The Joy of the Way

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:03

Tonight I want to talk about the happiness of the path.

A short excerpt from the Dhammapada: "By your own efforts, waken yourself, watch yourself, and live joyfully. Follow the truth of the way. Reflect upon it. Make it your own. Live it and it will always sustain you." And from another line in the same Dhammapada: "Know the sweet joy of living in the way."

Sometimes the fact that we're really on a path of happiness gets a little lost. We forget. And I know that the last week or so of a long retreat can at times be quite difficult, for different reasons. I'm putting this out because I want you all to know it's normal if you're feeling that sometimes things seem more difficult than they have been.

Sometimes it seems difficult because actually things are going really well and we like it and it's tranquil and peaceful and there's so much insight, and the thought comes: "How can I hold on to this when I leave and I get busy?" And sometimes it's just the reverse—that we begin to see how strongly our old familiar conditionings and patterns can come popping up at the drop of a hat, so to speak. And we can feel rather chagrined at times. "Well, what was the point of all this? Here I am, just the same me." In fact, we can get quite wrapped up in that. It can seem rather discouraging.

Or a third possibility is we're coming up against some last view we were holding of what freedom really should look like and what should have happened by now. And it didn't, obviously, whatever it should have been. If there's still some holding to that view, for all of these reasons, it can seem a bit bumpier, a bit more difficult at times in this last week.

Again, none of this stuff happening needs to be a problem. None of it's a mistake. Of course the same conditionings arise. If you keep paying attention, you'll see that there is actually the potential for meeting them with a lot more wisdom, a lot more spaciousness. You just don't remember, really, what it was like the first week of the retreat. You won't remember that until your next retreat, the first week, and then you'll go, "Oh yeah." So even though it might feel the same, it's very different.

I'm bringing that up because sometimes in this, we begin to engender a sense of struggle. Remember, if anything arising is a problem, it's not the thing in itself. It's because somehow we think it should be different. Just take the conflict not as a sign that something's wrong, but as a signal to look: Where's the clinging in this moment?

Simeon the New Theologian said once that the more a person enters the light of understanding, the more she or he is aware of her own ignorance. Think about that. It's true, and it's not a bad sign.

When we're in the phase—which can last a long time in our practice—where we're seeing and feeling the painful nature of clinging, the completely ephemeral nature of pleasant feeling, it feels like we really know: clinging is bondage, the heart of non-clinging is freedom, there's nothing to cling to. And we turn around in a moment of awareness, and just some pleasant thing arises, and we're gone out of our walking path and out the door. We don't even know how we got there. Well, how did that happen? I'm so clear that clinging is bondage and there's nothing worth clinging to. Why am I gone so quickly?

We can get wrapped up in discouragement at that if we don't see that that's just another identification. We can look at it a different way: the craving came up, it's strong. We learn to respect—a healthy respect—for the power of habit and conditioning. It really eases our way in this life. And you can also see that as strong as that craving came up and drove us, just as quickly the awareness was there and cut through the whole dynamic again.

Just as craving can arise and drive us, so too can awareness, connectedness, resting at home in the nature of mind be present just like that. And at times we have a choice in how we view our practice—whether the glass is half empty or half full. So in this, I want to remind us to notice how quickly, how easily, how immediately wakefulness is again present. And recognizing the power of our conditioning is the beginning or the middle of our becoming more free from it. It's not that we're worse than ever.

So this is just the preamble. What I want to talk about is really our path—the path that the Buddha has given us as teachings. It is a path of happiness, and we can forget that the path he showed us is much more vast than a meditation retreat. As vast as our meditation practice is, as vast as the Brahma Viharas are, and all the ways we can learn to be present with mindfulness—as vast as all this is, a retreat is only part of our path.

When the Buddha would give his teachings, he didn't simply start with meditation practice. He always talked about three aspects of our path: dana, sila, bhavana. Dana being generosity, sila being ethical or conscious conduct, and bhavana usually translated as mental development. You could say our formal meditation practices come under bhavana.

I'd like to talk a bit tonight about the first two aspects of this path, because I think sometimes we acknowledge that they're important, saying "yes, yes, they're important so that we can have a little peace, so that we can meditate." But seeing that dana and sila are in themselves paths—ways of living that bring deep peace and happiness—is essential. Each of these, and this is my opinion now, are practices of liberation, of freedom, of actualizing the heart and mind of non-clinging, of realizing through speech and action the wisdom of compassion.

The Buddha said over and over that there's no higher happiness than peace. The peace of a heart of non-clinging, the peace of resting in the clear, vivid wakefulness that is our birthright. That's the peace of what you could call emptiness. It's also the happiness of metta, the happiness of compassion—two sides of the same coin.

And everything the Buddha taught, if we really read or listen to his words, it seems like—okay, this is a generalization—but it seems like he really wasn't into fluff. He said, like he said over and over, "I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering. The sure heart's release." If you think of that and then see how much he emphasized the teachings of dana and sila, you realize that these weren't secondary instructions—as in "I'll teach the laypeople dana and sila because that's the best they can do, and save the good stuff for the monks." Sometimes it might feel like that, actually.

When I was in Thailand, it was interesting to be in a country where Buddhism is the main cultural context, because you can get a feeling both for the depth of understanding of how it's practiced, but also—as with any formal religion—I shouldn't say any, but from what I've seen of the formal religions in this country, especially Christianity and Judaism, similar to Buddhism in Thailand, it is met and understood on all different layers of wisdom. On the deepest layers, of course, there is the practice of freedom. But on the layers of just taking it in as culture, many of the Thai people are really quite wonderful in working with dana and sila. Yet I would get the sense when I was there as a nun, even speaking to people, that the dana culture, while quite inspiring, didn't quite have the depth—it was sort of, "the best I can do is be generous; you do the meditation for me." People would actually say that.

I think this really downplays the depth of the practice of dana and sila. Because if we look at them deeply, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, if we really inquire into these two aspects of the Buddha's teaching, we can see that besides being a way of living happily in the world with ourselves and one another, they are also moment-to-moment actualizations of a heart and mind of non-clinging.

Living happily, experiencing joy, gladdening the heart—I don't mean the specific mental factor of rapture, but a more broad feeling of gladdening the heart, of happiness—is actually very important in our practice, on our path of awakening. We've talked a lot about dependent arising, beginning with ignorance and going through all the cycles and ending with suffering. And there's another, called the transcendental dependent arising, that begins with suffering and then proceeds through to awakening with different steps. Suffering gives rise to faith, and faith gives rise to this joy, this gladdening of the heart. And this is a supportive condition for awakening.

So we've gone on a lot about how suffering is a supportive condition for awakening. But it is important because it brings faith, because it brings gladdening of the heart, which then leads on to tranquility, and then happiness—a kind of lightness—which then leads to concentration, knowledge and vision of things as they are. I'm not going to go through all of them—disenchantment, dispassion, emancipation. But the point I'm trying to make is that living in a way, relating to ourselves and one another in a way that brings happiness, is not just about holding on to pleasant feeling. This gladdening of the heart sets the conditions for awakening.

The practice of dana, of generosity—the Buddha emphasized this very strongly. It was usually one of the first things he taught, especially to laypeople. For me, it continues to take a lot of very deep inquiring into

it and paying attention to the effect of generosity in my heart and mind. I think I'm only just beginning to appreciate the power of generosity as a practice of liberation. And along the way, it brings so much happiness, so much joy into our lives.

In fact, when I reflect on generosity and on how in the Buddha's teachings nothing he taught was extra, nothing was extraneous, I have a huge amount of respect for how he set up his sasana, how he set up the way that the nuns and monks and laypeople related to each other—because it was totally based in generosity.

From, of course, it's clear for the nuns and monks—they were completely dependent on the generosity of lay people for food, for their requisites, for any kind of place to stay. And a lot of the strict rules that were laid down would ensure that this sense of connection to the lay people through generosity couldn't be broken.

Just a simple example: you can't keep food overnight. So you get enough food for that meal, that one meal for that day, and if there's anything extra, you give it away. There's no holding on, so that each new day becomes another day where the different groups of people meet each other through generosity.

In the monasteries, it's really something to see. When I was a nun in Thailand, at the monasteries I stayed at, the monks would go out on alms round, but the nuns didn't so much. The one place I know where a nun did go, she didn't receive as much. The monks would get huge amounts, and the nuns not so much because the lay people weren't really used to nuns coming around.

At one place I stayed in Bangkok, which was in a very wealthy area, the amounts were enormous—really unbelievable. On the Sundays, which are sort of like a church day here, rather than going on bindabat, the monks would all sit on a curved stone wall, and lay people would come, much like going to church, bringing food to the monks, hearing a talk from the Ajahn, eating all the leftovers, having a big picnic together—like a social, really a very nice gathering.

The monks would be sitting there, and part of the dana is also receiving, so they don't say, "No, I don't want that, take it back." By the end of all the lay people bringing their food, these monks would have a pile of little plastic bags of curries in front of them. I mean, I'm not kidding—it would be this high. Huge amounts of food.

Well, that food would feed everybody in the wat. After they took what they wanted, they sent it all back to the middle, and I was the only nun there, so it would go to me, and then to all the young boys, the temple boys, all the lay people who were there, then any visitors. After that, we'd pass it on to all the dogs and the cats and the chickens, and nothing goes to waste. It's really quite a nice system.

And on the other aspect of it, the lay people receive the generosity of the monks and nuns because it's so clear—the Buddha, from the very beginning, as soon as any of the nuns and monks had reached levels of understanding, immediately sent them out to teach. Go share this with all beings. That's the point of this.

So it's this way he set up the sasana in this symbiotic relationship based on generosity of heart.

And it's really giving everybody—not saying you have to be generous, you have to be nice—but giving people every day the opportunity to practice through action the heart and mind of non-clinging. Because that's what generosity really is. It's both aspects: the emptiness of not holding on and the fullness of metta, the generosity of heart that freely gives whatever is needed.

One of the things I really learned about generosity from my time in Thailand was the power of joy that living and acting from this deep commitment to generosity brought to people there.

At one of the temples I stayed at, a small one way out in the woods, all the temples of course are completely supported by the generosity of lay people. At this particular temple, the number of monks and nuns fluctuates all the time because the way these temples operate is also on generosity. You don't call up and make a reservation and they say, "Let me see if I have room on this day." People just show up. And when you show up, they find somewhere to put you. And it's not like, "Here's another one, where are we going to put her?" There's this happiness, this welcoming.

So this place I was staying, Tam Tong—on the nuns' side, it was back in the woods, nuns on one side of a river and the monks on the other. There were just five or six little kutis, little huts for the nuns. This was the practice area, the silent area. When I showed up, a foreigner, they really went out of their way to be kind, and they gave me a little private hut. That was fine for some time. There were just as many of us as there were huts.

Then one day, maybe five or ten nuns showed up. And without a murmur, the first woman to give up her hut was the head nun, a young woman who was very committed to her practice, very inspiring. She was the only person there who spoke English, and I actually got to know her some. Instead of saying, "Oh well, since I guess I'm in charge, I have to give it up," she was so happy. She'd have nuns come and stay in her hut. All the other nuns doubled up, tripled up, quadrupled up in these tiny little cottages.

But me, of course—they never even thought about it because I was the foreigner, the guest. I should be treated special. So I always had a hut by myself. But it wasn't just the ease. It was the joy that would come from this experience.

This not even thinking about the quality of giving.

And I reflected at the time both on how constricted I felt. *Gee, I hope they don't put somebody in with me*—t hat was really my thought. *Oh, I wish I too could be generous.* The feeling of constriction I felt, and the happiness I could see in the other nuns.

I thought back to the times I was on staff here, when the place was really full and overflowing. We didn't have a stampede of who was going to give up their room so more yogis could come and sit. I'm not saying we should, but I just really did contrast the difference in attitude. And I felt, who's happier? Who's more at

ease here? Who's actually learning to live from compassion and non-clinging through this generosity?

Everywhere I went in Thailand, there were just innumerable examples. I had to stay in the city for a while, in Chiang Mai, going to physical therapy every day. A young woman, a nurse, took me into her home—begged me to come, would have been insulted if I didn't—and insisted on getting up every morning at four to make me breakfast. I was wishing she wouldn't do it.

And this is where I learned the other aspect of the joy of generosity: to be the open and connected receiver. She was acting out of real connectedness and love. When I would say, "No, please don't do it," it was like a block to that connectedness, to the movement back and forth of metta and of generosity. When I could just open up and really receive—not in an "oh, I'm so glad she's taking care of me" way, but simply feeling the love and the generosity coming from her—it was transformative. And it wasn't really for me. Being a member of the Sangha, you remember that you're always simply a representative, and what's done for you is done for the Dharma, not for you as a person so much. Receiving in that way is extremely powerful. You see that it's not about this person being generous to this person, but about the flowing energy of compassion, of non-clinging. It was a wonderful experience of the joy of generosity.

Often I've seen that the poorest people are the ones who can be the most generous and have the most joy in that generosity. Recently, in April I think, at Yucca Valley, we were watching a video called *Home to Tibet* about a Tibetan refugee who lives in western Massachusetts. He's a stone mason—he builds stone walls, so you can see why living here is a good place for him. In this video, after many years living in America, he was going home to Tibet to visit his family, whom he hadn't seen for so long. An American couple went with him and secretly filmed this reunion.

I don't remember the whole thing, but I remember him getting back to the small village where his sister lived with her family, and of course how happy and sad the whole reunion was. But also his being somewhat shocked to see the hardships of their life and how old his sister had come to look. You could really see the two of them together in the video, how much she had aged. You could feel the sense of the hardships—just barely having enough food, very severe living conditions.

At some point towards the end—I forget the details—but I guess he had brought a lot of gifts and also some money. The sister, now having a little bit of money, was so happy, radiant with happiness. Because since she had just enough to eat, she could take this money and finally make offerings to the monasteries and monks near her, whom she felt as her spiritual support.

Seeing her, it was so clear this wasn't a "should"—not "I haven't paid my dues and I'm going to the hell realms." This was a source of such joy for her. You could see it radiate. It was so powerful to see, and to see in that moment that generosity is so clearly a liberation practice. Someone in that state—there wasn't any holding to something for me, no sense of separation, but just that joy: what I have is yours. It was really beautiful.

Metta is a kind of generosity—generosity of the heart, you could say. Just that straightforward well-wishing that wants nothing back.

Generosity can be quite spontaneous, as in some of these examples. And like everything else, we can bring our mindful attention to this area of generosity and really explore consciously how it works and what the effects are. During one of the times I was sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, the monk who was with him, Sayadaw U Janaka, gave this wonderful talk on dana and some of the ways we can work with it. I want to share some of what he said then about working with generosity.

Again, aside from it being a practice of happiness and a nice thing to do, if we really look deeply in a moment of true generosity, we see that first it's about intention—not about just how it looks. As they say, not to give with resentment, not to give detesting the gift or those who are receiving it. It's possible. "Okay, take it then, you stupid jerk." That's not what we're talking about in generosity.

One could give millions of dollars that way—to look good, or to get something back, or for tax purposes. I don't know. But it's really about looking deeply at the intention, at the motivation. That's the heart of generosity.

And when we look, we can see how obviously an action of generosity brings a sense of unity, a sense of connectedness. That's why it's often said, if you're feeling difficulty with someone, try giving them a gift—a real heartfelt gift. Because to do that, there has to be a sense of connection. To really give from that space of letting go, there's a sense of connection, and that helps. That brings us together again.

So working with dāna as a practice of freedom, a moment-to-moment practice of heart, of non-clinging—starting with the volition. That sense of: can I give this without wanting anything in return? Even recognition. Even having the person know, "It is I who gave this." How interesting it is. There can be just such a little sense of confirmation we need back. But remember, it's a practice.

And as with every wholesome act, it is accompanied by compassion. Compassion is the root cause of every wholesome action. So in a way, both dāna and sīla basically spring from compassion, and as such strengthen our understanding of connectedness.

These are the steps that Sayadaw and Jan Panika talked about. In deciding to be generous—whether you're giving a thing, whether you're giving of your time, whether you're just giving energy, a willing ear to listen, it doesn't matter what—pay attention to the volition. Let the volition purify, because of course often we have very mixed intentions when we go to give. So just let it settle and see what our intention is. Purify.

As Robert Aitken says, with every generous act, let it be the generous act of the bodhisattvas. At our deepest level, our intention can be: with this act, may all beings be free from suffering. That's one level, but any level down to simply "can I give it" works as well.

See and abandon the clinging to that thing—whether it's your time, whether it's an object, whatever it is, whether it's service. Can we look at our intention and see and abandon the clinging to it?

Sometimes, of course not always, we find that the giving is face-to-face, hand-to-hand. If it's your time or energy and you're doing something with a person—face-to-face. Or if you're actually handing somebody an object—hand-to-hand. This isn't always possible or even advisable. But if that is the case, to do it hand to hand, to really be there with full presence and commitment, is a very powerful way of inhabiting the act of generosity.

I got a good lesson in this from Sayadaw U Pandita about the powerfulness of this interrelatedness in generosity. I was giving him a book, which I think I had had somebody else buy for me since I was on retreat. I had inscribed it but had them give it to him. And when I went in for my next interview, he took the book and basically told me: there's the book, pick it up and you give it to me, face to face.

And it was really lovely, because it wasn't like he said, "Okay, thanks," and put it down. He was really there—one hundred percent present with a really open heart, really a mettā heart. I could feel it, just really honoring that intention of generosity. And that made me be there, fully present.

I could see the ways that sometimes I might want to just give something and not really quite own it—all those feelings of "what if they don't like it?" or "what will they think of me?" or "is it good enough?" None of that has anything to do with generosity. Generosity isn't about the bigger the better. It's not even about the person having to say, "Oh, aren't you incredible? This is the best book I ever received." It's simply about that intention of connecting, of mettā, of letting go.

What he was doing was really teaching me to inhabit fully, with mind and body, that act of generosity. It was very powerful.

And so then, whether you're face to face or not, give with your attention fully focused on the act of giving. Of course, again, we're fully inhabiting it. This strengthens the power of the volition of generosity. It strengthens the compassion. Rather than, "Oh, okay, here, take it and I'll be on my way."

Just be fully present. And then afterwards, continue to pay attention, because often we notice how we do something really wholeheartedly and then, "Ah, gee, but maybe I could have used that." Or, "That was good, but maybe I could have done something else with my time." These little regrets can come in. Just be mindful of that. So we purify the volition beforehand, we purify the volition afterwards.

And then, as with all acts, being aware of the broader context—that whatever giving or doing is not just to satisfy our own need to give, but that it is truly useful, that it's in a context where it's helpful. For example, if I have a friend who's manic depressive and she's in a really manic stage spending all her money, my idea to give her a gift of a lot of money at that time might not be very skillful. It might be much better to wait until she could use it in a healthy way. It's simply putting the generosity in a context of what's really helpful.

And then I added this last one, which I mentioned before: allowing oneself to receive in a very present, wholehearted, and open way. Because when we receive in this way, we are also moving out of our self-cherishing. When people give you a compliment and we want to deflect it, that's really self-cherishing. It stops the connectedness. Or when in Thailand, if you just talked about money, I had so much more at home—even here I don't have much, but compared to there I had much more than the people giving. But to say, "No, no, don't give me anything, I'll go out and buy an omelet," really stops the whole flow of compassion and connection.

So practice receiving generosity in a really open-hearted and present way. It's a wonderful practice of liberating ourselves from our sense of self-cherishing, from our sense of separateness. If you're really receiving someone's compassion and generosity, I guarantee you're not going to feel separate. And that is really the practice of compassion and emptiness. And it's joyful besides. It's a really beautiful way to live.

Even years later—for instance now when I'm talking about the time in Thailand—just the memory coming up of the joy and the incredible generosity of the people brings up in me such a happiness, such a joy. It brightens and gladdens the heart in this moment. It's really karmic fruit. When we talk about karmic results, we tend to often look at, "It's so bad, so this is my result from that," and then we rebel against it. But these moments of happiness are also karmic results of that generosity at that time. And so over all these years—it's been a long time—I can feel just the same strong sense of oneness with these people as I felt then. And the happiness and gladdening of the heart leads one into the ability to be more awake, more present, less clinging.

So we practice, and sometimes it might seem like a practice of generosity, but it moves from practice into such a natural way of being that one doesn't even think of it as generosity anymore. It's just of course. As Shantideva put it, who wrote the Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life: "Even when I have done things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises. It is just like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return." Just that. You couldn't even call it generosity. It's just like having fed myself. The actualization of our oneness. It's the beginning of our practice and it's also the pinnacle of our understanding.

Sila is much the same way. I'm not going to talk as much about sila—I know Steve talked about it quite a bit the other night. I just want to emphasize these two aspects: the happiness it brings to our hearts and minds through our commitment to ethical conduct, and that just as with dana, attention to our speech and actions is not only laying a foundation for our awakening, but is a moment-to-moment practice of freedom and compassion.

Really, commitment to conscious conduct is an act of compassion towards ourselves and all beings. It's an actualization in speech and action of our understanding of our oneness with all beings. Even the smallest act of kindness, even the smallest act of non-cruelty, of care, of carefulness with our speech—it doesn't have to be amazing renunciations—but even the smallest act of care with our action and speech is an

expression of compassion, of our understanding that we are all one.

And again, I find that by really investigating with care why we do what we do, why we say what we say, and the effects—again without judgment, but with interest and investigation—what are the effects on ourselves and others of what we say and do, all we have to do is pay attention. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, mindfulness is really the only precept. Because if we're really mindful, we take care, we're responsible. And as soon as we're paying attention, we can't help but notice that anything we do that comes from cruelty, from carelessness, from anger, has such a strong effect on ourselves, sometimes even stronger. As soon as I see—usually I have to say, for me it's usually going to be wrong speech—it's out the mouth.

It kind of missed the censor. The words didn't even show up on the screen, and it's out the mouth. Hopefully you won't discover this happening to you next week.

So when that happens, it's gotten to be so much that I just have to see the slightest ripple on somebody's face and already I feel reverberations that are so painful. It's not even something—it's not an idea. It's so obvious that carelessness which brings suffering to somebody else is immediately the same suffering, or even more, that I'm feeling. There's no way to separate it.

So when the Buddha talks about protecting ourselves to protect others, we often speak of paying attention to the five precepts—just the five basic lay precepts: not killing, not taking what's not given, not hurting ourselves or others with our sexuality, not lying or speaking maliciously, and not using drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind. Just those five. It doesn't seem like a lot to ask, but as Steve said the other night—what did he say? Some huge number, right? Ten trillion or something actual rules that it turns into.

But if we don't think of it as rules, if we just think of it as paying attention, it's so obvious that by protecting ourselves from the pain of remorse, from the pain of disharmony, we're protecting all beings.

I know that often when morality is spoken of or thought of, we begin by thinking of it on this level as a foundation for practice. "The bliss of blamelessness" is a phrase that's often used. And I'm sure you can all relate to those times sitting here when some unskillful thing we've done in the past—whether it was yesterday or when we were five, whether it was something seriously awful or just some slighting comment we made to a third-grade companion that we know hurt their feelings—comes to mind. I've gone through agony over stuff like that, really feeling the pain, the remorse that comes from unskillful, uncaring conduct. We can all relate to the bliss of blamelessness, the happiness of simply not making waves in the world.

That is, of course, one level of working with sīla—just the bare basis so we can have a relatively calm mind to then get on to the real stuff: the mental development, the samādhi, the wisdom. But thinking about what we do when we can't hold on to the samādhi four weeks from now, three months from now, in the middle of New York City, trying to walk down the street—lifting, moving, placing—what about my nice samādhi? Forget it.

But we can pay attention to why we're doing and saying what we're doing and saying, walking down the streets of New York. Do we say, "This is my right of way, you move over, buddy," in our mind? Or can we just step aside with a real sense of connection and kindness? Nobody else even knows it's happening. What's the difference in the effect on our heart and mind? The difference between conflict, separation, fear, holding my space—and spaciousness, connectedness, a heart and mind of non-clinging, compassion.

I feel very deeply that paying attention to sīla is a very profound path of liberation. And the Buddha spoke of it in this way. There's one sutta called "Effacement"—really about erasing all the kilesas, you could say. It describes different ways of radically removing these kilesas, these torments of mind, which is another metaphor for freedom. And he says in this sutta, "I say that even the inclination of mind towards wholesome states is of great benefit." Just the inclining of the mind. "So what should be said of bodily and verbal acts conforming to such a state of mind?"

The power of bodily and verbal wholesome actions is so strong that he then goes through—I'll spare you the list—but it's a list of forty-four different ways that contribute to this complete eradication of the defilements. And each of these forty-four, he goes through in about five different ways, but it's the same list. The first on the list is non-cruelty, or compassion, because compassion, as I said, is the root of all virtuous action. And of the first fifteen on this list, thirteen deal with simply wholesome speech and action—just the basics: non-cruelty, non-killing, non-lying, non-malicious speech, all the basic precepts.

He's saying these are ways to completely eradicate these torments, these defilements of mind. He's not saying this is just a nice thing to do so that later you can get enlightened. These are first on the list.

So here it's really saying that not only does conscious conduct—acting from our sense of oneness—bring happiness here and now, it is also a very powerful path of freedom, of touching through our actions that place of pure awareness, of non-clinging, of non-separation. Because in order to act from compassion, from any of the precepts, we're acting from compassion. And every action of compassion further strengthens our living experience of our oneness, which again deepens our understanding of emptiness. It's like a whole cycle that keeps going.

And another thing I think we sometimes overlook is the gladdening of the heart in the present moment when we are acting from non-harming.

This is very powerful. Again, it's the same as with generosity. An act of non-harming plants what Thich Nhat Hanh calls seeds of joy—seeds that can ripen at any time, that gladden our heart in the present and in the future.

This can arise spontaneously, but it's also something we can call on as a skillful means, in or out of formal practice, to help us become more connected to ourselves, to others, to our experience in this moment.

I'll give you an example of a spontaneous arising just the other day. Out of nowhere, a memory came of years ago—twenty years ago—when I was working in a sheltered workshop in North Carolina with

severely mentally handicapped adults. It was a place where people would come during the day and do some kind of little task, like putting two nuts in a plastic envelope, and then someone else would staple it. That was actually a complicated job for those folks. I was one of the instructors there. We'd just spend the day with the people, and it was intense. I won't get into the whole story, but it was intense.

This memory came back of one day—because I really came to love the people in the workshop, the people who came every day. There was one day in particular that came up in my mind. When I walked in, a lot of the different people, for some reason, were all coming up and hugging me. It was just a happy day where the sense of our togetherness and the kindness that I had been able to offer—I mean, I wasn't trying to be kind, it just came out of me because I felt connected to the people—was coming back to me. The sense of connectedness was palpable, and it was a really happy day. I can see all the different people now. Just the memory of that brings up again such happiness. It lightens and gladdens the heart. It brings in a brightness, a faith, an energy. And then from that, if there's something difficult going on, it's a little easier to open to it. If there's nothing special going on, it's a little easier to have energy to be with it. This is how seeds of joy can really strengthen our awakening, our intention.

So that's spontaneous. Something we might not always think to do, but that is actually taught as a skillful means, is to consciously reflect on our kind, our ethical, our non-harming conduct. I know it feels a little egotistical maybe to us. We tend to consciously reflect on all the bad things we've ever done—we do that very well. We can, at the drop of a hat, list off forty-five horrific things we've done in the last three days. And we feel like that's good practice, that's being honest. But if we say, "Sit and really reflect, feel in your heart all the kind, compassionate, non-selfish, non-self-cherishing things you've done," we feel like, "Oh, that's so pompous. That would make me so conceited."

But it's a very skillful thing to do. Again, not with clinging. Not with a lot of identification—"Aren't I incredible? I've done all these things." But just as I was describing that memory from the workshop, just feel the happiness of an act of oneness, of compassion. Because when you're really acting in that way, there's not a lot of "me" there. It's just doing the obvious, doing what needs to be done, what doesn't harm. And that is a very helpful way to bring some joy into our experience in the present moment—not to hold on to pleasant experience, but to gladden the heart, awaken the energy, reconnect us with the fact that we are all one, that the root of all conscious action, all wholesome action, is compassion. And each time we can speak or act from that, we're strengthening our understanding of emptiness.

This doesn't take huge concentration. It doesn't take powerful meditative states. It doesn't matter if all of our beloved psychological tendencies and patterns are still with us. Practicing with generosity and with sila is accessible to us in every moment. And when we forget, okay, the next moment is accessible again. And it's a moment where we have access to the twin wings of emptiness and compassion through very basic everyday activities.

I really think it's wonderful—the vastness of this path and the depth of this path that the Buddha has given

us. And it really is, I think, a path of happiness and joy. Not that we don't experience sorrows. In fact, we're more present for all the sorrows of the world. But we're also more present for the joys. And the greatest joy is just that of being so awake and alive that we're really present in this moment. Joyful, sorrowful, whatever it is, we're not afraid to face it.

So I just want to end with a poem that expresses to me this quality of joyful presence in life, from E.E. Cummings:

I thank you, God, for most this amazing day, for the leaping greenly spirits of trees and the blue true dream of sky, and for everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes. I, who have died, am alive again today. And this is the sun's birthday.

This is the birthday of life and of love and of wings, and of the gay great happening illimitably earth. How should tasting, touching, hearing, seeing, breathing—any lifted from the know of all nothing, human merely being—doubt unimaginable you? Now the ears of my ears awake, and now the eyes of my eyes are opened.

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