

The Freedom to Give

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As you sit down to meditate, one of the first things you want to do is to establish a sense of well-being. This is easiest if your life has been conducive to establishing a sense of well-being. If you've been making a practice of being generous, if you're clear about the principles and precepts that you want to follow in your behavior of not harming other people, not harming yourself, then that right there creates a sense of well-being as you reflect back on your generosity, reflect back on your virtue, think of the times when you went out of your way to be good to other people, when you went out of your way to avoid doing harm to other people. And that's food for the mind.

This is why generosity and virtue are part of the path. As the Buddha said when he started teaching Right View on the most mundane level, it starts as simply, "There are gifts." That sounds strange, that that would be a principle of Right View. But he was countering a thought that was widespread or at least had some adherents in that time: that everything in life was deterministic, that causality was a mechanical process, that the stars acted through you, or there were other outside forces that had totally determined from the very beginning from the design of the universe, that things were going to have to work out a certain way. Therefore whatever you did was meaningless. It was simply part of the machinery. For that reason, an act of generosity doesn't have any special value; it's just written into the way things are going to have to be. And so to counter the idea of determinism, the Buddha started out by saying that there are gifts, meaning that people actually choose to give gifts and that the gifts really do have meaning, both for the donor and for the recipient.

In one way you could say that he staked his whole teaching on the connection between freedom and generosity. When people would come to ask him, "Where should a gift be given?" he would answer, "Wherever your mind feels inspired, wherever you feel it would be well used." In other words, generosity is free. No restrictions. No "you should give here, you shouldn't give there." In fact when monks are asked, "Where should this gift be given?" That's the response they are supposed to give: "Wherever your heart feels inspired; wherever you feel the gift would be well used."

In exercising that freedom, we create a sense of well-being in the mind. So it's a basic principle of our freedom and also a basic principle of the practice, how you take advantage of that freedom. Because when you give a gift that doesn't harm yourself, doesn't harm other people, it is food for the mind, food for other good qualities in the mind.

This is why, when you look at the history of Buddhism across the centuries, you see that when people misunderstand the idea of generosity, the Dharma gets twisted as well. There is a series of texts called the Apadanas, the very last addition to the sutta section of the Pali Canon. It was obviously written at a time when monasteries were growing large and monks wanted donations. They did what they could to encourage people to be generous, more generous than if they were left to feel freely inspired to be generous. The monks promised huge rewards for

generosity. "Give a little gift, and you're guaranteed to become an arahant at a time of a future Buddha. And in the meantime you're not going to experience any of the lower realms. You get to be king of the devas, queen of the devas. For many, many eons you get to be kings or queens on earth countless times. And after a good long joyride through samsara, when you've decided you've had enough, okay, then you're ready to become an arahant. And if you want to become a special arahant, well, it's going to cost you a little extra but it can be arranged." The going price to be an arahant with special distinctions was seven days worth of meals for the whole Sangha.

You can see what's happening here. The monks are beginning to take the teaching on generosity and twisting it to their own ends. And as generosity gets twisted, the teaching as a whole gets twisted as well. The eightfold path disappears into the background. The fact that you are generous in what they call the Buddha field, the field of the Buddha's potential for creating lots of meritorious rewards for a little tiny meritorious gift: That becomes the important thing. You do service to the Buddha and then awakening is guaranteed. So the eightfold path turns into a onefold path: generous service in the Buddha field.

Once generosity gets screwed into strange shapes like this, the Dharma gets screwed into strange shapes as well. So it's good not to overlook the basics. It's good to have a right understanding of what the basics are all about. That way you keep the rest of the practice in line. Generosity is a freely given gift where you feel inspired. The Buddha does note that some gifts give greater benefits than others, but it's up to you to decide what you want to give, where you want to give it. And the monks have lots of rules for how to behave as they receive gifts. They can't go out of the way to attract gifts to themselves that might otherwise go to other monks. When they've been given a gift, they can't turn around and give it back to lay people. They can share it among other monks, but they aren't supposed to take something given to them and give it to a layperson they're trying to please.

Sometimes we have a tendency to disregard the Vinaya, thinking well, it's just a bunch of rules from old times that may or may not be applicable now. But a lot of the rules have to do with this: how to behave in an economy of gifts, in a culture of gifts. Because the principle of gift giving goes way back much earlier than the Buddha. Sometimes in those dana talks they say that dana is a 2500 year old tradition. Well it's not. It's a much older tradition than that. It goes back to the beginning of human society. Human society is based on gifts.

I read once that the very first book on anthropology was an analysis of gift giving in different societies. It focused on how much you can understand about a society by the way people give gifts, the gestures with which they give gifts, the expectations that surround gift-giving. It tells you a lot about how that society is organized. The same idea applies with the principles of the Buddha's teachings. He created a culture of gifts so that the practice of the Dharma can be surrounded by gift giving. This is because one of the good features about giving a gift is that it breaks down barriers. When you place a price on something, saying, "I'll do X for you in exchange for Y," that's creating a barrier. X is not going to happen until Y comes. But when you give a gift, it's like being part of a family. And it involves the same network of responsibilities and connections that you find in a family, which is a good environment for practicing the Dharma, teaching the Dharma.

The Buddha said at one point one of the ideal features of a Dharma teacher is

not to expect material reward for the teaching. He never said that the Dharma is priceless. That's another misinformed phrase you hear a lot in dana talks. What he did say was that the teacher should not expect material reward. In other words, the teaching of Dharma should be a gift. When it's given as a gift, people receive it as a gift. If it's given as something you're expected to get payment for, people will expect something for their payment, and start making demands. Sometimes the demands may be subtle. When a teacher looks out across the audience and starts talking about things that the people don't like to hear, you can see it in their faces. And if the teacher is concerned about how much money is going to come from the Dharma talk, he's going to start avoiding things that are difficult to talk about, that people don't want to hear.

There have been periods in the history of Buddhism when monks would put fans in front of their faces so that they wouldn't read the reaction of the people out there, the idea being that the audience would be more likely to actually hear the genuine Dharma when the speaker isn't trying to read the audience and please them.

So this is another one of the arrangements that the Buddha created: the situation in which people who practice the Dharma can depend on gifts. They're supposed to live a frugal life. And the gifts are not contingent on teaching. That way the teaching can be free, and less likely to be distorted.

So gifts are freely given, but there are things incumbent on understanding the right relationship there. Once the gift is given, it's given. Those rules in the Vinaya aren't designed only for the monks; they're also designed for the donors. When a gift is given, there is no expectation of services in return. This is a lesson that a lot of people not only here in the West have trouble understanding. It's something that constantly has to be reiterated back in Asia as well. As for the monks as recipients of the gifts, they have the responsibility to behave in a way that's deserving of gifts. Because, after all, they as individuals are benefiting from a larger system. And one of their responsibilities is to keep the system going. If they accept people's gifts but start behaving in ways that are uninspiring, that starts drying up the gifts for the other monks as well. And it breaks a sense of trust. Because that's what giving relies on—that you trust one another. This is probably one of the most important aspects of creating this culture of giving. The Dharma is a lot more likely to survive in an atmosphere of trust.

This is one of the ways we create a sense of well-being even before we sit down and close our eyes, trying to understand this culture of giving and to participate in it as we feel so motivated—because it does emphasize our freedom. That's the beginning of training the mind. We are free to train the mind. No requirements aside from the fact that we're suffering from aging, illness, and death can force us. But there are lots of people out there who choose not to practice. And the Buddha was wise enough to see that you can't force people to practice the Dharma. But you can invite them. And the best way to invite them is to practice the Dharma yourself so the results become apparent and other people get interested. In this way, the practice is done in the same spirit as giving a gift: You feel so motivated to do this.

So each time you sit down to meditate, you realize on the one hand that aging, illness and death are breathing down your neck, so you've got to do something. But on the other hand, as you think about it, you realize that this is a good thing to do. If you practice with a sense of being inspired to practice, the results are much

more likely to come. Ajaan Chah is famous for saying that when you feel like practicing, you practice. When you don't feel like practicing, you practice. And how do you do that? If you look at yourself and you say, "I'm just not in the mood to practice," you have to think yourself into a position when you realize that deep down inside, yes, you really would prefer to practice, regardless of whatever vagrant moods are coming through the mind. So at least part of you feels inspired. Part of you realizes this is the way to freedom, by exercising your freedom to practice.

One of the things we're going to explore as we practice further is, "What is this element of freedom in the mind?" We do have this choice. What is it to make a choice? This is why we practice meditation is to understand the process of making a choice, to see our intentions. This is why we practice concentration to establish a firm intention of the mind and then watch it, to see what happens when other intentions come in, and we make the choice to stick with our original intention, again and again and again. There is an element of freedom in there, and that's what we're trying to catch sight of, because it leads to a dimension of total freedom.

So in this way, the freedom that we're looking for that's free from suffering, totally free from any burdens for the mind, any restrictions for the mind at all, starts by exercising that freedom to give.