

Generosity, Part 2

February 18, 2017

(Drop In to Generosity Retreat)

Let's review some of the key points I mentioned in the first episode of this talk about

Generosity:

1. Generosity is the very foundation of the rest of our practice.
2. A generous internal mind state and the external act of giving mutually build each other up.
3. Giving is *always* voluntary. It is never required.

I also suggested that an act of generosity must be made with careful attention to the present moment. That is, it must be done mindfully.

1. Be aware of what is going on for you internally.
2. Be aware of the situation so that the gift you give is appropriate and timely.
3. Be present in order to see the recipient as the human they are, and make a personal connection with them if you can.

Perhaps by now you have experimented with mindful generosity. If so, you may have noticed these classic immediate results:

- Before giving, the mind of the giver is happy.
 - While giving, the mind of the giver is made peaceful.
 - After having given, the mind of the giver is uplifted.
- (A 3.6.37)

Buddhist texts also list some longer term benefits, and I think common sense would concur:

- Everyone will like you.
- All your friends will be good people.
- You will have a good reputation.
- You will have lots of confidence.

You can't really go wrong with that, can you. So let's get Generous! But enough theory. Let's talk about practical things and ways you can give. Once you start looking at it, you will find that the opportunities for Generosity are literally endless. Here are some categories of kinds of gifts you can give:

1. Material gifts.
2. Non-Material gifts.
3. Gracious receiving.
4. Self-generosity.
5. Fearlessness.

Material Gifts. You'd think that the definition of Material Gifts is pretty obvious. You give money or clothes or food to someone in need. But giving is not limited to filling basic needs. You can give things to people just to make them happy. In fact, that's a really good place to start, if you find the idea of intentionally practicing Generosity a little overwhelming. What can you give?

- Your cookie to a friend who loves cookies.
- A magazine article they'd appreciate.
- An old kitchen tool (but not giving instead of tossing; giving because it will be used).
- A hug.
- A book you enjoyed reading.
- A card for no reason.

What specific things can you think of to give to people you know? Why not act on some of these ideas this week and see how it feels? Remember to notice your internal thoughts and reactions when you give. Be aware of the present moment. By being consciously present with a person, opportunities for generosity will start to show themselves.

Non-Material gifts. The more you think about this category, the more you discover. You can give a compliment, or an encouraging word. That costs nothing, but does require both awareness of the situation and a mind inclined toward a desire to see others happy. You can give your time. Helping put the folding chairs away on a Thursday night is an appreciated gift of time and effort. Recognize the generosity in that, and pay attention to how it feels to do it, and to have done it.

- Help with a task/loan a tool.
- Just be present (don't have to be *doing* anything).
- Give your undivided attention (not multitasking).
- Offer respect.
- Be polite (if you can't respect someone).

Chances are, you are being a lot more generous than you are aware of. You might notice the times you fail to listen to an inclination to give more often than you notice the times you are generous. Start paying attention to all the different things you give, not just money and material things. The story goes that a man once asked Mother Teresa how he could give anything, since he had nothing. She replied: "you can give a smile."

Gracious receiving. There can be no gift if there is no receiver. If you are the recipient of a gift, you also give a gift by receiving the gift graciously.

When I was in high school, I spent some time with a sort of adopted aunt, a friend of my Uncle. She complimented me on something. I don't recall what the compliment was for, but probably something I had written or achieved. I was a shy and insecure girl then, and shook off the compliment

with one of my regular responses: "Well, it could have been better." Or, "I just got lucky." Or some comment like that. I don't remember the conversation up to that point, but I do remember that at that moment she slammed a stack of papers she was holding down on the desk, looked at me in the eye, and said "when someone compliments you, just say Thank You!" I was not aware of it, but apparently, I'd done this as long as she knew me, and she must have gotten tired of my refusal to accept her gifts of praise and inclusion that were in her compliments. She knew that I was shy and insecure, but imagine what it felt like for her each time I rebuffed her gift. I was essentially saying that I didn't believe her, or that she didn't have good judgement. What did it say about my connection with her? About my awareness of the situation, including her intention and care for me? She knew I didn't mean to judge her, but it still must have been frustrating. I have never forgotten that, and now I always accept a compliment. Even if I disagree with the judgement, I am grateful that someone would take the time to offer me appreciation.

When you are the recipient of generosity, try to apply the same awareness to your responses and emotions and actions as you do when giving. Perhaps you will recognize any internal reactions that drive your response, and you'll be able to respond more kindly as a result.

Self-generosity. Is there anyone here who has a tendency to be nicer to other people than you are to yourself? The fact that someone else is not you, is not in itself cause to give them priority over your own wants and needs. Besides, being generous to yourself is a gift to others. Taking care of yourself physically and emotionally will result in healthier relationships, for example. But even more importantly, be generous to yourself because it feels good! Make yourself laugh. Satisfy an indulgent craving from time to time. It feels good to make yourself happy. Next time to give a gift to someone else, be it material or non-material, think about when you last gave yourself something similar. And if it wasn't very recently, then plan a gift for yourself. What are some ways to show generosity to yourself?

Here are a few ideas to get you thinking:

- Material gifts: nice food, pleasant activities, comfortable things.
- Non-material things: time. Time to rest and relax, time to listen to yourself, time to explore your own needs.
- Basically, anything you give to others, you can give to yourself.

Again, your presence in each moment will point out to you where generosity is needed. Notice your own internal state, and your desired internal state. What gifts can you give yourself right now?

Fearlessness. I think this is a beautiful gift. Essentially, this is the gift of safety. Your gift to others is the knowledge that you are not someone to be afraid of. This might manifest as something

practical, like sitting with a friend who is afraid, or giving encouragement down the telephone. But more fundamentally, your meditation practice, which leads you to greater compassion and kindness, and your ethical conduct, shows people that they need not fear you. What a gift it is to be with someone who you know won't hurt you (at least, never intentionally). This is someone with whom you can be yourself. You can share your deepest secrets, or take delight in silly things. You feel completely safe from judgement or greed or abuse of any kind. This is the gift of Fearlessness. But, like so many other internal characteristics, it's something that you have to work on. You can't just decide that you won't be unkind anymore, for example. Fearlessness is a consequence of your practice. It's something people start to see in you, rather than something you try to give them. And it arises from your mindfulness practice.

So what is the greatest gift you can give someone, anyone, the world? The gift of doing your practice. This is the ultimate generosity, when it is done with awareness, intention, and connection.

Ask any meditation teacher who teaches within this Generosity-based tradition, what you can do to show your gratitude, or what gift can you give in return for their teaching. Every one will tell you the same thing: Do your practice. That is the greatest gift you can give.