Dāna, Sīla, Bhāvanā: The Three Pillars as Paths of Awakening

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 50:04

Tonight I just wanted to share some teachings that might seem quite obvious but have been awakening more and more interest in me—a growing sense of possibility in what seems like the most simple teachings of the Buddha as part of a really intrinsic path of our awakening.

I've been on this path of studying Buddhist teachings and meditation for a long time, and I've been teaching Buddhist meditation and the whole Buddhist path for also quite a long time. It's just turned out that most of the teaching I do tends to be intensive silent retreats, anywhere from a weekend to three months. We just finished the first six weeks of the three-month retreat out at the meditation center in Barre. We do that every year, just to give you a sense of where my energy has tended to go.

This is also Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, and it's often the case that the heart of the teachings we learn about, what's new to us in this culture, is the meditation piece—which is, of course, fascinating. Meditation is the part of really learning to investigate, to explore the qualities of our mind and heart. As the Buddha said, everything he taught is to free our hearts and minds from suffering, to free our hearts and minds from confusion.

When I came up in my practice and the way I learned this whole path, the meditation piece was central, but it was kind of unspoken, sent as the most important. Yet anywhere you read the talks of the Buddha, the teachings of the Buddha, he always talks about the three pillars as dāna, sīla, bhāvanā in the Pali—generosity, ethical conduct or non-harming behavior, and bhāvanā, which is mental cultivation.

What's clear is that the thread of awakening, of really seeing through the confusion that brings suffering in our lives, in our heart and mind—the place where that seemed the richest, the most interesting, has always been in the meditation. So meditation centers, city centers, intensive retreats. And dāna and sīla, generosity and moral conduct, are important, sure. We were always told in the early years that you need to have ethical conduct so that you don't have remorse, so that meditation can go deeper if you're not out there killing people, basically. Which is true. And generosity is good, yeah, generosity is good.

So this might be like a "duh" kind of a talk, but what's been more and more rich for me in the past few years is coming to understand more deeply for myself that everything the Buddha taught—as far as I can tell in my limited experience—none of it's just like, "Oh, by the way, do this so you can do something better." Every aspect of the teachings is a path of awakening. Every aspect is a way to transform the suffering habits of our heart and mind into compassion, into clear seeing, into non-ill will, into

loving-kindness, into wisdom.

So I just want to talk a little bit tonight about generosity and about sīla—virtuous conduct, non-harming conduct—as aspects of our path of awakening, and in themselves as paths of joy, of happiness, of purifying. Not that we have to wait till we can get to a weekend retreat. Weekend retreats are good. Or a three-month retreat—three-month retreats are great. Or go to be a nun for a year—that's great. But we don't have to do that. We can really start and continue to open up to generosity as a way of being that transforms our heart and mind in itself. That's a path of wisdom. It's not a second-best supportive practice.

The same with ethical conduct. And in both of them, it's about how we do it—how we pay attention as we're being generous, how we notice what's going on in our hearts and minds as we're refraining from harmful behavior. So you can see why, with awareness, with investigation, with kindness, with interest, these are really important aspects of waking up.

I can only, in this short of a time, hope to point a little bit. There's no way I can cover it all. There are vast things to say about both of these topics. So my only hope is if it sparks any kind of interest to take this into your life and really include it, explore it, enjoy it—to recognize the happiness that generosity and non-harming behavior bring us. Rather than it being something we should do, rather than not being generous or not being ethical becoming another way to hate ourselves, we can really see that these are sources of great happiness.

In the last few years, I guess every few years as we continue on our path, if we had to give a summary of what we're learning or how we see the path, it would probably change from time to time. So my current synopsis—I'm not up here saying this is the truth of all time—just my current synopsis would be that really, all of our practice is about transforming the suffering habits of our mind and heart. You see this everywhere in the Buddhist teaching, when the Buddha talks about sharing what will bring each of us to understand the deepest contentment, to really learn that we can live in this world as it is.

He never said he could change the world, and he didn't change the world. But he taught that we can learn to live in this world as it is without adding—by the way we relate to ourselves and others—without creating suffering for ourselves. And from that clear seeing, we can respond more appropriately to help alleviate the suffering of others. So it starts with ourselves.

In the most basic way, he was saying that the source of our deepest confusion and suffering is that we don't recognize the way things are accurately. And that's, you know, ten million other talks—I can't totally go into it here. But we don't recognize accurately, for example, the fact that everything is in constant change. We can say, "Yeah, I get it. Everything's in constant change." But then how do we act? We hold on to what we want. We're distressed when what we love goes away, as if that shouldn't happen, right? "No, no, I don't do that." Look and see in ourselves. Because we don't recognize accurately—and this is confusion, we don't see clearly—the habits of mind that cause us great suffering are greed and aversion, ill will, anger, fear. Basically: greed, negativity, and the confusion that doesn't see accurately. This is the

essence of the Buddha's teaching.

And when he talks about transforming, what's so cool to me isn't that we have to go out and with hatred say, "Look at these disgusting habits in my heart and mind. I am a horrible human being, so I better change these now." That's mostly what people come to retreats doing. "I hate how much greed I'm seeing. It's really disgusting. I have to stop that." We say, "Well, you're just changing from greed to aversion. That's not really what we're trying to do here." But that's what we know. That's what we trust. That's what's so familiar we don't even recognize there's another possibility.

And the catch-22—you understand catch-22, right? I teach a lot in Europe in English, and have you ever tried to explain to somebody what that means if they haven't read the book? So the catch-22 is this: what keeps the greed and the hatred, the fear, the aversion going is not recognizing accurately. What keeps us from recognizing accurately? Guess what? Greed and aversion in the mind. So when we're really angry at someone, if you look at them, how do they look? Do you really appreciate all their beautiful qualities as they keep on doing this horrible thing that's making you angry? Not so much.

But what's so cool about the Buddha's teaching isn't that we have to uproot this stuff with hatred and willpower. "Okay, now I'm going to stop clinging. I'm going to stop having any greed from now on." Rather, it's that through paying attention, seeing how these habits arise and how they work—if we really notice that without judgment—we start to recognize the suffering in ourselves, for ourselves. And this is the cool piece: when we see that, wisdom naturally arises. "Oh, this isn't so helpful," and it starts to drop away. It's not that we have to cultivate this huge willpower, figure it all out ahead of time, and then create the insight. I mean, it's a huge job—we can't do that. We just have to pay attention. See what qualities in our heart and mind are bringing up more suffering. See what qualities are actually bringing up more contentment, more connectedness, more happiness, more joy.

And if we're willing to just look without prejudging, without self-hatred, without fear, it's really obvious. The habits are strong, but the clear seeing of generosity, of non-harming behavior—which translates as friendliness, as compassion—these naturally lead to wisdom. It's actually quite a cool thing. It's a huge task on one hand. On the other hand, it's so much less than we think. And we just have to start paying attention.

So what I'm trying to say here tonight is that you don't have to only meditate to do this work. Yes, meditation helps us learn how to look at our minds, but also cultivating generosity, cultivating non-harming behavior—these actually purify and transform these habits of mine that lead into greed, that lead into aversion and ill will.

Because the way we are set up as humans, we cling to the habits because we think they're going to be what makes us happy. It's not like we're just perversely evil or something. We're trying our best. We just—half the time—okay, don't take offense. Maybe I'll just speak for myself. Half the time, we just don't have a clue. We're doing what we think is going to make us happy, but it just doesn't always work.

So starting to recognize these patterns accurately, but also seeing how insidiously these habits creep in, both from inside and from outside, from the external environment.

I'll give you two examples that just came up this morning in my experience. I was sitting for about half an hour, and—for myself, the one I noticed was ill will, anger. I just noticed a habit in my mind which I've noticed many times: the mood you could call resistance. Have you ever experienced that? Just whatever it is—"I just don't want to do that." No one knows what that is, right?

Whatever it's directed toward, it comes up. But I was just sitting. It wasn't even aimed at anything. It was just there. And whatever then comes up into that mood—okay, I think I'll do this or that—what does the resistance mind say? "Oh, no. I can't do that." And if you're at all intellectual, you'll find that the mind is really, really good at rationalizing. So it can come up with all kinds of good reasons why I shouldn't do whatever the heck it is.

But because I've recognized this, thank God, over all these years, I can feel that the resistance is basically aversion—a kind of anger, negativity in the mind. And then whatever choice or thought or decision needs to be made happens to come up at that time. The view of it, the way we see it, is colored by that resistance. So it becomes, "No, that wouldn't be any good. Oh no, I can't..."—whatever it is.

The resistance may have come up, and I don't even know what it was about. I was just sitting there. Maybe it's because I didn't want to sit anymore. Maybe it's because—I don't even know. But then if I had to make a decision, like if someone had called me and said, "Would you do this or that today?" I would have said, "Oh no, it's too much trouble. I couldn't do this or that." I can't see clearly.

But I notice now that when there's resistance and I just get up—"Okay, resistance is like this"—and I don't really let it drive the bus, and I just get up and do whatever needs to be done, the resistance is gone, and I can see much more clearly what to do.

So it's a familiar pattern for me, and I see I'm not the only one. It's a quality of ill will, of aversion, that then colors experience. It colors the choices I make. It's kind of self-perpetuating, you know? Like with exercise—if you don't exercise, you'll be so tired. Unless you're an exercise junkie who can't stop, one way or the other. But if I actually exercise, I feel better. If I listen to resistance, I'll just sit there and go, "No, I can't exercise." And the more I sit there, the more tired I get, which proves I really can't exercise. It just keeps going.

So that's on that level. But it's so familiar that if we don't notice, we're caught in it.

On the greed level—maybe some of you heard this too—I was listening to NPR this morning and there was a little segment. This is an easy shot, granted. They were talking to some so-called expert about conspicuous consumption in the U.S. So this is an easy target. But just talking to someone about how much you can buy, how much is spent—I have no idea if this is true, but they were saying...

That the level of consumption in this country—just buying all kinds of things, not particularly energy—if this level of consumption were replicated across the whole world, the earth could only support 1.4 billion people at this rate, rather than 7 billion at the already horrific levels so many people currently endure.

And then they were explaining how part of the economic philosophy that gets put out suggests that when there's a slump, what would help the economy is for everyone to go shopping. I have to say I've heard that in some form or another—this idea that it's better to get out and get that money into the economy. Basically, go shopping.

This operates on the same level with greed and how it can slip in as a way to make ourselves feel good if we're not paying attention. I was reading an interview with the actress Emma Thompson, who had just spent a few weeks in Burma with a nonprofit doing aid work. I've been in Burma many times. It's very poor, and it really needs a great deal. The government does almost nothing for the people—well, nothing good anyway.

So she was actually speaking at a conference in Burma, which is already unusual. But she said one thing, just one thing according to what I'm talking about, that I found really interesting. They were asking her, you know, why are you doing this? Why do you take your spare time and come here for weeks to do this aid work? They had been going around to villages—I'm not entirely clear what they were doing. But she said, "Well, you know, there's really so much suffering here and in the world. When I hear about the suffering, when I read about how much suffering there is, I feel really badly." And we do—we feel badly when there's suffering. She said, "So I realized that when I feel badly, I could either go out and buy myself a new handbag to make myself feel better, or I could take some generous and compassionate action. That's what I'm choosing to do now."

When I first read that, I thought, yeah, yeah. It sounded kind of glib, you know—an easy thing to say. But as I've thought about it more and just watched my own mind, without putting ourselves down, I've noticed something. Often when we feel badly—and there are many reasons to feel badly, and it's not that we always have to go out and do aid work when there's suffering—but when we're suffering even internally, often going and getting something pleasant is a way to think it's going to make us feel better. Maybe I just want to go get some ice cream.

I'm not saying that's bad. Don't get me wrong—I'm not saying that's bad. I'm saying we just watch what we do. It can feed the unspoken, unrecognized assumption that when things aren't going well, I need to get more good things. That's the way out of unhappiness. And sometimes, temporarily, it may be. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that, but just to see.

There's one talk of the Buddha's where he said, "The uninstructed person knows of no other escape from unpleasant feelings except to go and lust after pleasant sense experience." The uninstructed person. If you watch how often we do that, it makes me really sad to think of a life where that would be the only way we knew to find happiness, to find peace—to go get more pleasant sense experiences. It seems like such a

bleak life, doesn't it? But it's deeply ingrained in our habits. Not that it's bad to have pleasant experiences, but to see that this is not the only way out.

What Emma Thompson was pointing to is that generous and compassionate action actually brings so much more happiness, so much more contentment, so much more wisdom in our own hearts and minds. Not because it's a good thing you should do—not like that at all—but because it's actually transforming the habits of greed in our minds, the habits of self-centeredness, the habits of fear, the habits of ill will or anger. It's actually strengthening the wholesome grooves in this non-existent mind, you could say, rather than the suffering grooves.

So I want to talk now a little bit about working with generosity and, as I say, just pointing to a few things about generosity and ethical conduct—non-harming conduct—as paths.

The most important thing I want to say about both, starting with generosity, is that it's not so much an external mandate that we should be generous. It's about really bringing interest and awareness to our hearts and minds, and then to the situation around us, before an act of generosity, during the act of generosity, and after the act of generosity. What's transformative about cultivating generosity is the way that we relate to it, the way it really changes our heart and mind—from the inside out.

So it's not about simply giving, giving, giving in some glib or mechanical way. Not that at all. And we're not just talking about generosity of wallets, generosity of things. It's this sense of sharing whatever we have—food, our time, willingness to listen to a friend, caring, money, whatever.

In the culture in Burma, and also in Thailand where I was a nun, generosity is kind of ingrained because they're essentially Buddhist cultures. Both with the inner heart of it and also the external institutionalization of it that kind of kills the heart of it, just like anywhere. But generosity is very deeply embedded in those cultures.

All the nunneries, the monasteries, the meditation centers run completely on dana, on generosity. You could go to sit there for a year or for months. There's no fee ever. You show up and you're welcome, if there's room. There's never anything charged. And people come—all these meditation centers are signed up a year ahead. People come from outside, Burmese families, and offer the meals. They'll pay for the meal for the day. And it's not cheap anymore. The place I was sitting last winter, there were about two hundred people meditating each day, and the meals for the day cost four hundred dollars. I want you to know, except for the wealthy, people in Burma are really poor. It's a very difficult situation. And yet people are coming, signing up, offering meals, and then they sit and watch you eat. Because the generosity isn't just about the offering. It's in the sense that this incredible joy comes in the giving and in the receiving, and in doing it in a very intentional way together. There's something very immediate and joyous and contagious about the generosity in these countries.

But it's not just in the meditation centers. It's deep, deep in the culture. I remember I was riding in a little

pony cart way up in northern Burma, and the driver was a really poor guy. We were riding along talking to him—I must have been with a friend who could speak Burmese, because he couldn't speak English. We were talking about this Western monk who had been living around that area for a few years, quite a character, so everybody knew him. He always went around barefoot. This pony cart driver, a very poor guy, kind of in rags, was saying, "Oh, I feel so badly for him. He can't afford slippers. I really wish I could just save enough money to buy him some slippers." And he really meant it.

In those first years I was there, my Western conditioning would kick in: "Oh no, you don't want to give to us. We have so much more than you. We don't want to take anything from you." But we started to see how separating, how alienating that is. The wanting to give whatever one can afford, and the receiving of it in the same open-hearted way—that is really what's beautiful and joyful about the practice of generosity. You see it's not just we people who have a lot doing something for you poor people who don't. That's a kind of minimum generosity. It's not the generosity that's really transforming our hearts.

The quality of generosity that truly transforms is the kind that, in that very moment, liberates our heart from greed. For sure, we stop hanging on to whatever it is we're offering. But also, in that open, very present giving and receiving, the sense of who's giving to whom honestly starts to break down. This might sound kind of pie in the sky, but I've been there enough times in Burma and spoken with so many other people who've had the same experience, so I know it's not just me.

After a while, you get happier and happier when people are generous, and it's contagious. You start wanting to be generous yourself. At first, with my American conditioning, it was, "Oh my God, these poor people are giving me so much. I've got to start giving back." But that doesn't feel good. That's not transforming. That's a kind of me needing to do the right thing. I mean, it's better than stealing from people, don't get me wrong. But it's not the transformation of seeing through our separation. When the heart releases from holding on, there's this sense of interconnectedness, of the joy that comes from both the giving and the receiving—something absolutely uplifting and faith-building.

Shantideva was a great Indian teacher whose work influenced many of the Tibetan teachings. He said once, "When I've done something for the sake of another, I feel no elation. I look for nothing in return. It's like having fed myself." That sense of looking for nothing in return. Or the Buddha saying never let a day go by without sharing a meal. This spirit is so embedded in the culture that we start to catch it. I start to catch it. And you can feel the heart and mind open up, become lighter, become more content, become less needy, become less wanting. The happiness of offering is really a beautiful thing.

Let me share another example. The year after the cyclone—a devastating storm much like Hurricane Katrina—hit a part of Burma not too far from Yangon, we went to our monastery in the winter. Even the villages around there had lost a great deal. The really poor villagers had lost some of their houses. The rice crops had been ruined. There wasn't enough rice. So the abbot of this monastery wanted to organize what's called a rice dāna—dāna meaning generosity—which simply meant that we bought many bags of

rice. We had this huge room, maybe half the size of this one, filled with bags of rice. The villagers would come, each with a small chit for their household indicating how many people lived there, and we would give each family a bag of rice.

But they don't just say, "Okay, here's the room, go take your rice," the way I could imagine we might do it here. No. The Sayadaw—the teacher—came and insisted that we, who had brought money from our friends, participate directly. There were six of us, but we were very clear that we were just representatives of all the friends from the States and Europe and Australia who had offered the money. He said, "No, you can't just do that. You have to come." We put the rice on the table, and each person who came, we handed them a bag of rice. I have pictures of this. Narayan and I were both there, and these little ladies—these tiny little ladies—would come up. Narayan and I together could barely heave a bag of rice, and they'd plop it on their head and go walking off, some of them with children in their arms. It was unbelievable. We spent all day giving rice to the people in this village.

The next day, the monks went out early in the morning on what's called alms round. In all Buddhist countries, the monks still do this. They go out with their bowls, eyes downcast, and simply walk among the villagers. Anyone who wants to offer food can do so. The monks don't ask, they don't speak—they just walk their set route every day. Everyone knows where they're coming, and if they want to offer food, they can. This practice dates back to the time of the Buddha. In his time, it was the only way the monastics received food. Now in many monasteries, food is also cooked by lay people who come in and offer meals. So in these poor areas, like this one, the monks go out every day and all they receive is a little bit of rice. But it's really about offering the opportunity for generosity. They do this not because they actually need the rice—people come and provide the meals for the day—but because they're offering those who are poor the opportunity to give something. It's a really interesting dynamic.

So we had a friend, a guy from Mexico who was going on alms rounds. He told us—he'd been there a few months—he said they go every day, the same little route, the same villagers come every day, they know who comes. He said the day after that rice *dāna*, there were so many more people out offering rice, because now they had a little rice. And the first thing they did was to go and actually offer something back. It was just so beautiful. He said one family had all their little kids lined up, and each little kid had the chance to put rice in a bowl.

There's no pressure. No one's there saying you need to do it. It's because of the joy and the happiness and the symbiosis of that.

This is something that I've started to get more in my cells over all the years of being there. It's really become quite profound. I'm not saying that I've completely changed my mind. But I can see how this is the practice of awakening. The practice of non-clinging. The practice of not being all about me and fear of you and needing to hold on to what I have. The practice of trust—that enough will be enough. We give now and when I need, it will come. It's been quite amazing.

Just one last little story, to show it's not just monks and nuns. I was walking on the road through the village between the two meditation centers where I was staying one afternoon by myself. A little boy, seven or eight, came walking up to me. I'd never seen him before or since. He had no clue who I was. He came up dressed in his little school uniform, very nicely dressed, and he had a tiny jasmine flower. He approached me and then very formally, with his jasmine flower, did this formal bow—that respectful way that people say hello and thank you. Really focused, he handed me this little flower. We both bowed. I said thank you in Burmese, my one word, and he went off. That was it. I was so touched by that—just this sense of connection.

It's not about what's given. There's a place where the Buddha said, even if you rinse your dirty bowl and throw that rinse water in a pond, thinking, "May whatever beings live in this pond be able to benefit, to eat or drink something from this rinse water"—that's an act of generosity. Because it's not so much what, but how.

So it's said, in the way of giving, before giving, really bring attention to the sense of volition. So it's not just this casual, "Oh yeah, you need something? Here, take it." I've done that many times. A friend was saying to me once, "Remember that casual generosity of yours at that one point? This thing I've used so much?" He didn't mean it in a bad way, but it really went in. He was right. It had been a really thoughtless kind of generosity. I just had this thing. I said, "I don't want it. Do you want this?" He said, "Oh yeah, I'd love it." And he did love it, and I didn't, but there was no real connection in that.

So it's simply bringing attention to your intention, and then when we give, really being present with it. That's all. Not like, "I'm so great, I'm giving you this," but just being present with the whole giving and the whole receiving. There's something so powerful about that.

At first I was a little shy about that, all kind of self-referencing. But again, in Burma, when you give—when we go to the nunneries, we give them money because they don't get so much as monks, to buy food or to build a new floor or to put a roof on that isn't leaking, to build toilets. Toilets are a great thing to give money for, by the way.

You know, it's very basic stuff, so you give money. Now, in Burma, the money comes in big piles because it's just not worth that much. So when you're going to give money, you do it very formally. They go and get this big tray. You pile the money up, and a hundred dollars could be a big pile like this. At first it looks so crass, doesn't it? Handing over this big pile of money—you think, "Oh God, I thought it would be a little nicer than that."

But it's different. The nuns sit there. We sit there. We all put our hands on the tray—it depends how many people there are, but a few nuns, a few of the givers. Together, you hold it up. You're kneeling down with your knees back, so this can be quite agonizing if it goes on for very long. And they chant this beautiful blessing and thanks.

It's a really common thing they say: "With this gift, may this gift be a cause for your awakening from suffering. May your generosity bring you to awakening in the shortest possible time." That's a common thing to say. It's really different than when I write a check and put it in an envelope. I could still be more present for that than I am—you can still cultivate the intention and the connection—but there's not that immediacy.

Just last week, a friend, a yogi, a meditator, gave me a check to bring to Burma, which was very nice. But as she gave it to me, it just came into my mind to say that, like they do. So she's handing it to me, and I just said, "May this generosity be a cause for your quick awakening from suffering and liberation." And I could see her whole face change. We don't usually say that because it sounds so—I don't know—weird. I figured I could do it at the end of a three-month retreat. But it just came out, and I thought, "Oh, it gives it so much more power." It honors what you're doing in the generosity. It really starts to change our habits and bring us joy.

And then afterwards—and this is really important because it's not something we do very much—the Buddha talked about this with both moral conduct and with generosity. Afterwards, after you've been generous, after you've refrained—and moral conduct can simply be refraining from harmful behavior, that's an act of wholesomeness, an act of compassion, of non-harming, just refraining from taking something that isn't yours—is to actually reflect on your past acts of generosity, your past acts of non-harming behavior.

I know in my culture anyway, we think, "Well, think about how generous I've been"—it sounds like a real ego trip, right? "Oh yeah, I'm so generous." It's not that at all. Let me read this to you from the Buddha:

"Furthermore, this is the case where you recollect your own generosity: 'It is a gain, it is a great gain for me that among people who are overcome with possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleaned of the stain of possessiveness, generous, open-handed, delighting in being generous and responsive to requests.'"

And this is the key: "At any time when a disciple of the noble ones, when someone on the path, is recollecting generosity, in the moment of recollecting, her mind is not overcome with greed." There's only room for one thing in there. If we're really recollecting generosity, we're not filled with greed. It's really very simple how it works. We're not overcome with aversion. We're not overcome with delusion. Her heart, her mind heads straight based on generosity.

"And when the heart is headed straight, the disciple has a sense of the goal, gains a sense of the dhamma, of the truth, experiences joy connected with the dhamma, with the truth. And in one who is joyful, the body grows calm. One whose body is calm experiences ease. And in one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated."

And then he goes on to describe how this leads all the way up to liberation.

The exact same process unfolds when recollecting your virtuous actions—those times when you simply refrained from doing something harmful. You don't have to be Mother Teresa. Just bringing to mind the times you've restrained yourself from causing harm, the times you've done something simply generous. Perhaps a friend calls wanting to talk about their problems, and your first thought is, "I'm too tired." But then you realize, "You know what? I can listen." Recollecting moments like that heads our minds straight. It's really a way of purifying our heart and mind. This isn't about thinking, "I'm so great."

The Buddha goes on, speaking to this layperson: "You can develop this recollection of generosity while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children." Basically, any time. Any time at all.

I always run out of time to talk about *sila*, non-harming behavior. So I will end with something that really inspired me in an unexpected way last year—something that deepened my appreciation for both the subtlety and depth of our difficult habits of mind. This isn't to put ourselves down or be judgmental, but rather to illuminate why it is so essential for me, and hopefully for all of us, to cultivate and transform our habits of greed and fear—for our own happiness and for the happiness of the world.

Because it's so comfortable to fall back into greed, to fall back into denial, to fall back into delusion—even though these patterns bring us suffering. Without really understanding how our minds and hearts work, without genuinely looking and seeing whether it's true that these qualities bring suffering, we remain caught. Don't believe anything you read, or anything I say. Look and see for yourself. Not with judgment, but with clear seeing.

I know for myself, after all these years of practice, that what I'm saying is true for me. But you don't know it for you. You may, but don't believe me—look and see. And even knowing this, I cannot say with certainty what my mind or heart would do in the most difficult circumstances. I know what I think I'd like to do, but it's not always within our control.

A year ago last summer, I was in Germany again, and I visited Dachau, a concentration camp I had never managed to visit before. They've set it up as a museum, and I think they did a really good job with it. First I was amazed at how big it was. Then my German friends said, "Oh, Carol, that wasn't even one of the big ones."

The museum was arranged with large placards and posters describing every aspect you could think of. But they also made it personal. In each section—like the room documenting all the different groups of people who had been imprisoned there, the Roma, people from Hungary, gay people, Jewish people, Catholics—they didn't leave it impersonal. Almost always there was a name, a photograph of someone, some brief story. Stories of people who were in the concentration camp, people who worked there, people who lived in the surrounding community.

I was also watching the visitors. It was incredibly crowded—somehow I had imagined I would be

wandering around there by myself, but it was packed. Observing people move through the exhibits was fascinating. You could see couples enter chatting casually, and as they progressed through, you could see them becoming genuinely touched. The museum was designed in such a way that it reached your heart. You simply couldn't remain detached.

What that experience did for me—I was already having a difficult month—was bring me even more deeply into a sense that what I'm doing, what I hope we're all doing, is profoundly important. Because this is not just something about Germany in the 1940s. We only have to read history, or read today's news. I don't even have to name places, do I? The endless atrocities and genocides in the last twenty or thirty years, throughout all of history, events happening right now in Somalia, in Sudan, the Khmer Rouge, racism in this country. It's everywhere.

What I understood from looking at all those people involved was this: it wasn't just a few monsters who came up with some bizarre idea. It was many, many people in all different situations. And it's not as though we make one big decision. I don't know what I would do if I were in a situation where my family or the people I love were threatened, and all I had to do to protect them was turn a blind eye. Not actively do something harmful, but simply turn a blind eye.

I don't know. I can say what I wish I would do, but I don't really know.

So we see that it's just a series of tiny little decisions that we each make in our lives. When I'm not at ease with greed, or I don't understand fear, or I don't see how resistance can color all my decisions, then resistance or fear or greed is going to guide my choices—even when I think, "Oh, I want to be a good person," but I don't understand how my mind works.

Somehow that realization gave me a whole other level of inspiration. It's not just about meditation, but about the little moments. And there is no right or wrong—not that you should always give or always not give. But when I pass someone on the street who says, "I'm homeless and I need money," each time it's a new decision, isn't it? Each time. Not "you always give" or "you never give," but each time: Do I just walk by? Do I give? Either way, do I know what I'm doing and why I'm doing it?

If I give, can I not be embarrassed, and just be really present in that? Not think I'm doing something good for someone else, but simply be offering. If I don't give, know why I'm not giving.

Our whole life is just little moments, little moments, little moments of decision. We can take these chances of generosity, of restraining from stealing, from hurting people, from lying, from harsh speech. Just restrain, and do that consciously, and reflect on the sense of connectedness and wholesomeness and contentment that this can truly bring us.

I really believe that both of these practices—*sīla* and *dāna*—could be practices of liberation. Even when you're sitting at home in a house crowded with children and you can't come to meditate.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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