

Sensitivity Through Generosity

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I was talking recently to someone who had given a gift to a lay-run meditation center last year. He came back this year to find that it had disappeared. When he asked the people at the center about it, they said, “Well, that’s impermanence,” which is not the Dhamma of the Buddha.

There’s a danger in trying to boil the Dhamma down to just a few principles – like the idea that all the Dhamma teachings come down to the three characteristics, that you just have to accept that things are impermanent, stressful, not self, and let it go at that. The Buddha didn’t teach that way. That was a particular teaching to be applied in particular circumstances. But he also taught much larger frameworks that encompass a much larger picture. He actually taught Dhamma *and* Vinaya – and we tend to forget that.

The Vinaya is not just rules. It also includes protocols, patterns for behaviour. It’s through the Vinaya that you get a sense of how the Buddha would apply some of the more abstract principles to specific situations. A lot of the protocols have to do with learning how to look after the people around you, learning how to look after the things around you. This is an important part of the practice.

One of the ways of being unburdensome is that when someone gives you a gift, you take good care of it so that it stays around and people can get a lot of use out of it. The donors don’t have to keep giving it again and again and again. So even though it may seem like we’re attached to our things because we take care of them so carefully, it’s actually an application of the Dhamma principle of being unburdensome, one of the principles in the list that the Buddha taught to Gotami.

There are other protocols for how to help other people: how to look after people who are sick, how sick people should behave so they’re not a burden on the people looking after them, how teachers should look after their students, how students should look after their teachers... It’s a very well-rounded training. I noticed that when Ajaan Fuang would occasionally get students who he felt were not really ready yet for meditation, he’d get them involved in doing projects around the monastery. The generosity he wanted to teach them was not so much the

giving of material things, but just looking after what needed to be looked after: running errands, caring for things, cleaning things up.

I, myself, when I have dreams of the Ajaans, it almost always follows the same pattern. An Ajaan shows up, and I've got to do something for them. One time I had a dream of Ajaan Lee. I don't know what it is about Ajaan Lee – when he comes in my dreams, he comes with bodyguards. He needed some betel nut, so I had to find him some betel nut. With Ajaan Fuang, it's washing his robes, boiling the water for his bath. For some of the more famous Ajaans, they've got huge groups of monks in their monasteries. The monks go running off leaving a huge mess, and I'm there cleaning it up. It's an interesting pattern. It probably comes from the training I got during all those years with Ajaan Fuang: caring for him when he was sick, looking after his hut, looking after things around the monastery – it was an important part of the training. I learned a lot of Dhamma that way.

So when you come here, either as a visitor or as a more permanent resident, you have to realize that it's not just for the meditation. The meditation is the heart of the practice for sure, but the heart needs other organs as well in order to survive. Or you can compare it to the heartwood of a tree. The heartwood – if it doesn't have bark and softwood and leaves and branches – is dead. The parts that keep the heartwood alive include a lot of little things that we tend to overlook, and yet they contribute to the practice. This willingness to give – if you don't have material things, give of your knowledge, give of your time, give of your energy. And look around for opportunities to give. Don't wait for them to be forced on you. That's the true nature of generosity.

We've got this problem in the West where there are certain events and certain situations where you have to give. You get invited to a wedding; you've got to send a gift. Christmas comes; you've got to give a gift, lots of gifts. The little spontaneous acts of generosity tend to be forgotten, but those are the ones that really do show a generous spirit. Or you see a lack and you have the opportunity to fill that lack. That's an important lesson, and it's the way in which you become sensitive to one another. We all become sensitive to one another this way.

This is something that's really lacking, especially now as computers are taking over people's lives. People grow up with computers; they don't grow up with people any more. They're more comfortable looking at a screen. You see this all over the world now; it's not just here in

America. I was recently in Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia. You see groups of people sitting around, and they're all staring at their little screens. They're not learning the lessons that come from looking at the people around you – looking at their expressions, listening to the tone of voice, seeing what they're doing and casting around in your mind to ask yourself, "What do they need? What are they lacking? Is there something I've got that they could use?"

It's through reestablishing human contact that we also reestablish a kind of sensitivity within ourselves: on the one hand, this willingness to be generous, and on the other hand, knowing how to look after the gifts that other people do give you – learning how to appreciate them, how to care for them if they're material objects, learning how to be gracious in accepting other people's help. These are all habits that are really helpful as you meditate. They develop sensitivity, and that's what discernment is all about: sensing things that are not pointed out to you. The Buddha gives you lessons on where to look and tells you what to look for. But for you to *see* the actual movements of your own mind, you've got to be very sensitive, often in unexpected ways. And that quality of sensitivity is best developed through generosity, through virtue – all the standard parts of the path.

Then read up on Dhamma and Vinaya. The Vinaya's not there just for the monks. As Ajaan Suwat once said, it's there for everybody. When lay people come and deal with the monks, they've got to learn about the monks' Vinaya to have a sense of what the monks can do and what the monks can't do. In that way, they look for ways of being of help. That sensitizes them to other people's needs, and they start looking at their own needs in a different way.

This principle of generosity is an important foundation for wisdom. In other words, learning how to be generous, learning how to accept generosity, learning how to take care of other people's generosity – not just in terms of things but in terms of the things they do for you: That kind of sensitivity then gets turned into your own sensitivity to yourself – what the mind is doing, what it needs, and where and when it needs it. Because the most satisfying acts of generosity are the ones that are unexpected. You see an unexpected gap, and you've discovered in an unexpected way that you've got the means to fill in that gap. That's the talent you need to be a good meditator.

So all of these aspects – when you think of the eight teachings the Buddha gave to Gotami – boil down to three principles. One is what you're aiming at as you go on in life; two, what you're doing to develop your mind in that direction; and three, how your relationship with other people relates to what you're doing. Not getting entangled, being unburdensome, learning to be content – these things all interpenetrate. If you miss one of the dimensions, the others are going to suffer. We see other people who are just generous and don't meditate, and we see what's lacking there. Well, the same problem is there with people who just meditate and don't really understand generosity.

For the practice to be successful, it has to be complete. It's an all-around practice that helps you develop an all-around sensitivity. So eventually, you can see things you never saw before, realize things you never realized before, and attain things you never attained before. And the little things really do make a difference in that direction.