Generosity: Foundation of the Path

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 1:02:48

As Joseph mentioned, I'm going to talk about generosity, the practice of dana tonight, which is one of my favorite things to talk about. It makes me happy, mostly because I get to tell stories that make me happy, and that's fun.

To start, as we've said many times, the liberation, the freedom of heart and mind that the Buddha speaks of—the simplest way we've had of describing that is the mind, the heart of non-clinging. Really all of the teachings, as far as I can tell with my limited understanding, all of the different ways of teaching that the Buddha offered were all about this. Nothing was extraneous just for the heck of it because it's kind of interesting. And none of it was just, "Well, if you can't liberate yourself, do this." All of the teachings tend towards purifying the habits of our heart and mind, tend towards transforming the habits from suffering, so-called unwholesome habits, to wholesome, to pure habits—to weakening the habits of greed, hatred, and confusion in our mind, and feeding, strengthening the wholesome.

This is not only so that at some future moment the pure heart-mind can see Nibbana, which is true. But what's accessible here and now, and what we learn hopefully, and you're already seeing that many people have come to trust more and more, is to recognize how in a moment—just in a moment—when your consciousness has cleared from being identified with aversion or confusion or wanting. Several people have given this example of noticing aversion in the mind, and that shift, that Tai Chi move to awareness of aversion is not averse. It sounds nice, but when you really experience it, there's a sense of relief. There's a happiness in that. Aversion's still the object, and there's a happiness in that. It's not incredible bliss where you're dancing around—just a little kind of piece of happiness. If you're not looking so hard for the big bang, you'll notice. And this happiness, this joy almost, or calmness, is the happiness of the wholesome heart-mind. Just a moment of it, the peace of the purified mind.

So there's a saying—I don't really think it's a Buddhist saying—but there's no way to happiness; happiness is the way. And that's really, I feel, in all of the different ways that the Buddha taught, as different ways of purifying our heart and mind: experiencing this happiness, joy, peace here and now, as well as strengthening the habits so that that will continue in our mind and heart stream in the future.

Being here on a meditation retreat, of course our emphasis is on meditation, on bhavana. But what's really important—I think in my first years of practice I didn't really understand this so much, and I'm still learning about it—is that meditation, bhavana, it's like the most interesting, it's like if we get really deeply pure in our heart and mind, we'll understand, we'll see the truth. But it's not all about bhavana. All the different aspects of the way we live our life are equally purifying, ennobling, important. They all work

together.

And so the practice, the way of life—it's often called generosity, sila (conscious conduct, moral conduct), and bhavana (the word for mental cultivation, development)—and all the different kinds of meditation, all the different forms, have different techniques. They come from different angles, but they still, at their core, have this quality of purifying the habits of mind.

I just want to give that framework from which I want to share some of my own reflections about the habit, the way of life, the happiness of generosity. Calling it a "practice" makes it sound too automatic, too dull, something you have to do. But I've really begun to imbibe, kind of like by osmosis, from spending time in cultures that are primarily Buddhist—in Thailand and Burma. Not everyone's walking around enlightened of course; it's as messed up as anywhere, but in different ways. One aspect that I really feel in myself, the more I spend time there, is that the teachings of the Buddha are just more inculcated in the culture—both sometimes really with understanding and sometimes not, like anywhere. But generosity as a value, as a way of life, is just so through the culture, with this sense of joy, that whenever I spend time in Thailand or lately Burma, I can't help but pick it up, even if at first you don't quite notice what's going on.

You could say that generosity is really the foundational quality, the foundational ennobling quality, at the heart of our awakening path, at the heart of the Buddha's teaching. And so many times in the suttas, when he begins to unfold his teachings to people, he begins with generosity—all for bringing in, brightening the heart and mind, purifying the heart and mind, even in the listening. It turns the mind and heart in a wholesome direction.

Just on an intellectual level, it's not a surprise if you think about generosity. It seems to me quite understandable that as a practice, as something that we continue to strengthen in the way that we relate to our lives, ourselves, our things, and others—it of course counters greed and possessiveness of objects, of time, of views, whatever. It counters ill will, interestingly enough. Try giving something wholeheartedly to someone and feeling ill will for them at the same time. It doesn't work. When there's really a wholesome mind state, wholesome and unwholesome don't exist simultaneously.

And of course, it counteracts self-cherishing, the sense of separation and alienation that comes when there's a sense of me holding on to whatever. The act of generosity of mind, speech, and body is an expression of non-separation. And it also, I find, strengthens that understanding and lets us feel it in different ways—the sense of our non-separation.

And I found that the more the mind just inclines to generosity, it also strengthens a sense of inner contentment. In a way, we can't give anything if there's not some sense of inner abundance, of inner non-clinging—that's clear. But also in the giving itself, and in that circle of giving and receiving, joy and non-separation that flows from it, I find that the sense of inner contentment is strengthened while neediness simply weakens. The happiness of generosity is so much more enticing than the unpleasantness of neediness that the mind starts to incline toward the wholesome.

I don't know who figured it out, because even though we say awareness doesn't care about pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, it turns out that the *kilesas* are unpleasant and wholesome states are generally pleasant. Our job is not to cultivate more aversion and clinging to those experiences, but it's a good situation that as the mind inclines more toward wholesome states, there's much more inner happiness and peace.

So generosity—it's great. I recommend practicing it.

The Buddha, as you probably know, when he had to set up his way of living with the monks and nuns in India at that time, there were many different sects and probably many different ascetic men—more men than women. Still, the Buddha was establishing his own *saṅgha* of monks and nuns with his own rules.

This is from Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator, offering a quotation from the Buddha describing how he set up the relationship between monastics and lay people, all on the basis of generosity—the mutuality that comes from generosity:

"Bhikkhus, householders and Brahmins are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicines in times of sickness." Those are the four requisites that nuns and monks are allowed and need to have. "And you bhikkhus are very helpful to Brahmins and householders, as you teach them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, the middle, and the end, and you proclaim the spiritual life in its fulfillment and complete purity. Thus, monks, this spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

As you probably know, he really set it up so that monks and nuns are not allowed to keep food overnight. Not only can they not eat after noon, but they can't store food. The monks and nuns had to go out every day with their alms bowl—as in the story of Bāhiya last night—eat the food that they receive, and that's it. Then the next day, again.

So even though there's great emphasis on meditation and seclusion—"here are these roots of trees, go meditate"—they also couldn't completely isolate themselves from the lay people because of this mutual support. The lay people were generous if they felt inspired by faith, and the monks and nuns were generous in offering the Dhamma, not only through their lives but through sharing in whatever way with any lay people who came. He set it up so that you couldn't just live in isolation, because these four groups of people—ordained women and men, and lay women and men—are all needed. It's said even now that these four groups are necessary for this particular Buddhist *sāsana* to stay alive. We need all four.

In Buddhist countries, as I mentioned, this still exists, especially with the monks. They still go out every day on alms round. They can't keep food. But the peace I mentioned before—that has been a revelation to me—comes from being immersed in a culture where generosity is such a deeply ingrained way of being, such a value that it soaks in by osmosis. The revelation is the incredible joy and happiness involved in most acts of generosity, in both the giving and the receiving. And it's not only monks and nuns; it's lay

people too. It's really in the culture, and it's contagious.

Of course, I grew up in this culture where people are very generous. I'm not saying only Buddhist countries are generous—please don't misunderstand me. It's just that this is where much of my learning as a Buddhist practitioner and the joy of it comes from.

But there is a slight difference. The way I grew up—sort of Christian, more or less Christian, I would say—there's certainly a sense of love and compassion and sharing what one has, usually, and it's really well meant, with people who are needy. Of course, you tend not to give to people who have more than you, whether it's time or effort or whatever. There could often be, at least the way I learned it, a slight sense of subtle superiority in giving. That's not always the case, but it could be. And one could feel good about it—nothing wrong with feeling good about it—but not necessarily that sense of real joy and dignity in it. Sometimes, the way I grew up, you might offer something to a homeless person and tend to feel more embarrassed or ashamed rather than a sense of joy and dignity.

And if the person receiving it accepted it in this really open, dignified way, that was like a wonderful gift. But it wasn't often happening that way.

When I first began to get a sense of this, it was a long time ago when I was entirely as a nun at a forest nunnery monastery. There were just maybe a few little huts for the nuns, for the women to stay in. I had a little hut, and there was a head nun who was a young woman around thirty, a very strong practitioner.

In nunneries and monasteries in Thailand, people just show up and come. You could have three nuns one day, and then fifteen nuns could just show up the next day, and you have to find somewhere to put them. It's just like that. It's not like we advertise ahead of time. No, there's no room, you can't come. People just come. That's how it is.

And so whenever there were more people than there were kutis, the first person to move was always the head nun. She was happy to give. She'd go stay in this cave filled with bat guano—I'm not exaggerating—up high. I think she liked it a little bit for the aesthetic idea. But still, there was this great joyful generosity of moving out.

I had just come from my early years on staff here, where there's a sense of—well, that's what we would call the room game, you know, what room would the staff people get to live in? And believe me, it doesn't work that the most senior person happily gives up their place to the most junior person who comes. It doesn't work that way. It's all seniority, and we all accept that. So this sense of the most senior most happily giving—I just kept noticing that over and over and over, and I was quite touched by it.

Then quite some years later, the first time I went to sit at a monastery, a meditation center in Burma, I didn't really know anyone there. I was just doing my practice. I was there for quite some weeks. You're in your own world, getting yourself settled, and finally, after however long, you manage to come out of your own—maybe you guys haven't yet—come out of your own world a little bit to notice what's going on

around.

Like, do you notice how lovely the flowers are? That's somebody's generous mettā heart, someone in particular, who made it so lovely. She could have just thrown a couple of daisies in there, but no, she made it really beautiful. And then she changes the water when it's funky, even though it's a drag for her, out of generosity. Noticing that, we can let it in. There's a joy in seeing that, in appreciating the small generous acts around.

So I started to notice this in this meditation center. For example, the way most of them are set up, you come in to eat, and we have a certain set seat at a table, about four or five women at a table, and the monks at other tables, and food would be put on the table. And there are young women who work there, not nuns, who come and work. Really, they're hardly paid. Some of them aren't paid at all. They just volunteer their time and they work, like a full week's work. And they're just kind of waiting, making sure there's food and all.

I started to notice that some of the meditator women, even nuns—like foreign nuns—were incredibly demanding, asking the kids, "Well, I want some hot chilies. I want more salt. I want this. I want that." And with me, I'm like, "My God, you know, you're a nun. Aren't you supposed to be renunciant?" I had, quietly, a little bit of an attitude.

But I was just sitting there watching. And the women who were working really hard—first they would try to meet each of these requests. They'd go to a lot of trouble to try and meet them. They'd go out to the garden and come back so happy they could pick a few little fresh chilies. Happy—that's the key. They were so happy to try and do whatever was asked, to try and offer that generosity. It felt really unfeigned, because I was sitting watching it for weeks.

And after a while I thought, well, which is better—sitting here grumpy and judging, or kind of like opening to the joy of that heartfelt generosity about little things?

I mean, it doesn't really work to think, "I should be appreciating this." But it just starts to come in through osmosis. You simply start to notice it. And wholesome qualities, if we're not completely covered in delusion in a moment, are contagious. We feel them. They light up our heart and mind. It was really a gift just to sit there and watch the generosity of these young women.

So that's when I first started to get a sense of how uplifting this could be, because I was having a difficult time. Some of those periods were difficult in my practice. And without having been told anything about it, I just started to notice that when my mind was in a dark funk, if I simply did something like notice, "Oh, look at those flowers—that's somebody's generosity," it wasn't a false thing, but the generosity and the metta behind it would uphold me. It would bring some brightness, some faith into my mind and heart. And that would give me the strength to keep going.

So overall, the wholesomeness, the happiness of the wholesome mind shows us that our happiness really

is not at all dependent on external circumstances. But it doesn't mean we can't recognize our mutuality, our non-separation—and that's one of the great things about sangha here. Of course, you're projecting; you don't really know what each other is feeling. But sometimes you just get a sense. Someone walks by and they seem really mindful, and you just get this hit of happiness or metta from them. Great. Don't go into big thinking about it. Let it touch you. Let it be contagious. We're not so separate.

So that's when I first started to get a sense of it. And now I'll tell a few stories about how the mutuality of generosity is so imbued in the culture, and how much I just kept watching. I keep watching. I just have to think about being in Burma, and—believe me, this is a place with incredible poverty, much of it government-induced, incredible oppression, lots of fear. So it's not a paradise at all. And yet there's so much joy of generosity and kindness, a kind of generosity of heart and metta in the culture, in so many people—not everybody, but so many—that when I just start to think about it, memories start popping up and my heart gets really open and happy. It's interesting.

Just to give a couple of examples: one time I was staying at this meditation center right after the big cyclone a few years ago, which was like a massive hurricane, somewhat like Katrina. It had an even more devastating effect on a whole area southwest of Yangon, and on Yangon itself. We were staying at a meditation center right outside of Yangon, and all around it was a relatively poor village. Many of the houses, which were just little bamboo shacks, had been destroyed. A lot of the crops had been destroyed, both down in the delta and in this area. So poor people were even poorer.

This was a time when the government, of course, didn't do anything and actively tried to stop other people from helping down in the delta—though not in Yangon. The generosity of average Burmese people was so manifest because so many would actually risk danger or jailing by the government to gather food and somehow sneak down to the delta on boats or whatever to pass it out. Just your normal person—any of us—but a lot of people, because the government wasn't doing anything.

Anyway, this was a few months after that. Some friends and I had gone to Burma, and other friends had known there were difficulties and had sent money with us to share with people who needed it. The Sayadaw, the abbot of this monastery, said, "Why don't we buy a lot of rice and offer a big bag to each household in this village? Because rice is the staple, and now it's so expensive." He organized the whole thing—we gave the money, and he organized it. He's a great organizer. It was something like eight hundred households.

And again, the way the generosity is done there—we would say, "Okay everybody, bag of rice here, come get it, bye." But there it's done really face to face and with great dignity. So they brought in trucks of rice. There was this whole room piled with rice. And then the monks in the monastery, who can't offer money, offered their time and bagged all the rice into big bags.

And then Sayadaw came and got us, me and my Western friends, and said, "You have to come and offer it. You can't just give the money and go away. That's got no heart in it." He didn't say it quite that way. He

said, "You have to stand here, and each person that comes, you hand them the bag of rice."

So this became an all-day affair. The bags of rice—we're talking fifty-pound bags of rice. It would take two of us, me and my friend, to manage them. We're struggling, we can hardly lift the thing. And then this little lady would come. We're going, "Ugh!" She takes the rice, throws it on her head, and goes walking out. They all do. The women carry it on their heads. The men throw it on their shoulder. Some of the women—and I have photos, I'm not exaggerating—had a kid in both arms, the rice on the head, and off they go. But there's this face-to-face exchange. It has a sense of dignity, a sense of immediacy to it. But it's also the cycle of the joy of generosity and the joy of receiving going both ways.

This, of course, is the area where the monks go on their *pindapat*, their alms round, every morning. They follow the same little routine. So one of the monks—there were only about twelve in this monastery—one of them, a friend of ours, a guy from Mexico, told us the next day what happened. He came back from the alms round that next morning and said, "Okay, we go the same round every day, and more or less the same people come out and offer us rice. And they're poor, so mostly they only offer rice. It's pretty much always the same families, the same little ladies."

So he said the next day, after this rice offering, so many more families came out and offered rice because they had a little bit extra—and the first thing they did was offer it to the monks. He said there were a few places where the families brought out their little kids, because it goes down through the generations, so it was a real treat for the little children to be able to take a spoon of rice and put it in each monk's bowl. And it was just—I don't know—so touching, the cycle of generosity, and so normal there in that culture.

But the cycle of the happiness of generosity really runs not only within that culture but from any kind of giving and receiving.

Here's another example. Some other friends had, a few years before this time, come and visited one of the nearby nunneries—which I'll describe in a minute. Then they went back home, and the next year they sent a check to offer to these nuns who were trying to build a decent enough building to live in.

Just to describe the nuns: there are many, many nunneries around this area. More since the cyclone, as groups of two or three or four nuns would move up from the delta because they couldn't live there anymore. They would somehow get a little tiny plot of land and build these little structures of plaited bamboo—like a woven wall of bamboo. You can make it in about three hours if you know how, and it lasts four or five months. The floor is just bamboo poles laid like this with big holes in between. Many nunneries are like that.

This particular one was run by two sisters. They had come up from the delta some years ago and were living and studying. Many nuns study Pali and Buddhism, and these two had been studying for several years. They were about early forties and late thirties. At some point, the monk, the Sayadaw who was their teacher down in the delta, said to them, "There are these ten little girls, they're orphans, and I can't take

care of them anymore, so I'm sending them to you to take care of."

Now, as it turned out—they told us later—they didn't have any way to take care of these little girls. They were living in a study monastery, and their plans were to go and meditate the next year, to really dedicate the next few years to their practice. But instead, they got the news: here come ten little girls.

Many nuns take on little girls—orphans, or children whose parents are really poor—and they educate them, clothe them, feed them, completely take care of them. And that's what these two sisters did. So when we went to visit, they had found this little piece of land, built themselves this little crummy shack, and were living there with ten little girls. They were describing it all, filled with light.

They didn't tell us until quite some time later that they had really wanted to go off and meditate. We were talking through a friend who speaks Burmese, just so we could understand this fully. And they were just describing how they felt so dedicated to giving these little girls the possibility of knowing what a good life is, what a life of virtue is, what a life of generosity is.

They said, "If they decide not to be nuns when they're older, that's fine. That's up to them. But at least they'll know good values. They'll know how to live as a human being." Plus, these children are rescued from the street, rescued from some kind of servitude.

They would laugh about how everything they have is on *dāna*—their food, everything. And if they're given clothes, the head nun was saying, "Well, if someone gives me robes, that's wonderful. I can cut it up and make fifteen little tiny robes." For these adorable little girls in their little pink robes—they're very cute. She was laughing about it. "And if someone gives us a little money, we can buy fifteen little sets of slippers." These little sets of slippers all lined up. There was so much affection, so much dedication. She was teaching them Pali in the morning, and they all get up and chant together.

And then at the end it came out that they had really wanted to go off and meditate. So they just did a 180-degree turn for the next ten years of their lives—with joy, with so much lightness and happiness. It was really amazing to see.

So anyway, when these friends gave the check, and then when I came back the next year, I had gone to California where the friends were, and I had some photos of these nuns receiving the money. You have to put it in piles—it's like huge piles of money worth not very much. So you arrange it on these trays. It's always face-to-face, a very dignified offering, and there's chanting. When you offer, the nuns will all chant—a whole *mettā* chant, a gratitude chant, a blessing chant. It's really very beautiful and formal. So there are photos of all that.

And then the next day, we ran into the nun. She'd run out, and they'd bought concrete and bricks. She was coming back sitting in a truck filled with all the building supplies they'd just purchased. So we could take a photo and show our friends. When I showed them the photo, it was like the completion of the circle, because they were so happy. I was just watching them. "Here's the photo. This is what we did." And their

faces just lit up with the happiness of generosity.

So you're happy when you think about being generous, when you're doing it, and afterwards, reflecting on it. The Buddha really talked about this as a wholesome act—it's really beautiful. Quite catchy, as I said. It's really embedded in the culture.

I'm mostly giving monks and nuns as examples because that's where I've been spending my time. But just a simple example from last year—it's complicated with the money, bringing in foreign currency and changing it. It's just complicated. So last year, the way it worked out, the money came through a bank and a money changer. The money changing is like pseudo-black market, let's just put it that way. Now things are changing, but you didn't go to a bank and change money—that didn't even exist.

So a guy, a money changer, would come with—and I'm not kidding—huge mounds of these *kyat*, and look at every single foreign bill. And if it's a little bit wrinkled or it has one red dot on it, they won't take it. So it takes hours. They're going through everything.

So this is going on. And it's not quite like a drug deal, but there's a slightly sleazy quality to it. It's not like the room is filled with light and *devas*, really. But it's also not terrible—I mean, it's what everyone does. One time we were doing it right in the office in the middle of the monastery.

And the monks, rather than thinking, "Oh, it should go to monks, it shouldn't go to nuns"—and you do run into that sometimes—they're quite different. They've gone out of their way to find people who need help, to identify people whose houses are falling down, to find nuns who are running schools for poor children, and to help us go there and visit and see if we can offer support. It's really touching, these monks.

So this one monk came and said, "Oh, you should go visit these two other monks over there." And they were interesting, these two monks. One was about forty, one was about thirty-five years old, and they had only become monks recently—one seven years ago and one three years ago, in their mid-thirties. This is unusual, because usually men who are going to be monks become monks younger. Sayadaws have usually been monks since they were about seven and stay monks a long time. Or they become monks for a rainy season just to do it and then stop. But these two were different—one had been a captain in the military, and the other had been a businessman.

So we went to see them. Upanyaloka, the monk who told us about them, said they're interesting because when they became monks, they were living on this little plot of barren land near where we stay. It's just dusty, flat land. They didn't have a well, didn't have much of anything. He said when he first went to see them, they were newish monks, just the two of them. They didn't really have a senior monk teaching them. He said they were kind of hanging out. They were monks, but they didn't really know what to do with themselves. They had been there a while.

So Upanyaloka said to them, "Look, why don't you do something? You both have an education. There are all these poor children around." And the way school works in Burma—elementary and even high

school—even if you can go to the government schools, which have a lot of fees so many children can't, but even if you can, you don't learn enough to pass the exams, which everything is predicated on. Children basically have to hire the teachers for tutoring in the evening. That's how the teachers make enough money to live, because they're paid almost nothing. And so poor children—even if they can barely scratch together enough to attend school—can't afford to hire anyone for tutoring.

So Upanyaloka said to these two monks, "Look, you have an education. You're just sitting around here. Why don't you start tutoring? There are a lot of poor children around." And so they had started doing that. And now maybe a hundred children came every evening to get tutoring.

So we went over to see them. And it was really a great teaching in assumptions, and also in the happiness and the transformative quality of generosity.

You walk in—well, you don't really walk in, there's no "in"—but it's just this barren, dusty land with a kind of shelter, a lean-to. That's what a lot of places are. We went in the afternoon, and there really were a hundred kids there. These two monks were just tutoring them, and the older kids were helping the younger kids. It all felt very friendly and jovial.

The two monks were... not impressive looking, shall I say. They just looked kind of schlumpy. They had clearly been chewing betel nut all their lives. If you've seen that, it's a somewhat addictive thing. If you chew it for long, it dyes your mouth and your teeth red, it rots your teeth, and you're always spitting this red—it's not really a happy sight. But it's very common. A good monk or nun, and women chew it too just as much, wouldn't chew betel nut. So these guys had betel nut, just kind of standing there—U Bassa and U Bola.

But we started talking to them, and the younger one, the businessman, turned out that what he'd been in business in was beer and liquor and such. That was his business. But he finally had to beg his parents when he was thirty-three to let him be a monk.

Anyway, he starts talking to us. They'd been doing this teaching now for some time, and he was like—born again, in a good way. He said he felt like he'd wasted thirty-three years. He was so bright, so happy as he was saying this. He said he felt like he had wasted the first thirty-three years of his life. "I feel like I have a new life now," he said. He's giving his energy and his life to helping others, to helping the children. "Really, it's like I have a new life. I want to be able to do some form of helping for the rest of my life. This is it. And if it turns out there's nothing else to do here, I'll go somewhere else and help somewhere else."

He was just filled with happiness and joy from helping others. It was so touching.

And for us also—one of us had quite a judgmental attitude toward monks. As soon as this person would see a monk with betel nut, it was like a door slammed shut in her mind. So this was really for all of us like, "Oh yeah, maybe I have to drop that." To see the purity of heart, and to see the transformation through simple acts of generosity.

One last story in this vein, about a nun at a different nunnery nearby. She had been there a few years—maybe thirty nuns living there, not particularly bringing up orphans or running a school, not doing anything special. They study, but nothing in particular. And the head nun, Daw Sumanachari, seemed nice. She made good mohinga soup, but seemed a little bit depressive maybe.

Then she came the year before last, just after I'd left. She talked to Daw Aryanyani, who speaks Burmese, and she knew that sometimes people funneled money through her. She said, "You know, there's a school that a nun started ten minutes' drive away for poor kids who can't afford public school. And now five hundred kids are going to that school." I'm not kidding—all on dāna. They have to raise money every month to pay the teachers, to feed the kids, plus the nuns have to live on dāna too.

Anyway, this nun who came to see Aryanyani said, "But the little children around here have to walk half an hour, and in the rainy season, it's too hard for them. So I want to start on my place a school for the really littlest ones." She had a plot of land with two small buildings on it.

We kind of thought, "I don't know—can she really get this together?" But what the heck. So we offered what we could.

We came back the next year, and she'd really done it. First, they demolished the main building that the thirty nuns were living in, and they all moved into the smaller building. That's all they have to live in now. And they had the money to build a really long lean-to roof, hired several teachers, got blackboards. Then she got another company—a Burmese company, as many Burmese companies support such efforts—to build another lean-to. And she had one hundred ten little kids coming.

And she'd hired really good, regular lay teachers. So when she came to see us, we were really impressed.

But the point is, she came and was talking to us later that fall, describing the school, and her demeanor—even though I couldn't understand Burmese and she was speaking through a translator—her demeanor was completely different. She was radiant. She was just filled with light, so light and joyful.

What she was saying was that the year before, it was just eating at her. She couldn't sleep because she so wanted to start this school. It had just come to her that she had to do this, but she didn't know how. She was so worried about it. But now—and I wrote this down, I'm not making it up—she said, "Now the worry's all gone." Before she couldn't sleep or eat, but now she's so happy because it's happening. Even though she has to work so hard to keep it going, to get the dana, to keep the teachers, to take care of the kids, and they all live in this little building, she said she's just so happy. "All of my energy is for the children and the school," she said, "and so my mind is calm and happy."

And she looked like that. It was really quite transformative.

As the Buddha said, and the great story that illustrates this comes through his disciple Anathapindika. Someone mentioned that Anathapindika was one of the Buddha's most generous disciples. When he first

met the Buddha, he just had so much faith in the Dharma, in the Buddha, that he became filled with appreciation and generosity. Right away, he offered the Jeta Grove, where many of the suttas you read take place.

This story about Anathapindika shows that the main aspect of generosity is not about what or how much. We tend to look at the result. But as with everything, it's the motivation. The heart of the generous act of mind, speech, or body is in the motivation, the intention to offer time, material goods, freedom from whatever—and the tuning into that, the non-clinging. That's where the joy comes from, and that's what gives generosity its power.

Anathapindika started inviting all the monks from the Sangha in the area—like 500 monks, which means a lot. That's what Andy Olinsky says: when it says 500, it means a lot. Every day he would feed them with a great meal.

King Pasenadi of that area, who was also a disciple of the Buddha, heard about Anathapindika's generosity and wanted to imitate him—or probably do better than him. He thought, "He can do it, I can do it." So he decided he wanted to give alms and food to 500 monks every day, and he started doing that as well.

But then one day, as he was on his way to visit with the monks, he learned from his servants that his servants would give the monks the food, but then the monks would take the food and go into the city and give it to some of their personal supporters, and then the supporters would offer the food back. King Pasenadi said, "Why are they doing that? I'm giving great food. I'm giving better food. I'm giving really good food, so why are they doing that?"

The Buddha explained that in the palace, his servants distributed the food without any inner feeling, just following orders as if they were cleaning out a barn or taking a thief to court. Some of them even thought the monks were just parasites, or even had negative feelings. They lacked faith and had no love. The Buddha said that when anything is given in that spirit, no one can feel comfortable accepting it, even when the meal is of the most delicious food.

In contrast, he said, in the households of Anathapindika and Visakha, another generous woman, they welcomed the monks and regarded them as spiritual friends. A humble meal provided by a friend is worth much more than the most sumptuous meal offered by someone who did not give in a really generous, open spirit.

So you see, it's really about the joy and the purification of heart and mind, not just about giving a lot and being seen as generous. In fact, in another place the Buddha said that even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or a cup into a village pool or pond, thinking, "May whatever animals live here feed on this," that would be a great source of merit, a great source of generosity. It's that movement of heart and mind.

Sometimes you have water you're going to throw out, and if you just pour it on a plant and think, "May this be for the benefit of the plant," that's a mental act of generosity—something we're all quite able to do.

Once when Sayadaw U Pandita was here teaching, there was a monk teaching with him, U Nyanapannika, who was a Nepalese monk. He gave a talk on generosity that I really liked—I know because I took notes from it. I wouldn't remember one word if I didn't take notes. This was a long time ago. But he talked about the practice of giving as a practice and gave six points. I'll just mention them, because sometimes that might be helpful. Not to make it too rigid, but just to illuminate different aspects.

The first, of course, is when the thought of giving anything arises, give attention to the motivation, to the volition. Really purify it. The first and second go together. The second is that whatever one is giving, see and abandon the clinging to it. So it's not just this casual, "Oh, here, take it."

A friend of mine once used a phrase that stayed with me. I'd given him something I didn't want. I said, "I don't want this." He said, "Oh yeah, I'll take it." "Okay, here."

That didn't really feel like an act of generosity. I never gave it another thought. But some years later, he mentioned it. He said, "That thing—I use it all the time. Your act of casual, thoughtless generosity." He wasn't being mean or critical. That was an accurate description. It was casual, thoughtless generosity.

Looking at it, okay, it's more generous than not giving, but it's not really the generosity of giving attention to the volition—not "I should be generous." That's not it. It's this openness.

I heard a Tibetan teacher once say, you know, there's generosity of mind, of speech, and of body. So maybe the thought comes up, "I'd like to give this." But then, "Oh, I just can't." He said, practice in your mind. Practice giving it in your mind. If you can't even do that—well, okay, so you just practice there. Out of loving-kindness, out of generosity, not out of a should.

Another Tibetan teacher suggested taking a rock and giving it from one hand to the other. Just practice letting go. It's the act of letting go. We can play with it. Just start to see what holding on and letting go feels like—viscerally and in our mind. Sooner or later, we notice the letting go feels better. But it's not a should. We can practice that.

Or another way of thinking about generosity of mind: with whatever one does—I read this from Geshe Rabten, who was a teacher of one of my good friends, Fred Von Allmen, and he's been dead a long time now. A generous action of mind is simply this: with whatever you're doing—turning on the water, making some tea, washing your hands—just thinking, "With this act, may all beings be free from suffering." That's just an act of generosity of heart and mind. So simple. So many different ways to practice—with mind, with speech, with body.

The second point is to see and abandon the clinging. And whether that's time or service, it's not just about things.

The third one is to give when possible—it's not possible here when you're on retreat in silence—but when possible, when it's appropriate, to give face to face. That's the way it's traditionally done.

And the fourth one is to give mindfully, with the mind focused. So we're really collected, attentive to both the motivation and the act of giving. It really gives it a power and a beauty.

That face-to-face giving is something I've learned from the way it's done when you're offering to monks and nuns in Asia. And not just to monastics—to lay people too. It's this very formal thing. The giving is done with a real sense of appreciation, and the receiving is done with great dignity, great respect for the whole process. I find it quite ennobling on both sides, as well as joyful.

I remember one time when Sayadaw U Pandita was here. He had been—I was on retreat—and he had been talking about wanting to study Christianity and wanting to practice his English. So I got a friend to buy this very simple English book about Jesus's life or something like that.

And then I'm shy, giving face to face. There's this sense of self and shyness—what do they think?—and all this stuff that isn't the happiness of generosity, this whole kind of self-cherishing that's rather strange. Why is it like that when it's such a joyful thing?

So anyway, I had this friend give it to him, and I went on my retreat here. Weeks later, when the retreat ended and I went to say my goodbye bows, he said, "Wait." And he had someone go get that book.

And he gave it to me. He said, "Now give it to me face to face." It was really far out. And I was like a little nervous. And he was really present in the receiving, very formal. And then they say, like a blessing. And even with lay people, when he gives us some little thing, they go, "May this be a cause for your complete attainment of nirvana in this lifetime." Imagine you give somebody a little towel and they say, "May this be a cause for your attaining nirvana in this lifetime." I mean, it's beautiful. We just go, "Okay, thanks." Or "Do you have a better one?" No—"May you attain nirvana in this lifetime." Try it. It's really a wonderful thing.

So this sense of giving with the mind focused on the giving—it ennobles both the giver and the receiver.

Another example with lay people: someone had given us, had sent money to rebuild some houses after the cyclone. And these were some neighbors, really poor neighbors with their own tumbledown houses, who came to us and said, "There's this elderly couple with a son who's off and doesn't take care of them, and they don't have enough to eat, and their house is falling down. Could you help them?"

So we came, and they were in their 80s, and the woman was almost deaf, and the man was almost blind. He couldn't really work, but she grew things. Their house was spick and span, so clean, so tidy. She grew little plants outside and in back. And on the days that she was well enough to walk, she would take these plants to the market to sell. That was their only income. It wasn't enough, and neighbors would give them rice and such.

So we gave money to build a house, which was not much—it can be done in a day. Then we found out they didn't have enough money for the rent. In Burma, poor people own the house but rent the land. And if you

get kicked off, you have to take the house with you. They didn't have enough money; their rent was a year overdue. This was like sixty dollars for a year. So that was nothing, right? We paid that. Then we went back—the neighbors all said, "You come back." We went and paid the landlord, came back.

And it was just—they were so dignified and elegant, really, but also happy. The man had this greatest smile, and he had a kind of homemade mandolin thing that he took down and was playing and singing for us. The wife isn't so smiley, but very serious. And he was doing some kind of dance. It was just this appreciation of the whole situation, this great sense of happiness and dignity.

There was no space, no sense of the shyness of giving or the shyness of receiving, no saying, "Oh, I'm not worthy to give or receive." That cuts the mutuality. It cuts the circle. But to give or receive with this dignity and this face-to-face presence is really ennobling, and it really strengthens the joy.

The fifth factor is: after giving, to continue to be mindful of our motivation. Have you ever had a time when you give and then later you go, "Ah, damn, why did I give that away?" So keep on being mindful. Remind yourself when that happens. You don't want to go there. Re-immerse yourself into the happiness of the generosity while you did it. That's really quite accessible.

And this is important: having a clear comprehension of the broader context. So in other words, if an alcoholic comes and wants help, you give the help you can, but you don't give them twenty dollars to go down to the liquor store and buy more, for example.

But generosity with intelligence applies to everything. And I've added the seventh aspect, which is receiving with the same openness. Because when someone gives and we respond, "Oh no, I'm not worthy," or "I have so much more than you, don't give me anything"—that's problematic. Every time you offer something to these people in Burma, no matter how poor they are, they're going to come and offer you something back with huge joy and dignity. And not to take it is a lack of generosity. "No, no, I have so much more, don't give me that." That doesn't work. And it's not happiness-producing.

So just the last thing I want to say: there's the happiness of contemplating generosity, there's the happiness of the act itself, and there's the happiness of contemplating our past acts of generosity. This is something we don't do so much in this culture. It's not only generosity—also our wholesome sīla. But at times, when you're in a difficult space and you look around and go, "Well, looking at the flowers isn't doing it for me. Nobody's walking by filled with mettā. The leaves are falling and they're all brown and dead. I need something to bring some light in. I can't find one moment of mettā. What could there possibly be to brighten the mind and the heart?" You could contemplate your past acts of generosity of mind, speech, and body. You have to have done at least one, right? Somewhere? If you haven't, go wash your hands and think, "May this act be for the benefit and well-being of all beings everywhere." And then you can contemplate that later.

But this is from the Buddha. And it's a wise use of thought, a wise use of contemplation. He's talking to a

layman, and it's embedded in this sutta. He gives other contemplations, but I'm just going to do the dāna one because we're running out of time.

This is the case where you recollect your own generosity: "It is a gain for me that among people overcome with the stain of possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness—freely generous, open-handed, delighting in being generous, responsive to requests, delighting in the distribution of alms."

At any time when a disciple of the noble ones—that's all of you whether you like it or not—at any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, her mind is not overcome with greed, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. So just the recollection of generosity, done wholeheartedly, is a moment of purification of heart and mind.

And when the mind is not overcome with aversion, delusion, greed, her mind heads straight, her heart heads straight, based in generosity. And when the mind, the heart, is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones has a sense of the meaning, a sense of the Dhamma, experiences joy connected with the Dhamma. And in one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calm experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.

Thus, Mahānāma, you should 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.

In other words, no excuse not to. And it makes us happy, so why not?

Let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

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