

## *In Debt to Generosity*

*March 2, 2008*

The practice is a cooperative effort. It's true that when you meditate you're sitting here working on your mind and only you can do the work, but for you to be able to do that work requires the support of other people. The monastery we have here—the meditation hall, the huts, everything you look at, everything you can see here at the monastery—is the result of someone's generosity, which means that our practice depends on other people's generosity. And so in addition to learning to be generous ourselves as a support for one another and as an internal support for the practice, it's also good to learn how to be the recipient of other people's generosity in an appropriate way.

I know a man in Singapore who had taken early retirement from his job so that he'd have more time to practice. His pension wasn't much and he was looking after his old sick mother. There was one time when I had been invited for a meal and he came along. When the meal was done and everyone had their full, there was still a lot of food left over. So one of the women who had prepared the food set aside some for him to take home—in fact, she had actually made some extra food with the intention of giving it to him. She knew that he needed to save money and he could share the food with his mother. He refused it, though, on the grounds he didn't want to have any karmic debts. Well, that, of course, was an insult to her, that he wasn't willing to be indebted to her. So she put a curse on him. Seriously. "I curse you, I curse you, I curse you," she yelled.

There's an important lesson to learn in that story, that as recipient of other people's generosity, you're also being generous in a way that you're willing to take on the debt, realizing that you owe something to them. Now, this doesn't mean you have to pay them back in kind, but you do have the responsibility of doing the best in your practice so they can get the most out of the gift they've given.

The suttas list this as one of the motivations for wanting to become an arahant. As an arahant, any gift given to you would give great rewards to the person who gave it. In other words, the motivation is compassion, the motivation is generous. You hear so much Mahayana propaganda about the selfish arahant, but you can't be selfish and become an arahant. And one of the motivations for becoming an arahant is that it's good for other people. That's one thing to keep in mind.

Another thing to keep in mind is the comment that Ven. Maha Kassapa made once. He was looking back on his life as a monk. He had become an arahant seven days after his ordination and, as he said, "For seven days I ate food and I was a

debtor to the countryside. But from that point on, I did not eat my food in debt.” In other words, as long as we’re not arahants, we’re in debt to the people who provide us with what we need.

So you want to learn how to take on that debt in good grace. Be gracious in receiving the gifts they give you, realizing that, yes, you are incurring a debt. But it’s a good debt to pay off, because the best way to pay it off is through the practice—to be a virtuous person, to develop good qualities of mind. That’s how you pay them back. So when someone gives a gift, you accept it with good grace, even if it’s something you can’t use, because if you can’t use it there’s someone else who can. If, however, you see the gift is inappropriate or that it’s going to be harmful to your practice, then you can refuse the gift, but you want to do it in such a way that you’re not hurting the other person’s feelings.

An important lesson in the practice is to learn the humility of a recipient. Years back, when I was first going on my alms round, there was one couple who lived in a tiny shack. They were newlyweds. The little shack was just big enough for two people to sleep in, with a little makeshift kitchen outside. Almost very morning, though, they had something for my alms bowl. And to be the recipient of the generosity of a poor person—that’s a really good lesson. You go back, have your meal, and then you sit and meditate, and you think, “They gave that. They’ve invested that in my practice, so my practice had better be good.”

These are good things to reflect on as you meditate. Spread thoughts of goodwill to all the beings who’ve helped you practice. If there was any meat in your meal today, dedicate your merit of your practice to the animals who died. Dedicate the merit of your practice to the people who gave the food, who gave the clothing, the shelter, the medicine, all the things we have here, because without their help you wouldn’t be here practicing. This place wouldn’t be here for you to practice in.

And remember the way to pay back the debt is not to do special favors for the people who’ve given things, because that cuts into the merit of their giving. It’s to be really sincere in trying to be mindful, trying to get the mind to settle down, doing the best to understand your defilements so that you can go beyond them, because the world needs more people like that.

So just as the practice is a cooperative effort, the results you gain from the practice are not just yours alone. The people around you are going to benefit. And it’s in that way that you’re a worthy recipient of people’s generosity. So as long as you’re still have to incur a debt, you stick with the practice. Take on that debt in good grace. And regard your ability to repay that debt as a privilege.