Getting on Board for Liberation:
Dāna, Sīla and Nekkhamma Pāramī

Although the Buddha's first full teaching was about the Four Noble Truths, that sermon was given to people who had already gone forth as renunciants and made commitments to a spiritual path for many years. He didn't always teach in this way. In general, the Buddha taught people in accordance with their own way of life and understanding, and often began by pointing to three powerful and transcending inclinations of mind: generosity (*dāna*); virtue, morality or ethical sensitivity (*sīla*); and renunciation, the ability to let go of the pull towards a sense object (*nekkhamma*). It was when a person had contacted these inclinations in himself or herself and felt confident in their validity that the Buddha would then explain the meaning of the Four Noble Truths — his analysis of why we experience stress, inner pain or dissatisfaction (*dukkha*) and how we can be free of it. The establishment of generosity, morality and renunciation through wise reflection is then to be understood as a necessary foundation for the teachings on full liberation.

Preparing the Mind for Liberation

It's said of the Buddha that he could 'train those who wished to be trained.' Even a Buddha can't teach someone who isn't interested, willing and capable. In other words, if the mind isn't ready, it can't take in the Buddha's teachings (Dhamma). What makes it ready isn't a matter of belief, but the capacity to access and feel the validity of generosity, virtue and renunciation. Now most of us

may not have these inclinations heading the to-do list of our thinking minds all the time, but when they're pointed to — when someone asks, 'Is generosity a good thing?' — we'd probably say that it is. Morality, the sense of 'act towards others as you would wish them to act towards you,' is also something that we'd probably approve of, although we might disagree over details.

The inclination of renunciation, of simplification, begins to make sense when we consider why, despite the validity of generosity and morality, people don't always share, but instead tend to fight, steal and abuse each other. A powerful cause of all that is the pull of the senses towards having more for oneself, which leads to miserliness and manipulation, jealousy and aggression, selfishness and greed. Hence the value of renunciation. However, this inclination towards simplifying one's wishes to make them fit one's needs often depends on some careful thought and introspection.

In all cases, even apart from the good that these perfections bring forth, their cultivation requires reflection and discernment. These are wisdom faculties. And when we use those faculties to put aside superficial or short-term gains and develop deep and long-term results, we're getting on track for liberation.

The inclination towards a life based on depth rather than on the surface activity of events is a fundamental cause for the development of *pāramī*, potentials that we can firm up into guiding intentions. Potentials such as generosity, virtue and renunciation are deeply supportive faculties. They make us clear about our own values and intelligence, and as we develop these, they become a kind of temple, a sanctuary within which we can stand, look around and formulate a path for practice. And the Buddha once described the Way of that practice as being 'for my welfare, for the welfare of others and leading to Nibbāna (peace)' (*M.19*). Whatever we do, whatever views or aims we hold, if we examine them under the light of these criteria, our actions will generate *pāramī* and spread them into blessings for others.

Outside of this temple of practice, we don't see where we get caught; or we see it but think we have no choice but to be caught up in our moods and impulses. Such an assumption deprives us of dignity and self-respect. So, when we don't acknowledge our own inner temple, and visit it often, we lose faith in ourselves, and weaken our potential for complete liberation from suffering and stress.

Wise Attention

Sometimes this inner visit is helped by a situation such as a sacred place so that the mental/emotional activity calms and brightens and we feel settled. In such places, as the mind clears we can feel a call from its depths, something like an urge for the true and the good. We might sense this experience to be transcendental or transpersonal — something that takes us to a place in ourselves that feels more meaningful. Then realizations tend to occur in the holistic sense of 'for my welfare, for the welfare of others and leading to peace.' Values of sharing and harmlessness and simplicity are not foreign to our hearts, but bringing them forth depends on the mind's being placed in an environment that allows its boundary of concern to widen.

This is because the mind takes on the characteristics and concerns of what it's associated with, or where we place it. All the time you are placing your attention within a certain frame of reference: if you are going out for the evening, your attention will be established on the intention to look smart or well-dressed, and with that intention you'll be aware of clothes and grooming and social mannerisms; whereas if you were gardening, you'd be looking out for weeds and grubs and wouldn't feel concerned if your clothes weren't of matching colours or your hair was untidy. And if you're meditating you'll be attending to the elements of peace or anxiety or clarity in the mind, and what you're wearing is irrelevant. Your purpose or intention establishes a boundary of attention; and that affects what you experience. Conversely, what you attend to affects the nature of your intentions. When you enter a sacred place or a temple for instance, your attention is

given to that particular space, and then receives whatever is within that space. Elements within such spaces trigger uplifting, reflective or sobering impressions so that the mind brings forth its transcendent potential. Then you're more likely to think and act in terms of that potential — which doesn't arise because of the symbols, music or vistas, but because of the values that the mind brings forth when it is calmed and opened by them. There's a profound difference between the indoctrination effect of brainwashing and the summoning of your own potential that deepening the mind can bring about!

Most often the boundaries of attention are located in everyday life, and they cause us to take in confusing or deluded messages. In the TV adventure serial, violence is exciting and heroic; then on the news it's illegal and a source of concern. In the commercials, consuming and getting more is fun and the true way to happiness; on the ecology programme, the chief source of global warming and pollution is unbridled consumerism and squandering of resources. It's all very confusing. But the television set and the computer are the most popular temples these days: when your mind is inside them, it's confusing — but nothing is asked of you, and you carry no responsibility. Your attention is suspended from your own concerns — which feels like a relief — but the mind is in a passive position that doesn't call up anything from its depths. Attention is in a trance.

With Dhamma practice, however, one thing we are doing is referring more directly to real human beings. In a Buddhist monastery for example, we gather together as the fourfold assembly of the Buddha's disciples: the monks and nuns who have gone forth into a life of renunciation, as well as the men and women who are living in the public sphere. When such people come together, then there is a sense of empathy and sharing, even and especially if the gathering is impersonal — with little conversation and silence. Such occasions can touch into our depths and bring transpersonal inclinations to light. For example, we are encouraged to recognize what unifies us. We look through the circumstances of daily life to something more timeless, and we recognize what we have in common.

One such common factor is the sense of aspiration, the wish to do or be better, to find peace or meaning or happiness. Then, because we see this in other people, or we attune to this unifying factor, we step out of the mistrust, the comparisons, the criticisms, the fears and the jealousies. And that helps us individually to see ourselves in a new light. So the presence of others in a transpersonal mode of attention helps each of us to see ourselves more fully. This is one reason to cultivate *pāramī*: inclinations such as patience and truthfulness towards ourselves and others take us out of the vortex of isolation, self-consciousness and the suffering of all that. With just this view we can realize simple truths such as everyone suffers, wants to be happy and makes mistakes — and that what really helps is being in touch with and acting in accord with shared principles.

Right View Through Generosity

One thing that the first three perfections indicate is that to undo the stress our minds create takes a move to a more selfless, less egocentric mode. With generosity and morality we take other people's welfare into our awareness; we incline towards empathy, kindness and compassion. And yet this doesn't cut off our own welfare: to live with a kind and conscientious heart is good, and means we make good friends. So this is for our welfare and others' welfare; it's not self-centred or self-denying; and it leads to the allaying of abuse, greed and mistrust — a net lessening of suffering and its causes.

The first perfection, generosity, is very accessible. Most of us have received gifts, so we know how uplifting it is to receive other people's kindness. It touches us. Then when we reciprocate, we feel good in giving something to someone — and for that particular moment, a benevolent connection is established. It's a simple and fundamental approach to relationship. As a Buddhist, one of the primary things one does when visiting one's teacher, for example, is to make an offering. It can be just a candle, incense or flowers — but one does this as a gesture of connectedness, of being in touch in a benevolent way. We probably already have a

feeling for this way of relating but only do it occasionally, on birthdays or at Christmas. However the Buddha's encouragement is to develop it on a daily basis. It lifts the mind out of its isolation and establishes goodwill.

With generosity, what one gives is not that significant, rather it is the act of giving that's of value. This action opens the heart in a benevolent way, and affects another person accordingly. It's a movement into the reality of a shared world. Furthermore, when one cultivates *dāna*, it's important not to think that only material things are the beginning and end of it all. Instead, giving a friendly gesture or a helping hand, offering service, or giving attention are offerings that may in some situations be more important than giving material things.

One of the long-term benefits is that through generosity, we begin to establish a happier sense around relationship. Relationship is a basic thing: we have mothers, fathers, children, friends. We are born into relationship experiences, but often our relationships get tarnished by fears, blame and dislikes, and we imagine we'd feel more comfortable on our own. Of course the Buddha himself encouraged solitude, but that was in an Indian society where everyone is so tightly connected through village, clan, family and caste that someone could lose the sense of being an individual. However in the West, it's exactly the opposite. Your sense of what you belong to ends at the edge of your skin, which is one reason why people in the 'developed' countries get to feel so alienated and anxious. We've developed self-view: 'You're on your own, compete and keep it for yourself.' But we've lost a lot of the sense of being part of something meaningful and sacred.

Consequently, what the Buddha called right view — which is the foundation of the path out of suffering and stress — gives value to relationship. It encompasses acknowledgement of and gratitude to mother and father and other supportive people, as well as the sense that there are wise beings from whom we can learn. And accordingly we learn to relate to ourselves in a wise and kindly

way, to acknowledge the good we've been born into, the good we've done and the mistakes that we need to learn from. Right view reminds us that we are not just an isolated point that is only relevant for the moment. We are in a field of present awareness that absorbs and carries the consequences of what we've done in our life or had happen to us. In some way, we have absorbed and are still connected to all events, all actions and all circumstances in our life. Therefore, all of that has to be purified.

However, it's not the case that you have to go through every event and judge who was right and who to forgive. Instead, you sense the overall results that stay with you: regret, doubt, worry, aversion and so on. You investigate, open to, and heal those results. This is one of the processes of mind cultivation or meditation — a cleansing and healing of the results of the past through just sustaining awareness of a pain in a wide, kindly and unhurried way. With such a focus, we're not even trying to fix or understand the past; we try to be with just how it seems now with that single, kind intention. Then even when one is on one's own, one is abiding in this particular field of awareness that is uplifting and aimed at purity of intention. This is a transpersonal awareness in which the mind leaves its shadows and burdens behind. All the perfections lead to that.

In this kind of awareness your relationship experience is clear. You have no numbness or defensiveness in your heart, and you aren't trying to find a separate place in the universe where you can hide out and not have to be anybody. With transpersonal awareness, even when you are on your own, you can still be in that shared temple of *pāramī*. You are not separated from the good actions you have done and you are not essentially separated from mother, father or from the sense of being welcome and at home in the world. Whilst you're never really 'left in peace and quiet' as long as you have unresolved mind states and attitudes, you're never mixed up with and overwhelmed by them if you have this transpersonal wholeness.

Connection Through Generosity

To develop *dāna* is a vital intention that goes against the 'get it for yourself' attitude, or the 'she's got more than me, it's not fair' complaint of the competitive materialist world. This model, encouraged through Western capitalism, has never been the only way that societies operate. In fact, I was reading a while ago about a social model that is used on some islands in the Indonesian archipelago, where the aim is to gain as much debt as possible. What happens is this: you get in your canoe with your pig, and you paddle over to another island where you give somebody your pig, and they give you a coconut. They are then indebted to you because your pig was worth more than their coconut. Now they have a bond with you because they are indebted to you. Then they take their pig and swap it for somebody else's pineapple, so that that person is now indebted to them. In this way, they gradually create a whole network of feeling connected, of belonging and owing something to everybody else. This movement of energy enacted between people, and often between a person and the land, is what constitutes a firm sense of 'being in' the world, rather than trying to find a place of one's own in the world (which always leads to stress).

In the island's system, a really important person is one with such incalculable debts that there is no way they can ever pay them off. They are indebted to a whole village or a whole island, and it is impossible to pay it all off. Such a person is considered to have made so many connections that they are a success. Now in a normal capitalist society, many people, and indeed most countries, are also in debt, but there is fear and shame around that. This is because there is no sense of direct interaction and hence belonging. Money is a source of having power over others, rather than a token of belonging. The creditor, often a remote institution, could reclaim and take away your house, which would never happen in the tribal model that I just described. When there is the sense of connection, it supports ethical sensitivity. I wouldn't want to deprive you of shelter; it would be bad for you, it would be a disgrace for me, and it would ruin our friendship. Who wants to live like that?

This sense of developing connectedness through value leads to an openness of heart. Then things don't have to be fair and equal because we support and share with each other. This is something I've noticed with alms-rounds. I, as an alms mendicant, am not equal in material terms to others. Why should they give me anything when I haven't worked and therefore 'earned it?' And who do I think I am anyway to be expecting others to feed me? This is the kind of thinking that can go on in my Western mind. When you are wandering for alms in England, many people don't know what Buddhism is; they know you are probably some sort of religious person, but that's about it. Yet some feel instinctively drawn towards making an offering when you have a shaven head, a modest and peaceful manner and a bowl, and even thank you for being around so they can do that. It seems to indicate an intuitive feeling for the beauty of making a free-will offering with no manipulation, no scheming, no 'I get something back out of this' attitude. This blows the 'equal,' 'fair,' 'deserve it' judgemental mind. The simple truth of the matter is that people feel moved, and inspired when they have a chance to be generous, and they get to like the feel of it.

It's said that the highest kind of *dāna* is when a worthy person gives to a worthy person. Of course, it depends what you mean by 'worthy.' The poor and the downtrodden, the homeless and those in dire need are worthy of our compassion. Also giving to wise people is to be cultivated, because you support those who can support many others (so it's a good investment), and because you establish a connection with that kind of person. Then the wise person becomes part of your temple of awareness, and a support for your consciousness. This may mean that you give $1,000 to a shelter for the homeless, but if you visit a temple, ashram or monastery, you may offer your services instead. One may need more financial generosity, but the other may benefit more from generous actions.

Generosity of service is more the norm in the renunciate life, where one has few material resources to share. Instead one shares the Dhamma, a gift that is called the greatest gift, because this teaching encourages all of us to be generous, moral and wise. Also

monks and nuns will serve their teachers in many mundane and practical ways, even as the teacher shares his or her wise attention with them. Fundamentally, service keeps people connected to right view and to each other; it's not about 'getting a job done.'

As a meditation, the cultivation of generosity is about bringing people to mind and sharing the goodness of one's life with them. It means developing a sharing intent, and from there learning to see one's life as part of a whole system rather than as an individual fragment thrown together with others in a haphazard way. The 'whole system' view definitely helps in getting some perspective on one's own character, and it allows the heart to feel full and settled with others. With right view we're on a boat that can cross the floods of insecurity and loneliness.

Morality: Respect and the 'We' Sense

This boat is kept on course by *sīla*, morality or virtue. Morality, like *dāna*, is based upon a sense of empathy; except with morality it's not a question of making an offering, a one-off occasion, but of making non-abuse a way of life. So it's a more sustained kind of practice. The fundamental principle behind morality is: I don't do to you what I wouldn't want you to do to me. I don't steal things and I don't lie to you, because I know I wouldn't want those things to happen to me. And I don't sexually abuse or violate others, and so forth. I have that sense of respect for other beings. So that's for my welfare, for the welfare of others and leads to peace.

In Buddhism, there are the Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*): personal commitments to refrain from intentional killing, stealing, sexual abuse, harmful speech and use of intoxicants. These may sound really basic and boring, hardly a sublime vision of the transcendent. They're not that decorative or grand. But the transcendent point is not what they look like — but what they call forth, what it takes to keep them, and the effects that they have on your life. Speaking truth and avoiding gossip lifts the

mind out of many scummy habits, and causes you to associate with trustworthy people. Avoiding alcohol keeps your mind bright and opens up more time in your life: you're not violating your mind.

It's this understanding of the value of long-term effects over superficial appeal that makes these precepts special and valuable. If most people kept even most of the five precepts most of the time, there would be an end to so much misery in the world. They are to be practised with a sense of truly valuing one's own mind, one's own body and the context of the people one lives with. With these precepts, we extend that sense of respect and regard towards all creatures, so that we impart value to this realm that we share with others.

Sīla also involves wisdom. Its ethical sensitivity asks us to consider more carefully what is harmful, and to exercise discrimination. We can then notice the energies and impulses that we leave outside the boundaries that we set — things we might acknowledge about our nature but don't build our life upon. Particularly as one looks into the mind more fully, and meets the floods, all kinds of inclinations that are un-virtuous and 'sub-personal' come to light: murderous instincts, jealousy and spite. Some pretty dark stuff can be thrashing around in there. If one doesn't have confidence and faith in one's temple of awareness, one can get very confused and depressed about it all. This is where the idea of establishing good-heartedness and generosity as a foundation pays off, so that the mind's foundation can be built on intentions like these that one has carried into action. Then one can acknowledge the negative forces and energies that move into the mind; and, through not encouraging or building on them, one can withdraw emotional energy from those channels.

This withdrawal isn't a denial, but a lessening of the drama. It is happening but you are simply not taking an interest in it. You're not obsessed with it. Just that withdrawal of emotional excitement and highlighting calms the energies of the mind and makes them subject to being shifted into more useful channels. This is only a start — we have to meet and transmute those energies in

meditation — but inclining towards the bright, and withdrawing from the dark, is the very necessary start.

That approach begins to develop the quality of wise discernment. We can note short-term, passionate impulses and consider long-term effects. We can ask ourselves which is more beneficial — the glee of getting revenge by verbal abuse or gossip, or the sense of being a master of our heart and living with truth? And in the long-term what is the result of revenge? Counter-attack, feuds, conflicts that can go on for generations. Is it better to steal an advantage over someone else, or to live with a mind that is free from manipulativeness and mistrust? One small drink may seem OK, but when does it lead to another, and what is the result of a loss of clarity? Careless speech is the first result, and also collusion in the use of mind-blurring stuff as a form of entertainment. Clearly, noting the accidents, sexual abuse and crimes that are drink- and drug-related, we would do well to know it's best to leave this stuff alone.

Renunciation: Taking a Look at Craving

This takes us to the third perfection — *nekkhamma* — which is generally translated as 'renunciation.' This practice is a matter of wise discernment rather than of asceticism or of being puritanical. To put it simply, renunciation means discerning what one actually needs at any given time within the range of wants and desirables, and following on from that. You could call it simplification. It's an important practice to cultivate because the mind can conceive of many desirables, and all that conceiving and pondering stirs it up into a mass of agitation. In this way we can lose our balance, fall overboard and dive into the flood of sensuality. And of course, the great powers of the consumer industry are very aware of how susceptible the mind is to impressions of comfort, excitement, attractiveness, being popular and all the rest of the things that buying an ice cream, a gadget or an item of clothing promises you. So to go through a shopping arcade bearing in mind what you really need is a very relevant practice of renunciation!

And when you pass through one of these malls — it seems that every airport now forces all passengers to pass through an arcade of luxury goods and alcohol — you can feel how sticky and demanding, and how superficial all this stuff really is. You get to know that, and how manageable your needs are. The Buddha summarized them as food, clothing, shelter and medicine. With this understanding there is a return to your own dignity and value as a human being. You don't need to be, in fact you can never be, lifted up by an excess of material things.

In monastic life, some aspects of this are very easy. We don't really have a lot of choice, in that our discipline requires that we give up money and ownership of food and lodgings, and that we use simple standard robes for clothing. We choose to take on that renunciation and live more simply, because then we have less to look after, less to get envious about, fewer options to choose from. You can't style your hair when you don't have any. You can't decide what you're going to eat today if you're living on what people offer. And to compensate for what might sound like miserable deprivation, you get the joy of living free from material concerns, and the warmth of receiving the generous free-will offerings of people who want to give you support. This is pretty amazing.

One big challenge is putting aside sexual activity. I've met people who could scarcely believe this was possible for a week, let alone the decades that I've been practising celibacy. No sexual activity — not opposite sex, not same sex, not with yourself — monastic rules draw a very clear line. And because human sexuality is a complex issue of emotional and relational energies as well as the more sensual, one has to develop the warm-heartedness and the inner pleasure of meditation in order to back up the abstinence — otherwise I think one would indeed go very weird.

Renunciation, particularly in the area of sexuality, also demonstrates how enormously attractive and appetising forbidden things become. For people who are sexually active, sexual activity gets to be no big thing. I even lost interest in it when I was a

layman — along with all the game-play and competition that could go on around it: the jealousies, the infidelities, the separations and the heartbreaks. But after giving it up, my mind could review the whole topic in a very rosy and distorted light — I had to keep reminding myself of why I'd given it up, as well as the fact that the huge number of people who were sexually active didn't seem to be blissed out most of the time. And the distorted lens through which craving viewed sexuality showed me what a fool it makes of the mind. Do I really need to see people through the lens of craving?

In fact our craving is about something we don't have. We can't crave something we already have, so the very fact of not having sets up a target for unresolved passion. Therefore it isn't the object that sets craving up, but the sense of 'not having.' There's nothing wrong with sight and sound, taste, smell and touch; it's the fantasy world that craving makes of them that creates the danger. This is the flood of sensuality that will drag you under. Knowing the flood for what it is takes the whole thing apart. You understand that stilling craving is not, for example, just about removing sense objects, but a matter of investigating the mind and resolving passion. Sexuality and food are not really the source of craving. The source is the 'not having.' If you can't have tea, it will be 'not having' tea that will become the source of your craving. If you can't have bananas, then 'not having' bananas will be the source of your craving.

If giving something up encourages craving, why do it? Well, apart from enjoying simplicity, a big reason to renounce is in order to understand and thereby undo craving. What we are primarily giving up is this sense of absence — the feeling of 'I need, I want, I am incomplete without.' That's what we're giving up. How does this absence become such a solid and pressing presence? The point is that when you look into craving, you realize that the hole is not a hole; it's a vortex of tangled, over-stimulated energy. It's unresolved passion forming a block in your energy and awareness. And it's sustained through craving, through spinning passion out in the thousand and one projections of the mind. This energy needs to be, and can be, redirected. That's why it's necessary not just to restrain and repress, but to look into craving and what it's

based upon. The whole tangled, seemingly solid and technicoloured block is based on the ephemeral fantasy of fulfilment. In other words, on ignorance, on not acknowledging for example that if last week's shopping spree didn't fulfil you for more than a few finger snaps, more of the same isn't going to do so either.

So craving is based on ignorance: we imagine that fulfilment comes through passion (people will keep trying this approach until they drop), and even when it dawns on us that this isn't working, we don't see that there is any other way to find fulfilment, so it seems that even a few brief hits is better than nothing at all. That's why to really develop renunciation we need to go into the mind and heart; we need to meditate. That's where the fulfilling happiness of unentangled energies can be found; there's a quiet warmth available that can suffuse the body and uplift the heart. Yes, when we can turn the mind away from its dreams and back to its source, we can remove the block and feel more full and vital than ever before. Once you do this, you understand the fuller significance of renunciation.

The *pāramī* of renunciation gives you the focus to see craving for what it is, and if developed, the wisdom to not participate in the attempt to fill its bottomless hole. Renunciation also encourages you to develop other sources of fulfilment. But the most valuable thing that viewing craving from the vantage point of renunciation offers is the realization that just this abandoning of craving is what the Buddha meant by Enlightenment. It's just absence that we're giving up. This is the essence of the Four Noble Truths, and this is what is meant by Nibbāna — the complete ending of sorrow, lack, confusion and despair. And to sense that is worth giving up a lot!

But to cross the flood to that Other Shore, we need to build a boat, start to handle it and get to know the currents we have to cross. These three *pāramī* start the process and give us a foretaste of the peace, wisdom and compassion that the journey will bring us. So build carefully and make a temple of your boat. Make it solid and spacious, then warm-hearted and reliable companions will get on board with you. And that very vehicle becomes an expression of the goal of Nibbāna.