Gratitude and Generosity

Rebecca Bradshaw · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 1:00:39

Tonight's talk is about gratitude and generosity.

I'd like to start with a poem from Mary Oliver. Sometimes I feel like she's the poet laureate of IMS because we read so many poems by her. This one is called "Philip's Birthday":

I gave to a friend that I care for deeply something that I loved. It was only a small, extremely shapely bone that came from the ear of a whale. It hurt a little to give it away. The next morning, I went out as usual at sunrise. And there in the harbor was a swan. I don't know what he or she was doing there. But the beauty of it was a gift. Do you see what I mean? You give and you are given.

I like this poem for a couple of reasons. First, I appreciate that she said, "it hurt a little to give it away." To me, this points to the practice of generosity—the way we stretch ourselves in giving. And then I also appreciate the seeing of giving and receiving, or I would say giving and gratitude, the flow between these two.

We could say that gratitude and generosity are two sides of the same coin: receiving and giving. Both are about an open heart that recognizes the flowing nature of this world we've taken birth into.

Often the practice for lay people in the time of the Buddha was described as having three parts: dana, sila, and bhavana. Dana is generosity, sila is morality or ethical conduct, and bhavana is mind development. You may also recognize that the first two are the first two paramis from the list that Greg spoke about last night. So there are these three parts of the path: generosity, ethical conduct, and mind and heart development.

In the West, we tend to talk a lot about mind and heart development, and sometimes we're slower to realize that the first two are just as important in our practice—that the first two are actually foundational practices that prepare the mind, that make it ripe for our formal bhavana practice. They're all intricately linked. They all work together.

I have to start by saying that gratitude and generosity weren't qualities I came into my adult life with well-developed. They're practices that have grown out of my formal meditation practice, but also conscious practices I've undertaken that feed back into the formal practice. Sometimes I think that because I didn't naturally have these qualities strong when I first came into my adult life, I can actually speak about them—because it's something I've studied so much.

Usually, when I would give a talk about these subjects, I would discuss generosity and then at the end talk

about gratitude. But recently I've started to shift the order, speaking about gratitude first. I think that generosity without understanding gratitude can feel, for many of us, like some kind of duty we have to fulfill, some kind of obligation. There's sometimes a bit of cultural conditioning here. In Buddhism, the flavor of generosity is very different. If we understand gratitude first, we can perhaps understand more of the flavor of generosity from a Buddhist point of view. In Buddhism, generosity is about happiness and about freedom of heart and mind—a different flavor than duty or obligation.

So, gratitude. Gratitude is receiving with an open heart. Gratitude acknowledges our interdependence, and for this reason, it's a very deep spiritual quality. If we understand how much we're receiving all the time, it can help lessen the clinging in our hearts. The reality is that we're all very intimately connected and that we're receiving constantly.

If we think about it, even with each breath we take, we're receiving. We're receiving oxygen that we need for life. And with each breath we exhale, we're giving back. We're giving back carbon dioxide that feeds the trees, the plants. So with each breath, we're intimately receiving and giving back to the universe.

Within this giving and receiving, there's the understanding of impermanence, of flow and change in this world. I was thinking about this today as I took a walk in the woods. I was sitting on a log over a creek, a small river, watching the water flow. I noticed that the river gives and gives and gives. It endlessly gives. Even during a dry period, it gives what it can. It just keeps flowing. There's no holding on.

Then I was thinking about the sun—how the trees take up the sun and grow leaves, and then how they give the leaves back. This time of year, they're giving the leaves back. They let the leaves go and they fall to the soil, and by my footsteps and by microbes, they break down and nourish the earth. From those nutrients in the soil, the trees grow strong.

And then one day, a tree falls over a creek and offers a nice sitting spot. There's a sense of flow. When we understand gratitude and generosity, there's a sense of ceaseless flow in this world, and we become part of that rather than resist it.

The Buddha said there are two kinds of rare people: pure givers and acknowledgers of giving. So those who feel gratitude—givers and those who feel gratitude. Gratitude is that acknowledgment of giving. It's an ability to see and to receive the blessings that come our way with an open heart.

Gratitude, I also find, is a relief because it means that we're not alone. We're sustained and nourished by this universe. If we're alive, we're receiving, we're being given to. This can bring for us a sense of warmth and intimacy and openness. We recognize that we are intimately linked and depend on each other, that we're built of each other. We let ourselves be touched by the generosity of life.

Sometimes I think of gratitude also as an anattā teaching. Because with gratitude, we really understand and recognize our interdependence and that all that we are has come to us from others, has come to us from this universe. Sometimes when we talk about anattā or not-self, it's frightening to people. They think

that it's about a void or something not there. Another angle from which we can understand anattā is that there's no independent self, that everything is co-created in this universe, intricately linked to everything else. We're part of a web.

This helps us not to overestimate ourselves and believe in some myth of independence—that we alone are responsible for what we are or what we have or our success. But we also don't underestimate ourselves because we see that we're part of a web. With gratitude, we challenge our unworthiness. We allow ourselves to fully receive. Gratitude can magnify the joy that we feel in life, and it brings the happiness of connection.

A number of years ago, I was teaching in Sagaing in Burma, the place we've mentioned a number of times because it's so dear to our hearts for many of us. I was writing a talk on generosity, and after a while I put it aside and went for a walk. The monastery is on the side of a hillside on the Irrawaddy River, and you can walk up all these steps to the top of the ridge. It's a beautiful area. It has six or seven hundred pagodas and monasteries in a few square miles, so it's very imbued with the spirit of Buddhism and practice. I like to walk sometimes up to the ridge. It's a bit steep—I counted once, there's five hundred steps up.

I was walking up the steps, and this young monk, must have been about ten years old, was walking down. In Burma it's not unusual for children to be monks or nuns. Often they're orphans taken in by the monastery and educated and raised. Sometimes families have their children spend a time in the monastery. So he was walking down, and as he got close to me, he made some gesture for me to stop, or I thought maybe walk around him. I stopped for a minute, and then he put his hand on some pocket he had in his robes. He took out a handful of candies and held them out to me.

The monks and nuns in Burma are on the eight precepts, and as you may know what is allowed for the eight precepts, candies are considered medicine. Medicine is allowed. So he may very well have been holding out his dinner for me.

He held out the candies, and being a good Westerner, I thought I should probably just take one, right? That's the way you do it. So I took one little candy, and he shakes his head. Then he puts all the candies in my hand. He went on down the stairs and I continued.

I was so touched by just that connection—the connection between us created by him giving me a gift and me receiving it. I still remember this boy all these years later because of that gift. It was so sweet. Gratitude is feeling that sweetness of connection.

We could also talk about gratitude as a quality that awakens the energy we need for this hard work of transformation. It energizes the mind, gladdens the mind. When we feel grateful, our mind and heart are uplifted. It's lighter. It's easier to concentrate, to pay attention. Gratitude also quiets the mind. It's a gentle happiness that teaches us to be content with little.

We could say that gratitude quiets our inner hungry ghost. In Buddhist cosmology, there's a realm known

as the hungry ghost realm—beings with enormous stomachs but tiny mouths and narrow throats. They are perpetually hungry, always wanting. I think all of us have a little inner hungry ghost of some type, always wanting. With gratitude, we can quiet that hungry ghost. There's contentment, a feeling of no lack. It fills that empty belly. When we slow down enough to really receive the beauty and goodness in this life, we see that maybe we don't need so much to be happy.

I'm sure some of you have noticed this here—that there can be moments of contentment with the simplest little things, moments of gratitude. I remember one of the first times on retreat where this struck me. I was washing dishes in the pot room. It was winter, December I think, and it had snowed. The sun was coming in through the window, and there was snow outside. I felt the deepest happiness, contentment, joy—just tears streaming down my face. I was so happy with so little, so much gratitude.

I also think that gratitude is very natural for a heart that is open. Many of you here are experiencing the opening of the heart at times. It comes and goes, I know. But when it's open, many of you are also mentioning gratitude. When the heart is contracted in aversion, obviously we're not going to feel gratitude. And when the heart is contracted in wanting, in clinging, we also don't feel gratitude. But when the heart is open and relaxed, gratitude is natural.

So we can cultivate a heart that sees the world through the eyes of gratitude. It supposedly works better than antidepressants. There's a Japanese therapy where people are asked to make daily gratitude lists, and apparently after a few weeks they feel better about themselves, have more energy, and feel more alert. List keepers sleep better, exercise more, and have more general contentment.

Another way I like to cultivate gratitude is at mealtime. Sometimes I like to really contemplate the plate of food in front of me, to consider how, if you trace all the connections and really look at the web that brings that food to us, the whole universe is supporting our practice in that plate of food. In that plate of food we have the sun and the rain and the earth. We have those who work the earth and those who supported them and those who transported the food. The web just keeps going out, keeps extending. The whole universe supports us each time we eat a plate of food. For me, noticing that brings up gratitude.

The deepest gratitude understands impermanence. It understands that we can't hold on to what we receive. So the deepest gratitude is openhearted and unconditional. Can we appreciate and be grateful knowing this truth?

Another poem by Mary Oliver, for me, demonstrates a very durable kind of gratitude. It's called "At the Pond":

One summer I went every morning to the edge of a pond where a huddle of just-hatched geese would paddle to me and clamber up the marshy slope and over my body, peeping and staring. Such sweetness every day, which the grown ones watched, for whatever reason, serenely. Not there, however, but here is where the story begins. Nature has many mysteries, some of them severe. Five of the young geese grew heavy of chest

and bold of wing, while the sixth waited and waited in its gauze feathers, its body that would not grow. And then it was fall. And this is what I think everything is about: the way I was glad for those five and two that flew away, and the way I hold in my heart the wingless one that had to stay.

So durable gratitude may at times carry the flavor of compassion, of caring in this world of change and unpredictability.

A while ago I was reading one of the little newsletters from Abhayagiri Monastery in California. I think it's called *Fearless Mountain*. There was a whole newsletter devoted to gratitude, and they talked about a few Pali terms that I found quite interesting. The first is *kataññu*—a person who knows what has been done for them, one who feels grateful. Then there's *katavedī*—those who pay back the debt. And then they put the words together: *kataññu katavedī*, feeling gratitude and striving to pay back the debt.

And in this article, he said this is the basis of any sane and fully functioning system. When we feel gratitude—and again, it's not a duty—but when we feel gratitude, there's this natural wish that starts to arise, a wanting to give back into the system, to give back into the flow.

Many years ago, when I was twenty-two, my first job out of college was working in Nicaragua, teaching English as a second language. For a while I lived with the family of a woman I had actually met when she was here on an exchange at the university—Marisol. So for a time I was living with Marisol and her family: Marisol and her baby daughter, her father, her brother, her cousin, her sister, and a bunch of other people in a small house. It was basically a two-bedroom home, but one of the bedrooms was divided, so perhaps it was almost like a three-bedroom house.

They were very kind to me. By our standards, they would be described as poor. By Nicaraguan standards, maybe middle class. And they always gave me the best. I got one whole bedroom to myself, when I just listed off all the people who were living in this house. I paid them a little bit, but it wasn't very much—they didn't ask for much. And they were so kind to me.

At that time, as I told you, when I came into my adult years, I didn't really understand gratitude or generosity, either one. And years later, I never forgot what she'd done. I always felt that somehow I had not been generous, and it weighed on me. It was as if somehow I had stopped up some flow that should have happened.

In the meantime, Marisol and her family emigrated to the United States and then to Canada, where they now live. A number of years ago, when I was teaching in Canada, I designated a portion of my dana to be sent to that family. And it cleared something inside of me. There was that sense that I had a debt, and to fulfill it freed my heart in some way. Marisol, of course, didn't think I owed her anything. But to me, this demonstrates katanyu katavedi—this feeling of gratitude and then this sense of wanting to pay it back, understanding that to not do so is to somehow block up some energy flow.

One description I saw of it is like a garden hose: for a garden hose to work, both ends have to be open.

There's the receiving end and the giving end. If you block either end, the water gets stagnant inside.

A few years ago, I did a retreat where I practiced a lot of metta, and I did it differently than I had in the past. Previously, when I'd done metta for myself, it was simply "may I be happy, may I be peaceful." But for this retreat, when I was doing metta for myself, I was bringing to mind benefactors I'd had in my life and having them send the metta to me. I was thinking about different people who had helped me, and I was astounded by how many there were. I hadn't really realized it somehow.

My primary benefactor on that retreat was my tenth-grade high school counselor. He had believed in me at a time when I really needed support. He encouraged me to be a foreign exchange student, which set my whole life in motion—speaking Spanish and how much that's meant in my life. He set that all in motion. He would always say to me, "You can do anything."

Sometimes, if we're coming from a place of scarcity, we may not realize all the people who have supported us—people we may have forgotten. Contemplating that, I got the sense that I could spend the rest of my life trying to repay all the kindness and support I've received, and I wouldn't be able to do it. And that was a beautiful feeling—a feeling of gratitude.

So we naturally move from gratitude to giving. It's natural to want to give when we see how much we receive, when we see how connected we are.

The characteristic of generosity, according to the Buddhist texts, is letting go. So we're back to Annie's talk on the first night, when she said that what we're going to be talking about over and over again, in so many ways, is letting go. Letting go includes the idea of non-clinging, non-attachment. Generosity is a physical manifestation of the heart of non-clinging. It's an expression of our deep understanding of non-clinging. It's an expression of our understanding that non-clinging leads to happiness.

So the practice of giving aids us in the purification of the mind and the heart. Through giving, we strengthen non-attachment, non-clinging. Giving is an antidote to greed and craving. When we give something or give of ourselves, we reduce attachment. And when we make a habit of giving, we weaken the mental factor of craving in the mind and heart.

We release clinging.

Giving practice is wonderful because it shows us where we're still attached. We learn to stretch ourselves and discover that we don't need to hold on.

In this retreat, as you know, we give a talk every night, and sometimes if we want to give the same talk, we have to negotiate among ourselves. Early in this retreat, it was negotiated and decided that I would give this talk because I wanted to give it. Then a few days ago, the possibility arose that somebody else might give the talk. My instinctual reaction was to hold on—I had planned to give this talk and I had prepared for it.

It is kind of ironic to think of holding onto a talk about giving.

So I let that sink in. I paid attention to my reaction and what I was doing, and I saw that it was suffering. It just wasn't pleasant. I realized I could let it go. Then I realized that it would actually make me happy to help out this other person and let them give this talk. Then things changed again and the talk came back to me.

But this is the practice of giving—watching how we relate to giving or holding on. Seeing that holding on is unhappiness, it's suffering. And that letting go and giving brings joy, brings happiness. I felt so much better when I let go of the talk.

Here's a quote that I really have enjoyed. It truly stretches me, so I like to read it every once in a while. The author is E.J. Gold from Gnosis Magazine. Apparently he teaches some kinds of workshops. He says:

"There's a kind of school where you arrive saying, 'What can I get?' or 'How is this good for me?' You see, I had workshops. I figure I must have had 20,000 people through my workshops in 37 years. Most people asked, 'What is this going to do for me?' My answer is always the same. This is not for you. It is not for your benefit. You're not supposed to get anything out of this at all. If you do, you'll be very fortunate because I never have. All you do is give. That's the whole thing. You just give and give and give. And it costs you to give. You even have to pay to give. And in the end, you have nothing, just nothing. Now, if you can handle that, you belong here."

I think that's actually quite beautiful. In a way, that's what we do when we practice. All the challenges that we meet every day on a day of retreat, all the ways that we suffer during practicing—in some ways that's paying to give, because in the end we give our practice back. We give our practice to all the people that we contact when we leave here, all the ways that we serve more clearly and with a more open heart.

So as I said, the Buddha taught that generosity is about happiness. A quote from the Buddha says: "Generosity brings happiness at every stage of its expression. We experience joy in forming the intention to give. We experience joy in the actual act of giving something. And we experience joy in remembering the fact that we have given."

For me, as I mentioned, this was something I felt I needed to learn. One time I did what I called a dāna retreat—a self-retreat at the end of the year. At the end of the year is when I tend to do charitable giving, so I decided to do it very consciously in this retreat. Every night on this retreat, I would write out a check to a different foundation or teacher or institution. And I would consciously do this reflection before, during, and after I was giving.

Before I was going to write the check and give, I would think about who was going to receive it, and I would notice the happiness that would arise in my heart and mind.

to be giving it to them. And then when I was writing the check, I would reflect on that again, and

afterwards I would reflect on it once more. It was a really lovely retreat. For me, it was like reinforcing that joy of generosity so that I could more deeply understand it, and also so that I could counteract some of my conditioning that would cause me to hold back.

And it was kind of fun because sometimes I would take a check that I'd written, look at it, and go, "Nope." I would rip it up and write one that was bigger. It was fun.

So just as gratitude enlightens the mind and makes it energized for practice, generosity does the same. If we remember a time that we were generous, it usually will lighten the mind, bring joy, bring happiness—and a happy mind is easier to work with in meditation. It concentrates more easily. You could say that generosity makes our meditation soil rich so that things will grow. Our dear friend Toad probably had pretty rich soil because his plants finally did grow, right?

Plants don't grow well in weak soil. Generosity and sila practice help strengthen our soil, our meditation field. This is why it's sometimes called a foundational practice that offers protection. And we need this sense of protection if we're going to practice deeply. It gives us a container to hold the process of transformation.

If we've created a world of scarcity, alienation, and holding on, it will be harder to go deeper. We'll be less likely to trust. But if we've created a world out of our kindness and generosity, we find it easier to relax, easier to trust, easier to go deeper in practice.

Visiting Burma has also been really inspiring for me in developing this quality of generosity, because dana is so ingrained in the culture there. It's not to say that we don't have generosity in this country, but there it's so woven into the fabric of life that it's really inspiring—that's the only way I can put it.

When we would give dana to the monks and nuns there, they celebrate it. They have us come forward, they chant, they enjoy the merit. Sometimes here in the West, we give and we kind of hide it. There it's really out in the open. And they also get quite happy enjoying other people being generous.

One time I went out to buy Buddha statues—one of the things I love to do in Burma. I went to buy a number of statues to bring back for volunteers at the meditation center I run in Western Massachusetts. I was also bringing back a fairly good-sized Buddha, maybe eighteen inches to two feet, to donate to the center.

I came back at lunchtime with all my bags. There were a number of women who serve the food at this retreat who I've become friendly with, and they wanted to see what I had bought. They were very excited about it, so I unwrapped all the little statues. Then I showed them the statue that was going for the meditation center. I don't speak much Burmese—I'm working on it—but I put together a sentence that they understood. The sentence was "Dana Yekta America"—giving, meditation center, America.

There were three of them sitting there, and they all spontaneously put their hands together and said,

"Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu" to me. Sadhu means "well said" or "well done." I was shocked. They didn't consult with each other—it was just automatic. They were so happy that I was giving this statue as dana to a meditation center in the United States.

As a little aside about this: when I was coming home, I was overweight in my luggage because of the statue. In Burma, when I told them why—that I had a Buddha statue in there—they didn't charge me. And in Thailand, the same thing happened. They love the Buddha so much.

Acts of generosity also have tremendous power to transform. At this monastery in Burma where we sometimes teach, there's a story about how the whole program started. The main teacher is the Sayadaw, Sayadaw U Lakana, and we work as kind of assistants. What happened was about thirteen or fourteen years ago, a Westerner named Stephen Smith was meditating there. At that point, Westerners hadn't really gone there.

He was doing a retreat, and there was a young woman named Chet Su who was working on the road in front of the monastery. She came from a very poor family. She was fifteen years old at the time and had to drop out of school to work for her family. She was carrying heavy bricks back and forth to make the road.

Apparently she saw Steve meditating, and apparently he was the first white person she'd ever seen, so that was surprising to her. But also, she was so appreciative that he would practice. Folks, in Burma, when you go there and practice, they're so appreciative that you're doing that. She was so happy to see him practicing that she decided to give him something. And what she decided to give him was a can of Coca-Cola.

It took about—I've heard anywhere from three to five days' wages to buy one can of Coke, because it's imported. Very expensive. So she did that. She saved enough money to offer this Coke to him. And he was so touched by that generosity that he was inspired to give back and started this whole project called the Metta Dana Project, which is related to the retreat that we teach. Through it, we help support the hospital, built a new school, support the younger kids in the school, support several nunneries—about one hundred nuns across several nunneries. All of this built out of one act of generosity. A can of Coca-Cola. So beautiful. So powerful.

Chet Su is now married and has a couple of children. When we go around sometimes to give dana to the nuns, she brings along her youngest daughter. The first time I saw her do this, her daughter was quite young—maybe a year and a half old, about eighteen months. She brought her daughter with us as we gave dana to the nuns. She would put the dana in her daughter's hands and have her daughter give it to the nuns, teaching her so young to give. A year and a half old, learning to give. Really beautiful.

When we give, looking at our motivation is important. It helps us to purify our giving. At times when we give, we can have mixed motivations. We pay attention to that, to see the relative levels of happiness and suffering that come from different motivations to give. Sometimes we may give wanting something in

return. We can feel that as holding on in some way. Or we're reluctant to give, or we don't give the best—we give the okay. Other times it flows freely, and we see that it comes from compassion and from metta. We can feel that too. So we explore the motivations.

One time, a number of years ago, I lived in a place where I had some bird feeders. Watching birds at a bird feeder is just one of the simple joys I love. Most mornings I like to watch the birds and have some tea. I had these bird feeders, but I also lived in an area—and I still do—where there are bears. In the springtime, they love to take bird feeders. Every once in a while, I would lose a bird feeder to a bear. I remember one time watching this bear. He had my bird feeder under his arm and was galloping off on his three other paws with my bird feeder.

Given that sometimes we lose bird feeders to bears, it's not a cheap hobby. Bird feeders are actually quite expensive. One morning I was sitting there watching the birds, and I had this thought: I've spent a lot of money on bird food and bird feeders. Have I gotten my money's worth? Have I gotten enough enjoyment for the money that I've paid? I noticed there was some tightness and contraction in the mind with these thoughts. I didn't particularly like how it felt.

So then I tried a different tact. I thought, this bird food is my dana to the birds, my gift to them so that they can eat and be healthy and happy, as birds can be happy. That felt better. It felt lighter.

But then my mind, even without trying, went further. There was just me and the birds, and we were each fulfilling our role in the universe in this wonderful dance. There wasn't so much a giver or a receiver.

There was just this dance of things going where they needed to go. And in that sense, my mind felt the freest and the least burdened by self-concern.

I thought afterwards that this reflects the three traditional kinds of giving talked about in Buddhism. There's first what's called beggarly giving, and that's where you give, but there's a lot of self-concern. There's either holding on or bargaining or attachment—like me wanting to get something back for my money. So there's a lot of self involved. And even though it's not the purest giving, it's still encouraged. We're still learning to let go.

The second kind of giving is called friendly giving, and that's where we give more openheartedly. We give more of what we have. It's easier to let go. We start to experience the happiness of giving, the joy of giving. This was the shift when I started to see the bird food as dāna.

The third kind of giving is traditionally called kingly giving. But we have a little problem there with both sexism and classism, so some people call it selfless giving. This is where we graciously give what we have, and we don't even have the sense of ourselves so much as the giver and others as the receiver. There's less attachment to "I." There's a letting go of self-concern and just an understanding that we're temporary caregivers of what we have and that things flow where they're needed. The freest kind of giving. A kind of giving that understands interdependence and is free of the constriction around self.

So how are we developing generosity here on retreat? Well, one of the biggest gifts we can give is the development of our own spiritual growth. As we become happier, as we become more aware, as we become more peaceful, we can offer this back to the world. As we become steadier and more understanding, we can offer this gift. As we learn ways to become free of suffering in our hearts and minds, we can offer this freedom to those around us.

Gandhi said, "I believe if one person gains spiritually, the whole world gains that much." So when we develop ourselves spiritually, we are offering a gift to the world. We're doing this for everyone—for our friends and our children and our partners and our coworkers and the guy who cuts us off in traffic. We're doing it for all of them, for all the people that we treat more kindly and for the harm that we avoid. This is the generosity of our practice.

And we see that our practice is embedded also in giving and receiving. There's centuries of giving and dāna that have brought this practice to where we are. I love to reflect on this—that this whole tradition has been held in generosity for over 2,500 years. There's this whole lineage of people behind us that have made it possible for us to be here, people over centuries who have given. It's so beautiful.

And even just this center that's been around for, what, 36 years now? Something like that. All the people who have supported this center, all the staff that have come through and done the work here, and the staff here right now—their gift makes it possible for us to be here. And all those who have donated for our meals. And then we have all the people who at home have covered for us to be here—our family, our coworkers. It's beautiful.

And all the beings that live in this area: the chipmunks and the fox and the red squirrel, the titmice, the frogs sleeping in the bottom of the pond right now, the bears going into hibernation. The unseen beings who protect us. The trees and the sun and the earth and the rain—all supporting us to be here. It's like a circle that keeps going around.

I want to end with a story that I've really loved from Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet—a poet of the people, you could say. At one point, it got him into enough trouble that he was exiled. He wound up on the wrong side of the government. Then in his old age, he was allowed to go back to Chile and died there. A very beloved poet in Latin America. And there's a story about one of the things that fueled his talent and his ability to give to so many people.

This is from Pablo Neruda:

"One time, investigating in the backyard of our house in Temuco the tiny objects and minuscule beings of my world, I came upon a hole in one of the boards of the fence. I looked through the hole and saw a landscape like that behind our house, uncared for and wild. I moved back a few steps because I sensed vaguely that something was about to happen. All of a sudden, a hand appeared—a tiny hand of a boy about my own age. By the time I came close again, the hand was gone, and in its place was a marvelous

white sheep. The sheep's wool was faded. Its wheels had escaped."

All of this only made it more authentic.

I had never seen such a wonderful sheep. I looked back through the hole, but the boy had disappeared. I went into the house and brought out a treasure of my own—a pine cone, opened, full of odor and resin, which I adored. I set it down in the same spot and went off with the sheep.

I never saw either the hand or the boy again. And I have never again seen a sheep like that either. The toy I lost finally in a fire. But even now, at almost fifty years old, whenever I pass a toy shop, I look furtively into the window. But it's no use. They don't make sheep like that anymore.

That exchange brought home to me for the first time a precious idea—that all of humanity is somehow together. That experience came to me again much later. This time it stood out strikingly against a background of trouble and persecution.

It won't surprise you then that I attempted to give something resiny, earth-like, and fragrant in exchange for human brotherhood. Just as I once left the pine cone by the fence, I have since left my words on the doors of so many people who were unknown to me—people in prison, or hunted, or alone.

This is the great lesson I learned in my childhood, in the backyard of a lonely house. Maybe it was nothing but a game two boys played who didn't know each other and wanted to pass to the other some good things in life. Yet maybe this small and mysterious exchange of gifts remained inside me also, deep and indestructible, giving my poetry light.

May our practice be a gift—deep and indestructible—that brings light to this world.

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