose in life, our deep motivation, and also the moment-to-moment qualities in the mind that arouse intention to act—shows up. In terms of how the Buddha described it, the beginning of the path is wise understanding, right view—one of eight. Think of it more as a circle, but still it's in this order. The second is wise thought, wise intention, wise attitude—different translations of the same thing.

So in other words, how we think about or understand things—ourselves and experience, whatever's happening in the moment—is what gives rise to the attitude, the thought, the intention in the mind, which is what forms the third, fourth, and fifth steps of the path: our wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. In other words, how we speak and act in the world.

In terms of the link between the depth of understanding, the purity of consciousness, and how we show up in the world—the choices we make, the way we act with ourselves and others—it really comes together in this link of our motivation, our intention, our attitudes.

Guy mentioned the quality that's present in every moment of consciousness: cetana, intention, motivation. This is one way I want to refer to it. It's on the micro, moment-to-moment level. There's an intention for each movement, for each action, for a choice we make in the mind. It's a little movement of mind. And that particular intention that arises is fed by, is formed by whatever factors are present in the mind at that time.

So, for instance, if we're feeling sensations in the stomach and the mind recognizes that as hunger, there could be fear present in the mind at that time. And that fear says, "Oh my God, I'm hungry. If I don't really get to the front of the line, there might not be enough food." That fear motivates you to jump up and run out of the hall one minute before the bell rings. Or you want to, and you have to hold yourself down. Or you take three times more food than you can actually ever eat, because there's wanting in the mind.

Does that happen? You get to your plate and think, "What am I going to do with all this?" The next day you think, "I'm not going to do that." You think you're taking the right amount, but there's still wanting in the mind and it colors the perception, and we take too much.

Or there could be those same sensations and the mind is in a really quite quiet, equanimous place, and it just notices hunger. There's no wanting, there's no fear, there's calm, there's wisdom, there's concentration—and so you just keep on sitting there. Or there's calm and concentration and wanting, but the wanting is to hold on to the concentration, not the food, so you keep sitting there, but you're sitting there because you're wanting.

You get a sense of how the seed, the heart of actions in this way of looking, is not in how it looks from the outside, but in the intentions that are coloring, that are driving the choices. The habits of our mind are what show up in the intentions, and that's what naturally changes, purifies through the moment-to-moment mindfulness, the awareness, through seeing and understanding clearly.

Do you remember Guy's quotation from the Zen master? What was the question? "What's the purpose of a lifetime of practice?" And the answer was: an appropriate response.

This is exactly what it's talking about. It's incredibly powerful and it's really profound. An appropriate response implies that in any particular moment when something happens, the attention is so present and the understanding, the heart-mind, the consciousness is pure. In that moment it's not going to be colored by greed, hatred, or confusion, and that's what allows a recognition of the situation, of what's an appropriate response. You don't have to think it through. That's why the habits of mind are so key.

Again from Dilgo Khyentse, another way of describing what happens when the habits of wanting, of aversion, of delusion—which come connected to pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, as you saw this

morning—are present. Dilgo Khyentse says: "When the sense organs encounter an object, the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object influenced by your accumulated habits and past experiences, the process is entirely subjective. When your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, and what you do is in accordance with that seeing, you experience everything as primordially pure and beautiful."

So just playing with that possibility—really seeing how consciousness, the moment of knowing, awareness itself, as a friend of mine described it, is squeaky clean. It's pure. The Buddha talks about the mind, the citta, the consciousness as naturally radiant and pure. It's colored, or we don't see through it, when it's obstructed by greed being there in a moment, or hatred, aversion, confusion, and we don't recognize it. But that natural purity is never stained or touched or affected really by these things. They don't mess it up.

That's why I keep talking about how we learn to shift our refuge from believing in the habits to noticing the awareness. Just that moment is a huge shift of habit.

Today in the questions, I felt—of course, I was thinking about this—so I felt like, oh yes, this really brought it out very well. Seeing how when something unpleasant arises, the natural habit, when we're not really noticing or paying attention, can be just a subtle aversion or a pulling away, or it can go all the way to murderous rage. When it's pleasant, the subtle habit is that wanting, that leaning in, that liking. And then that can go on to color the whole world. And as someone said really perceptively, with neutral, it's like... huh?

You know, let's get something else going on here because there's nothing happening. That's delusion. And the seed of all of those reactions is that they're all referring back to me.

But did you notice—and some people mentioned this—just the simple noticing, the relaxing, observing, and accepting, allowing it to be just as it is? Not trying to change it, not saying, "I have to get rid of this habit of clinging. Either I will never cling, or I will never let myself experience another pleasant moment. I'll do everything so that God forbid clinging should ever arise." You can hear the intention behind that is not wisdom. It's either wanting or aversion. So we're just feeding it again.

But did you notice in a moment of simple mindfulness? Oh, pleasant—look at that, the clinging comes up. Or someone described the unpleasant experience in their body and then saw the pleasantness of the thought, just how the Buddha said it somewhere: an ordinary person knows of no escape from unpleasant sensation except to lust after pleasant experience. And so that comes to be the habit of the mind. That's it—daydreaming or eating or whatever it is.

But the point is, when we just notice that, just notice it, when the mind's relatively quiet like sitting here, we just see it and go, "Oh, well, that doesn't really work. Look at that." And just for a moment—not for our whole life, unfortunately, but just for a moment—in that moment, there's the release of that habit, the

release of the clinging. It's not out of a should or because it's bad. It's out of wise understanding, the clear seeing in that moment. Pleasant thought—there's nothing to cling to. It doesn't do it anyway. And we're here again. Do you get a sense of what I mean?

And that's simple. That's natural. We're not saying, "I'm going to see this in order to get rid of it." As you know, that doesn't work. So the natural shift of habits, the shift of intention from clinging to this pleasant thought to take me away—somehow shifting to just, "Oh, let it go." It's renunciation and it's just wisdom and it's just presence. That's quite spontaneous, quite natural. That's a shift of intention, a shift of attitude, and it happens by itself.

So in terms of appropriate response, as Guy said, in the moment of real presence, when the consciousness, the citta, the mind and heart is not colored, not caught in greed, hatred, or confusion—we have to be awake, not in a moment of being dulled out, because then that's delusion—the natural response, the appropriate response, can be one of the four Brahma Viharas that Guy mentioned last night. In the face of meeting someone, there's this natural connectedness, acceptance. In the face of suffering, there's a natural compassion. In the face of joy, we're open, connected—there's a natural sharing of joy. And in all things, there's an equanimity of knowing: I can't control even my own experience, never mind yours, and things are as they are.

This was expressed beautifully in a different way by Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrows of humankind become your sole concern."

Not like that's a should. It's just that when we're seeing with wise understanding, that sense of fear and separation, that sense of "it's all about me"—it goes away. And then that's the appropriate response. If there's some need, there's—right, it's my need, your need. It's just a need. It's just caring for the world. It's not at all a kind of "Oh right, nothing ever happened and so nothing matters and to heck with it all." It's not that at all. Quite connected.

I have this one page of notes I keep—oh, here it is, I keep misplacing it. But seeing once or twice, or one or two thousand times—because how many moments of that clear seeing have there been here and in our lives? There are really many moments where the habit releases itself. And each moment of that clarity, of that wisdom, of that metta, whichever it happens to be, is shifting the habit of mind. Again, that quotation Guy mentioned: what the mind frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination, the habit of the mind.

It will. That used to scare me when I would look at, you know, when I'm not really paying attention and just moving through the day without much awareness—where does my mind go? Left to its own devices, it's often not very pretty.

But how many moments there have been of pure awareness, of kindness, of generosity, of just allowing, accepting. On a retreat, it's a lot of moments. And continuing in our life, it really is shifting. But the habits—that's why there's a path. That's why it really takes this sense of moving into connecting with our deep motivation, our commitment, our sense of why, if it is, for each of us, why and how this path of awakening is important to us. And finding how we can continue to connect with that motivation and inspire ourselves, here and in our lives.

Because the habits are strong. They don't just vanish. It feels like here on retreat they might, but even more in our daily lives, it's almost like we get tricked back into the habits—either not noticing them or believing in them, or they're so familiar that they just feel like that's the way to respond in life. Someone is angry at us or does something hurtful, and the normal response is, yeah, you should get angry back.

One of the ways I feel we get tricked is that, by and large—not completely, that's why we have to look for what helps us with our motivation—but by and large, the messages we get from the greater culture reinforce these habits. Often, at least this is my experience.

Rodney was telling me yesterday—I don't know where he got this figure, but we'll assume it's accurate—that he read somewhere that in a normal week, for a normal person, whatever that means, in this culture, we are confronted with approximately 17,000 media advertisement inputs. That's billboards, things coming up on the internet, television, radio, magazines, postcards, phone calls—17,000 inputs in a week. That's a lot. And probably many of them are quick, subliminal, we don't notice them consciously. But what are those inputs telling us? You need this. You're not good enough. You should do this. You need to have this. Everyone else has it. Who are you? You need to be prettier, richer, thinner, younger. You need to be something. That's going in.

How many times—I call it a mail order catalog mind. Here we get a lot of mail order catalogs, and sometimes when I'm just tired and can't really focus at night, I like to flip through them. And how often do you end up really wanting something you didn't even know existed five minutes ago? But suddenly you've got to have it for your well-being and happiness, right? Well, 17,000 times a week we're subjected to that. Once in a while, it's going to catch us.

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche said—and this is where we need to call on our motivation, our intention—when that happens, you don't hate yourself, but you notice it. He says, watch the fickleness of the mind, how easily it is influenced just by a pleasant or unpleasant sight or thought or sound into an immediate mood. Then, I would add, if I don't notice it at that point, that mood expands—we're off into a whole world, just triggered by some nice looking something in a catalog. And then there's a thought: wow, with that I could do this and that, and then we're off. Or how often are we a little bit bored and we start surfing on the internet? The next thing, I'm planning trips and looking at airlines and renting cars. I have to do that a lot anyway, but I get sidetracked off into something else. It's so easy.

So not that it's bad, but this is where, if we just let ourselves flow without resistance in the waves of

society, in the stream—and this is what the Buddha said when he said practicing in his way is going against the stream of society, a quotation I read from Bhikkhu Bodhi—so it's not that we want to hate and fight, but we want to wake up.

We want to wake up. I mean, I hope we want to. I want to anyway. This is what the spiritual path is: seeing why we're doing what we're doing. What brings us happiness and peace? How can we affect others to help them have happiness and peace? What brings us into more suffering, into more feeling of neediness, of want?

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh. He says, "We've lost our taste for being quiet, for being alone. Society can take many things from us and dull us with noises, smells, sights, so many distractions. So the first thing for us to do is to return to ourselves in order to recover ourselves, to be our best. This is very important. Then we need to reorganize our daily lives so that we do not allow society to colonize us. We need to be independent, to be real people, not just the victim of society and other people."

Personally, I wouldn't use the word "victim," but more like haplessly tossed about by the winds of habit. But as Rodney said, really, we're hermetically sealed. No one else is making us fall into the habits of wanting, of aversion, of delusion. It's not that, but I think it's really helpful to recognize how we're not separate from each other, from the world, from anything. We are the world. The world is ourselves.

And sometimes that's beautiful. The beautiful, wholesome emotions and ways of being are contagious. But so are the others. Wanting is very contagious. Fear is contagious. Have you ever noticed that? I remember reading about a big fire in a nightclub in Rhode Island a few years ago. People panicked, and quite a lot of people died in the fire. I read somewhere later about it, someone who survived describing it. They said when the fire first started, people were scared, but they were heading more or less okay towards the door. And then they saw one person losing themselves in panic. And that panic is what spread like wildfire, and everyone lost control and trampled each other, and people died.

Well, the beautiful, the wholesome states of heart and mind are actually even more contagious because they're really more the natural expression of the truth, of the way things are, of who we are. But if, at least as I've found, I just kind of say, "Okay, well now I've done a retreat and I know that's important and I'll just sit back and let the truth mingle with my mind and body and turn into the compassionate bodhisattva of the ages..." It's not like I have to go out and try hard. It doesn't happen that way.

But it's more that willingness to recognize the moment-to-moment creation of decisions, of intention, of response to life. And it's not that we have to make our actions always be perfect. Forget about that. But finding in ourselves on a deep level—this is a more macro way of talking about motivation, of intention—finding what one Buddhist monk, Nyanaponika Thera, who wrote the guide *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, calls "aligning ourselves with our deepest purpose" as an aspect of wider mindfulness.

And this is really something that's come up in a few of the conversations I've been having with people in different ways. First, connecting with, really honoring, finding for yourself what is deeply true and important for you in your life. And then not just saying, "Okay, now I've found it, let it do its work," but also seeing how, as we make decisions, as we live our lives, as we go through our actions, connection with that purpose helps us make choices, helps us align ourselves with what we're doing and why, with what's really important. And also finding whatever in our life supports us to continue to deepen, to continue to reconnect with our purpose.

A couple of people have said here how when going through the retreat, when they come to a time—which does happen—where they can't connect to their commitment to practice or their motivation or what it is that inspires them... Sometimes you just can't find that. And if that lasts for a while, it gets a lot harder. Whatever's going on gets a lot harder. You're sitting and walking, and "Why am I doing this?" We all have times like that.

But if that really goes on for a long time, it's helpful to find things that help us connect. And sometimes we can get a little too caught up in thinking—like Ajahn Chah says, be independent. So we think, "I just have to be independent. I have to totally, all by myself, get in touch with my deepest purpose, stay really motivated, stay really inspired, and it's all up to me." You know? No. Let's give it over. It's hard enough. The path is hard enough. But just like we can't exist in isolation, just as we affect one another, so we can also use that to find what helps us reconnect.

So just another couple of words about trusting yourself. Really, you may already know what your deep motivation is, what your commitment is, what your inspiration is, what your purpose is. You may know that. And it may change over years—different words emerge. It may not even be words; it may just be a certain sense, a certain feeling. I can't put it in words, but sometimes that's all it is for me. And when I'm touching it, everything's clear. I know. The things that I do, the choices before me, are clear. There's not all this second-guessing and self-doubt and "is it good enough" and comparing. I know. And if something comes up that's really off, I don't have to agonize—should I do it? Shouldn't I do it? Should I get involved? It's like I know. I know. It may be hard. I may want to do the thing, but I know. And there's really no question.

When I'm not in touch with that, the first step is recognizing that—the feeling of doubt and confusion—and then finding what helps us connect.

So it may change over the years. But I just want to put in a plug: if this is something that resonates with you—it may not, and doesn't have to—but if it's something that resonates with you, just in your own time, in your own way, let yourself really deeply... it's not so much thinking about it, but just see, let yourself feel whatever it is. And honor it in yourself.

Often I found when I first started tuning into this, long ago, the expressions that arose in my mind, the thoughts that would come out, sounded—from my self-judgmental, self-hating pattern of mind—really

arrogant or highfalutin. You know, "Who the heck do you think you are?" That kind of thing. Like it was coming from an ego place. But the real deep purpose is not coming from an ego place. Those thoughts of "who do you think you are, you jerk"—that's coming from the ego place.

So if something comes up—I don't know, it can be just "let me be more kind in life," or "let me be loving to my family," all the way up to "let me make the commitment to go through all however many eons of lifetimes it takes to be born as a Buddha"—whatever it is. "May I serve all beings. May I serve the Dharma. May I live with compassion"—whatever it is for you. Just let that be and honor it and treat it with tenderness and care. Don't dismiss it with "not me, not this lifetime."

Because the essence of the motivation is in that seed of intention. We can't control the results in life, how it manifests, how other people perceive us. If with the clearest intention in the world it doesn't turn out the way we want—that's nothing we can control. And mostly our tendency is to evaluate whether the motivation was right by whether things turned out in a good way. But that's not necessarily in our control.

So it's really learning to trust this depth of wisdom, of purity, in our own hearts and minds. You can't fix the world. But the reference point is what's arising in my heart, in my consciousness, what's motivating this action.

We keep using the Dalai Lama—he's so quotable. But he often talks about, when people ask him, "How do you know if what you're doing is right?" And he says, "I just trust the purity of my intention."

Tibetans—the next generation of young Tibetans, energetic activists. They were basically reproaching him because his deep commitment to engaging with the Chinese who've overrun Tibet and are systematically destroying the culture is really one of nonviolence, of compassion. He's committed to that.

And this interview really touched me because these young Tibetans were saying, basically, "Old man, it's not working. You're wrong. We need to take another tack." And so this article said he was quite touched, like a little tear coming down. And he's so open. He's saying, "You know, you might be right. It could be that you're right. It could be that I've been wrong. But I cannot be otherwise." Just so committed to compassion and nonviolence that the reference point is the deep motivation and purity of heart and mind. Not, "Well, this purity didn't do it, so I'll give over to anger. That'll get the result I want." That's from outside in. And wisdom and freedom and compassion and connectedness come from inside out.

So that's really the importance of connecting with our motivation. It gives us a sense of purpose and a stability and a reference point to maybe do things we wouldn't have thought we could do. I mean, when you first came on a nine-day retreat—some of you, this is your first retreat—when you thought about it, did you think you could make it through if you knew what it was like? When I look back at my first ten-day retreat, oh my God, I had no clue what I was getting into, which is mostly how people come. And then when you come to the next retreat, you'll find you forgot most of the bad stuff and you remember the nice moments, and then you'll start again and go, "Oh my God, I forgot about this"—but then you're here.

There's a clarity of purpose that we can come back to that keeps us going, that allows us to make choices we wouldn't have necessarily thought we could make.

One of the ways I look to keep connecting with my motivation and to keep inspiring it when it's getting a little weak or I'm getting distracted is by looking—this is one of the ways it works for me—looking to other people, like the Dalai Lama, but he's not the only one, of course, who manifest that. You can see they're ennobled by their commitment to the purity of their motivation and such a deep refuge in that.

Another person like that is Aung San Suu Kyi, the woman who's been the leader of the Burmese freedom movement. She's been under house arrest in her house for the better part of seventeen years. The place—I went by it the other month. You can't really get close, but you can kind of look over. It's all dilapidated, and no one's allowed to see her but the person who cooks for her.

Seventeen years. Her husband, who lived in England, died. She hasn't seen her kids for years now. She could leave any time, but she knows she could never come back. And even though no one can talk about her in that country—it's so repressive—she's really the focal point of so many people's hopes and sense of possibility. Anywhere you go there, as soon as people aren't around any that could be spying—because the military regime—I've been with poor nuns in little poor nunneries, and they take you upstairs, and they have her picture in little places underneath by the books, and they'd call her "the Lady." The taxi driver: "The Lady, she lives just down there." Everybody knows. She's committed to that.

But it's not—it's again, it's like the Dalai Lama—it's coming from a sincerity of her deep inner motivation, not out of an outer looking at what should happen.

This is from an interview. She said, "Just responding appropriately in each moment."

But you can see where it's taken her. What enormous courage and what enormous steadfastness and clarity of purpose. And I know from a few people who've known her and visited her that it's not like it's so clear and easy.

So really we have to reconnect with our purpose moment after moment, choice after choice. One teacher said once that every moment we're committing to something. The question is: to what?

So it takes us back into this immediacy of awareness of the moment. "So now I made a choice out of greed. Do I want to spend the next hour beating myself up about it, or do I want to see what choice I'm making in this moment? Oh yeah, right. My deep commitment is to awareness, to freedom from suffering. Okay, in this moment, can I manifest that?"

Moment after moment. What choices are we making?

Another person who really inspires me in this way—and this is just one example of how it's contagious, how we're interconnected. Because if something or someone or their behavior inspires us or touches us, what is it that's actually inspiring? It's touching that same potential in ourselves. Otherwise, we couldn't

appreciate it. So when we see someone who's really so committed to compassion, like His Holiness, and if that inspires us, it's because it's touching that place of compassion in ourselves.

We're not independent in this. We use that inspiration, but not to give it all over—thinking "he's like that and I could never be." Rather, we see he's like that and that touches me. This is the potential for compassion in my heart in this moment.

Maha Ghosananda is another one who inspires me, because of seeing someone in whom the habits had really been shifted, been purified. He died on March 15th of this year, just recently. He was a Cambodian monk, very much like Thich Nhat Hanh—a real peace activist and peacemaker, a deeply realized Buddhist Cambodian monk who came out of the killing fields. His whole family was destroyed in that. In the Buddhist world, he's very famous for being so dedicated to peace and to metta, really, working in the refugee camps with all the Cambodians whose families had been killed. He led peace walks through Cambodia. He was just very inspiring.

This is from the New York Times obituary. They quoted a professor of Buddhism at the University of California who wrote that "Maha Ghosananda's ability to forgive those responsible for the murder of his entire family is incomprehensible until one heard his explanation of Buddhism." Maha Ghosananda said he does not question that loving one's oppressors—Cambodians loving the Khmer Rouge—may be the most difficult attitude to achieve. But then he added, "It's the law of the universe that retaliation, hatred, and revenge only continue the cycle." Reconciliation, he continued, "means that we see ourselves as the opponent. For what is the opponent but a being in ignorance? And we ourselves are also ignorant of many things."

Powerful.

Now, that's inspiring, but this next piece is what really moved me. A few years ago, there was a conference at Spirit Rock of Buddhist teachers from all over, from all different traditions. Maha Ghosananda was there, but he was clearly in the middle stages of dementia—I don't know whether it was Alzheimer's or what. So he was there and someone would stay with him through the day. He certainly wasn't presenting or anything. He was just kind of sitting there, and someone would be with him to make sure he didn't wander off.

If you went up and spoke to him, or even if you didn't, he just beamed total metta. It was so powerful to me. At the very end, they had him come up on the platform and lead us in the refuges. It just came out of him—first it started in French, and then it went into English, and it just poured forth. Sometimes he would end retreats by passing out red strings you tie around your wrist. So they gave him strings to pass out to about two hundred people.

When he gave it to me, and I watched with others, he would hand it to you with total presence, completely beam you with metta, and then move on to the next person. But he couldn't really carry on much of a

conversation. I've spent a lot of time with my parents in nursing homes. I've seen a lot of people with dementia. So when I saw this, I thought, that's the habit of his heart and mind. This is how he got there. For some reason, I thought, wow—that's a life well lived. That's an appropriate response.

It really inspires me. If I think, "Fat chance, Carol, you're not going to get there," that's not helpful, that's not inspirational. But when I just let that touch me, and I don't go into any story about Carol or what's possible or the future, but just feel the power of love, of purity of heart and mind, in a moment—in a moment—that's possible.

So for me, that really inspires me. What I'm saying, though, is not that this should be your trip or that this should be what inspires you, but to find in your life the people, the readings, the activities—whatever it is that helps you reconnect, retouch deep motivations. It even deepens them, because people say, "Oh, more is possible than I even knew."

If I just stayed in my own little experience, it would be so limited. But as Maha Ghosananda said, we're all beings with ignorance. So what is possible for one, we can touch that in ourselves.

And that's the next piece I want to mention—recognizing this contagiousness of how we manifest, of how each other manifests. Just as we can catch wholesomeness and inspiration and commitment to freedom or wisdom or compassion or non-harming from others, so also we must recognize that how we are, how we manifest in a moment, with our own understanding as best we can, also affects others in the same way.

This is why we always emphasize the importance of sangha, the importance of recognizing spiritual friendship. Sometimes we're the person through whom the light is shining and we're the spiritual friend. Other times—and it could change every five minutes—it's the other person. We're all in this together. And so no one of us has to say, "I have to be totally perfect." But to have that openness to see what choices I'm making, and the openness to recognize when someone else is acting from compassion, from love, from wisdom—and instead of getting into envy or whatever, to let it in. It's kind of like sympathetic joy, like compassion. It's sort of like sympathetic goodness, appreciative goodness. We catch it from one another. Recognize and recognize. Cultivate the wholesome.

One of the reasons I really like to go and practice and sometimes teach in Burma, even though the government is really one of the worst in the world and there's a lot of horrible stuff going on, is that there are also quite a lot of Theravada Buddhist retreat centers and places to practice. It's a culture where, for the majority of the people, it's a Buddhist culture. And so there's a sense of—yes, Buddhism as a religion, but even without that—the qualities of non-harming behavior, of generosity as a source of happiness, not as "should" but as a source of happiness, of real metta, of real friendliness as the normal way of meeting someone new, as well as a real love of and respect and support for bhavana, meditation practice. Those are really deeply in the culture.

I didn't know that. The first time I went there was about six or seven years ago to do a retreat. I'd heard

that, but I didn't really get it without being there—how much being surrounded by, continuing to meet people not just in the retreat centers but taxi drivers and the people who run the little guest houses and poor women who come in and help to cook in the meditation centers. I mean, really, so many people, people that you just meet on the street, imbue this kind of quality. They ask, "What are you doing here?" My first taxi ride, the young guy goes, "Well, what are you doing here?" I said, "Well, I came to meditate." And the response—and this is more the norm than the exception—he turns around. Luckily, the cars are old and things are going slow, so it's not that scary. He turns around and goes, "You're here to meditate? That's so wonderful! I really want to meditate too, but I have to take care of my mother." And you hear all the really heart-rending stories. But he's not saying, "Oh, I can't do it." He's so happy that I'm there to meditate.

And the sense of generosity—of people's time, of food, of anything they can do to support you—is so strong. And people are so happy in being generous, which is the piece I never really got intellectually. Once we were in a village, I was with some friends, and an old fisherman took us up to look at a house a friend had built. He took like two hours of his day. Then we came back and he was so generous. We wanted to give him something, but he wouldn't take it. But he wanted to give us something. And all he had was a big dried fish. So that's what he gave us, this dried fish—and so happy to be able to give.

You receive this dried fish, and our kind of Western mind goes, "What are we going to do with this?" Take it to your friend in Bangkok? We're thinking, "Yeah, right, I'm going to take this dried fish to Bangkok." But he's so sincere and happy. This is just the first thing that came to my mind; there are about a hundred different examples. You just feel so honored, so happy to receive it.

And then he leaves and we go, of course we can't bring it to Bangkok. So who can we give it to? And immediately we thought of some nuns we knew who could really use it that day. We went and gave it to them, and then we were so happy to give someone this dried fish. The more you're there, the happier you get—you just want to start giving things, giving time, doing things.

Not the way we think of it here, where it's "oh, they did this for me so I have to do it for them"—tit for tat. That's not generosity. That's like doing the right thing; it's not bad. But this real generosity is a source of happiness. You want to do things for people. You want to give. It's mixed with mettā.

I've been going for about the last four or five years. The last few years I teach a month at Spirit Rock with Guy and some other friends, and I've been showing up from Burma the day before. The first couple of times I did it, they would say, "Carol, don't you think you could give yourself a little more time? You've got to teach, you've got to get over jet lag." And all that's true—I get tired. But they stopped saying that now because they noticed, "Geez, every time you come back from Burma, you're in such a good place. You're so happy."

And that's what it is. You catch the beauty, the joy of generosity, of mettā, of love of the Dhamma. These are just normal people, and we catch it. When we come back, when we catch it, we can pass it on. Not by

"I'm going to give you generosity, I'm so great." No, just by being happy. Just by sharing it. It becomes a way of being.

That's just an example. So in a world of choices and actions and relationships, really seeing that each moment we make a choice—each moment we can choose to connect with, to align with our deepest motivation. And when we don't, the next moment we can choose to just see with awareness what we're doing, not beat ourselves up. What are we feeding? What are we starving?

I'll end with two quotations. One is about a Native American elder who is teaching his grandchildren about life. He said, "A fight is going on inside me, a terrible fight, between two wolves. One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, ego—all those things. The other one represents joy, peace, love, generosity, friendship, kindness, compassion, faith. The same fight is going on inside you too, and inside every other person," he added.

The grandchildren thought about it for a minute, and then one child asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

The Buddha used that a lot—not that story, but the imagery—looking at what we're feeding, what we're starving in the consciousness, in the mind. Sometimes the delusion is there and we don't know. We really think our motivation is coming from the purest place, from real compassion, from caring, from mettā, from wisdom. And that's really the best we can do—it's true. We just don't know. The delusion could be manifesting and we don't see it.

But we keep paying attention. If we find over time that the way we're acting or the things we're doing leads to suffering increasing, or wanting increasing, or aversion increasing—I don't mean just a mood that's coming and moving through, but over time, over days—you can really start to sense something's feeding this ill will. That's when we stop and look. Just stop and look. What's going on? Can I align more? Find a way to connect with that inspiration, that commitment, that purpose.

So I want to end with a quotation from Howard Zinn, a historian: "To be hopeful, to be an optimist in bad times, is not just foolishly romantic.

It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents. And to live now as we believe human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

Let us close with Maha Ghosananda's prayer for world peace:

The suffering of Cambodia has been deep. From this suffering comes great compassion. Great compassion makes a peaceful heart. A peaceful heart makes a peaceful person. A peaceful person makes a peaceful family. A peaceful family makes a peaceful community. A peaceful community makes a peaceful nation. And a peaceful nation makes a peaceful world.

May all beings live in happiness and peace.

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