

A Generosity of Spirit

January 21, 2020

Every day we extend thoughts of goodwill to all beings. It's a basis for concentration; it's a basis for meditation. Even if we don't take goodwill as the object of our meditation, it reminds us of why we're here: to find a happiness that doesn't harm anybody, a happiness that spreads its goodness around. Because when the mind is well-trained, you behave in ways that are not oppressive, and that's because you don't need to take happiness away from anybody else. But we don't wait until that point in the practice to be good to other people.

The Buddha points out that if you're going to develop thoughts of goodwill, you have to live in a way that's in line with your thoughts. And there are two practices that come immediately to mind: One is generosity; the other is virtue.

Virtue is basically abstaining, not harming anybody, and that's a gift that can be given to all beings. Just as goodwill is unlimited, our virtue can be unlimited. In other words, we don't harm anybody, we don't kill anybody, we don't steal from anybody, have illicit sex with anybody, don't lie to anybody, don't take intoxicants. At all. Under any circumstances. That, the Buddha said, is a gift that's universal and unlimited.

Generosity, however, has its limitations. You give in line with your means, and if your means are limited, the generosity will have to be limited. But it does have an unlimited aspect to it, in the sense that the Buddha places no shoulds on it. He does say that if you're stingy it's going to be impossible to get into jhana, it's going to be impossible to attain the noble attainments. But when he was asked where should a gift be given, he said to give where you feel inspired, where you feel that it would be well-used. That gives a lot of freedom to you.

Then there's a tradition in Buddhism to protect that freedom. When monks are asked, "Where should a gift be given?" that's what they should say as well: "Give where you feel inspired, where you feel it would be well-used or well taken care of." That's it. There are no compulsions. There's no insistence that you have to give to *our* charitable fund or *our* location or whatever. Because the Buddha wants to remind you that generosity is your first experience of freedom of choice: where you have something and you could use it, but you start thinking about the good that comes when you give it away, and you decide to go for that good instead.

As Ajaan Lee says, it's like taking a fruit, squeezing the juice out of the fruit, and what you give away is the remains. You drink the juice. In other words, the object is not nearly as important as the quality you develop in the heart, a generosity of spirit.

When you can learn how to appreciate that, you learn a lot of good things. You learn that generosity is a trade. You get something back. And it's a trade up. You gain a sense that some pleasures are more valuable than others. And you learn the principle of delayed gratification.

There might be an instant gratification that comes from consuming what you have, but you're willing to forego that for something better, which may take some time to develop.

However, the Buddha does note that one of the nice things about generosity, when it's done well, is that you feel good about it beforehand, while you're doing it, and afterwards. This is where you go beyond simple generosity in terms of where you feel inspired, and where you try to turn generosity into a skill, realizing that because your resources are limited, you want to be a little picky about who you give to, and how you give, what you give, *why* you give.

But even then, if there's a sense that you really want to give something, without calculating all these things, it's best to go ahead and give, because it *is* an expression of freedom. Of the various parts of the practice, it's also the one that opens the most room for creativity. When everybody sits meditating, it's pretty much the same. When you practice the precepts, it's all pretty much the same. But your generosity is *your* generosity. You can think in creative ways about *what* you would like to give, *who* you would like to give it to. Again, it's an expression of freedom.

Because one of the most important lessons you're going to learn in the practice is you do have choice. As the Buddha said, if you weren't free to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones, there would have been no point in his teaching. I don't know how many times I've run into people who say that they've learned from their meditation that there is no agency, there is no choice. There *are* meditation methods that try to drive choice underground: You get to the point where you deny that you have choice, that you're simply there on the receiving end of what happened from the past. But that's not in line with what the Buddha taught. He said that if you think that the present moment is totally determined by the past, you have no freedom at all. If whatever you do is determined by the past, you have no choice as to kill or not to kill, to steal or not to steal. It would be a meaningless life. There would be no meaning in the path.

And, he said, it would leave you unprotected and bewildered. "Unprotected" in the sense that you wouldn't have any way of arguing against your urges to do something unskillful. And "bewildered" because you'd say, "What did I do in the past that made me compelled me to do this?" Because you're denied the chance to look into your motivations in the present moment.

But when you realize that what you're doing right now is the important part of kamma, and that you're free to do something skillful or not, then you can look into your impulses right now that would try to get you to do something unskillful, and you can say, "I don't have to follow these." You can pry into them, look into them, see what's their allure. And then you can compare the allure with the drawbacks, gain a sense of where the compulsion came from, and realize you *don't* have to give into it. That's when you escape.

So this lesson in freedom of choice is one of *the* important lessons from generosity.

The other lesson, of course, is that there are gradations in pleasure. Some pleasures are worth more than others. Some pleasures are worth sacrificing other pleasures for. And

particularly as you give up things—and generosity doesn't mean just giving up things, but also giving up your attachment to, say, your knowledge, wanting to hold it back from other people, or wanting to hold back your energy from other people—when you learn how to overcome that resistance, you develop generosity of spirit.

This is probably one of *the* most important things that you learn from the meditation. There's a happiness that comes in giving, giving away. Because there are many things you're going to have to give up and give away as you practice meditation, as you observe the precepts. But you realize that the mind becomes lighter as a result. It's like the sandbags that hold down hot-air balloons. You give away the things that you're holding onto, you cut off the sandbags, and the balloon can go higher and higher. The mind becomes more expansive, and that becomes the mind that's in line with unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.

So this is one of the reasons why here at the monastery we don't have a staff. Everybody helps. Everybody pitches in. It's our way of being generous. Everything from gifts of food, to gifts of time, gifts of energy: When you look around, it's good to look around at the place and realize the place is clean because there are people who wanted to keep it clean. Not because they had to—they wanted to. We have what we need to practice because people wanted to give it. It's in that way that we give encouragement to one another on the path.

So although it is possible to be giving in the sense of calculating what you're going to gain from it, the Buddha points out that there are many gradations in the motivation for giving, and you want to look at your motivation and learn how to develop generosity as a skill, to get to that generosity of spirit that is simply happy to share. It makes the mind more sensitive, more inclined to settle down with a sense of well-being, and to feel good about being here with that sense of well-being.

I've run into people who, when they attain a sense of well-being in the meditation, don't feel right about it. They feel like they don't deserve it. But if you've been generous, there are no problems. You realize that it's an innocent pleasure, nothing to feel guilty about. Because that generosity of spirit gives you sustenance, a sense of self-worth, a sense of well-being, in which all the elements of the practice come together.