

1. Generosity Part 1

February 16, 2017

Last week I introduced the list of the 10 Most Excellent Practices for Enduring the Flood and Reaching the Other Shore. Today, we will begin to explore the first of these practices.

First on the list of Most Excellent Practices is Generosity. There are a number of different versions of the buddhist lists of Most Excellent Practices, with each school or lineage having their favorite items in their favorite order. But on every iteration, Generosity is the first on the list. It was also the first thing the Buddha would teach to new students. That's because Generosity is so fundamental to the path of freedom, that without it, nothing else can come to fruition. It is the foundation of practice itself. It is the table on which you work, not just a piece of the puzzle you are putting together. It is a preparation for entering your path, and an underlying and constant support during the entire process of becoming free.

You see, the whole point of this journey is to become free from suffering. The roots of suffering are classically defined as *greed, hatred, and delusion, or clinging, aversion, and ignorance*. To be free from suffering, we must become free of these roots. Generosity is diametrically opposed to the roots of suffering. In the act of generous giving, grasping is expelled. In the act of gracious receiving, aversion is negated. And in the opening of the heart that results from both of these, we begin to see things as they really are, and ignorance begins to crumble. While other practices wear away at these roots of suffering, what is revealed when they are removed is Generosity. Without Generosity, we will be forever bound by clinging and aversion. In fact, it is said that if someone didn't understand the value of basic generosity, the Buddha would reject them as a student, because they weren't even teachable.

Given that it is so important, let's be clear on exactly what is meant by Generosity, and what it doesn't mean. For a start, notice that the Buddha did not turn students away for being selfish, but rather for being unable to understand the *value* of Generosity. He was more interested in the inclination of the mind than in the attainment of some measurable level of giving. Generosity is not something one achieves or attains.

Secondly, Generosity is not a rule that must be followed. Indulge me in a little bit of linguistics, and I'll be able to explain this more clearly. The Pali word (the language of the Buddha) that is used on these lists is *dana*, and is typically translated as "generosity." It actually means only the physical act of

giving. *Dana* does not presuppose an attitude of mind. You can physically give *dana* with internal selfishness and resentment. The word *caga*, on the other hand, is the wholesome mind state that is inclined toward giving. This open hearted attitude of *caga* is what makes a gift of *dana* generous.

Internal Generosity, (*caga*) will result in the action of external giving (*dana*), and the action of external giving will develop the internal attitude of Generosity.. The internal and external parts of Generosity are really inseparable, and usually when we speak of Generosity in the sense of the Most Excellent Practice, we are referring to both.

Now the internal mind state (*caga*) is not something you can just decide to have. You have to work on it and tend it, and with practice, it will increase. The act of giving, though, requires only a decision to act. But the action in and of itself is not the purpose of the practice. It is part of the learning process. That's why it is so important to understand that **giving (*dana*) is not obligatory**. True, a mind with a generous inclination will produce active giving, and giving can cultivate the generous mind, so eventually, the physical act of giving will undoubtedly occur. But there are no rules that define when or what or to whom anyone must give. This differs significantly from generosity as taught in some of the major religions, which is why it can be so difficult for western practitioners to let go of assumptions about what it means.

When I was a fundamentalist christian, it was expected that all members of the congregation give 10% of their income to the church. This was based in several old testament commandments that said in no uncertain terms that God required a specific amount of specific items (crops, livestock, etc) to be given to the temple at regular and specified times. This was carried over into the modern church, and I actually have no problem with this requirement. In order for me to receive the support and teaching of my pastor, the pastor needed to be able to feed his family. We needed to be able to rent space to meet in, so we all contributed to that. It was sort of like a co-op. We all put equally (proportionally) into it, and we all benefitted equally. This kept the church running. We were taught to give cheerfully, but nonetheless, our giving was obligatory and clearly defined.

This is not how the Buddha taught generosity. It is true that monasteries did and still do depend on the generosity of lay people to exist, and contemporary teachers depend on the generosity of their students to pay their household bills. However, there is a subtle yet significant difference between support that is given entirely by choice, and that which is compulsory, regardless of how cheerfully it may be given. *Dana* never was, and never should be, payment for goods received. I am not paying my

teacher a fee or a salary for her teaching. I am not contributing my share of expenses. There is no balance sheet keeping records of what I give versus what I have received. *Dana* was not established to generate income for monasteries. Generosity is taught for other reasons.

In Judaism, *zedakah* is the duty of giving to the poor. The word means "righteousness, fairness, or justice." Giving to the poor is not seen as altruism. It is simply an act of justice, a small step toward addressing the imbalances of income and opportunity within the Jewish community. I like this view of charity, and I would be glad to see this attitude encouraged more. But this is not what the Buddha was teaching, either.

In Islam, giving is an obligation. *Zakat*, sometimes referred to as "compulsory charity," literally means "purification." Compulsory giving is believed to purify the heart of greed. Now we are getting a little closer to what the practice of Generosity is about, but the buddhist teachings never make giving obligatory. While other traditions do see the benefit of giving, to both the receiver and the giver, buddhist teaching emphasizes that it is not possible for something be freely offered, if the giving is compulsory. We always have the choice to give or not to give.

So far we have said this:

1. Generosity is the foundation of the path because it purifies the heart of greed, hatred and delusion.
2. Generosity has two intertwined elements: the mind and heart inclined toward giving, and the external action of giving.
3. Giving is not obligatory. It is never required. There is a strong implication that if we don't cultivate a generous heart, we're not going to get very far on the path. Still, it is your choice whether and how to proceed. No one is going to take you aside for a talking-to if you aren't seen to be giving. It's totally your thing. You decide if, what, and how much is appropriate for you to give in any particular situation. There is no "should." No expectation.

So what and when to give is your decision, but how to you determine what is appropriate?.

Fortunately, there is a lot written about that to get you started. First of all, remember *dana* and *caga* (the action and the mind state) mutually support each other. Giving will naturally and effortlessly arise from a mind in which generosity has been well cultivated. At the same time, deciding to give anyway, even when you feel selfish or resentful, will foster the development of a generous mind and heart. So the action develops the wholesome state, and the wholesome state manifests in action, which

then further cultivates the wholesome state... So if you don't feel generous, the most effective and appropriate way to change that is to give a gift.

But how do you know what would be beneficial generosity? Traditional texts describe three factors that must be considered when giving. The first is the quality of your own mind. Ideally, you are trying to live an ethical life. You try to give with care and respect for the recipient, and with no attachment to the gift. In a perfect world, you give without expectation of anything in return, even acknowledgement or thanks. (But remember that this is a practice: simply the *intention* to work toward these qualities is sufficient.) Finally, "A person of integrity gives a gift without adversely affecting himself or others." In other words, don't "give until it hurts!"

The second factor concerns the recipient. The traditional wording of this factor is that the recipient should be "morally virtuous." A lot of controversy has gathered around this, as it seems to imply bias against individuals who do not live up to some moral standard. This clearly is contradictory to my understanding of ethical conduct, but rather than get caught in this behemoth of an issue, I am going to ignore these particular words for now and look at the principal that lies underneath. What is important here is that we should know enough about the recipient to be able to say something about him. To know his character, or to even simply know that he is in need, it is necessary to have some sort of interaction with him. The core of this guideline is about removing barriers and making connections.

Finally, the gift should be appropriate and timely. Don't give a box of chocolates to a diabetic. Don't give a homeless person another coat if what he needs is shoes. Give what is needed, not what you want others to see you giving.

I love these guidelines, because instead of telling you when and how much to give, they require that you pay attention to the entire process of giving:

You need to be aware of what's going on inside. What are your motivations? How do you feel? Is this gift arising from generosity, or given to develop it? Are you attached to the gift? Or expecting a response? There is no "right" answer to these questions. What is important is to be aware of your own internal state at this moment.

You also need to know something about your recipient, which means that you need to make a connection. It is not as beneficial for you to give to a guitar case as it is to give to a busker. And to give to a person, you need to see them, look them in the eye, maybe even speak to them. I don't think it matters what you find there. What matters is that you see the recipient as a human being, just like you.

They aren't a charity case. They aren't a building. They aren't invisible. In order to give to a person, you need to connect with them, to know they are are a person. I think this is one of the key factors of giving.

Finally, you need to think about each gift every time you give. You don't just set up an auto-payment to your favorite charity and then check "Generosity" off your list. For a gift to be appropriate and timely, you need to be present in the moment, responding to what is happening right now. You can't put Generosity on auto-pilot.

(I should mention here that I do not mean to imply that giving to charitable organizations, or setting up a regular donation to a person or program is *not* generosity. It certainly is, and I encourage you to do so if you are so moved. But try to make your donation mindfully, recognizing the humanity that is benefitting from it, not giving to a project, but to people).

The practice of Generosity is not about how generous you feel, or who you give to, or how much you give. It is about being aware of yourself and of the other person. As Generosity grows, as grasping and aversion begin to crumble, as you start to see through the delusion of self and separation, you discover that there *is* no separation, no real difference between "you" the giver, and "them," the receiver. The moment becomes simply the act of giving. And then even that dissolves. John Kabat-Zinn says it like this: "At the deepest level, there is no giver, no gift, and no recipient... only the universe rearranging itself." And *that* is a great definition of Freedom.

Generosity Exercises

Benefaction Bucks

Mark a dollar bill with a sticker or paper clip. This is now a Benefaction Buck. The sticker will remind you that this money is to be used as a gift. Don't spend it on ice cream.

Sometime in the next week, give your buck away. It doesn't matter when, to whom, or why you give it away. You will not be required to reveal those details. What is important is that you pay close attention to the process. Be aware of what's going on inside before you give it away, and while you are giving it. What moved you to give it? (Or why did you decide not to?) Was there any interaction with the recipient? What sort of connection was there? Or what sort of aversion? Explore your thought processes and your emotional responses and your physical actions during the giving. And notice how you feel afterwards. What is your emotional reaction? What dialogue comes up in your mind?

Next week, I will invite you to share your experience. Remember, there is no right or wrong.

This is an exploration, and we can all learn from each others' personal insights.