

You Bet Your Life

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To be born, to take on a human life, takes on a lot of risks. Many things we have to take on faith. We don't know what the future will bring, and life doesn't come with a handbook explaining how to use it. We have to figure things out as we go along. There's even the question of whether we're acting on our own, or if something else is acting through us. Do we really have choices? Do actions really give results? Is action illusory? There are no guaranteed answers.

But it was in response to this risk, this uncertainty, that the Buddha taught mundane right view, especially the first phrase: "There is giving." It may sound strange. Of course there's giving. But what the Buddha is saying here is that giving is important.

You probably know the story. The brahmans in those days said that, yes, giving is important—especially if you give to brahmans. And you can imagine that after centuries of that, people began to rebel. Some schools of contemplatives said that there isn't giving at all. People don't have any choice in the matter, they said, so there's no real giving. People are just doing what they have to. That was one argument. Other groups said that you're just nothing, other people are nothing, so anything that's given to something that's nothing doesn't come to anything. There's no virtue to it.

To counteract these forms of wrong view, the Buddha started mundane right view with the phrase, "There is giving"—the implication being that, one, you do have the choice to give and, two, there is real virtue in it. In fact, if you're going to gain anything in life at all, you first have to give.

This is why it's risky. You give before you get any guarantee that you'll get anything in return. But the Buddha is encouraging you to take the risk. As he says, if you take this particular risk, it's a safe bet. You're not placing your hopes on anyone else who will or will not be able to carry through whatever they promise. You're placing your hopes on the fact that your actions do have results, that you do have some control over them, and that you can learn how to make them skillful. These are good things to bet on and, as the Buddha says, they're safe to bet on. Even if it turns out that the principle of giving

is not true, you can look at your life as something nobly lived.

We all know instinctively that we have selfish tendencies as well as unselfish ones; noble ones and ones that are not so noble. If you bet on the fact that your actions have results, and it turns out that they actually do have results, then you get the good results of those noble actions. If it turns out that they don't give results, at least you know you acted on nobly on skillful intentions.

Look at the Buddha himself. He put so much on the line when he went into the wilderness. It was a huge gamble. He had wealth, he had power, he had all the sensual pleasures you could imagine back in those days, and yet he realized that that kind of life didn't mean anything. As we would say today, he who dies with the most toys, or she who dies with the most toys, still dies. When you die, the toys don't mean anything. But if you die having acted on the desire to find a true happiness, a happiness that is totally harmless, then even if there's nothing left after death, you've lived a noble life. And that's something you can look back on with pride.

After all, you've got this human body; you've got this human mind. You might as well gamble on the likelihood that you can actually accomplish things with this body and mind. You can be virtuous. You can learn how to bring the mind under control. You can work on your discernment to find out what kind of happiness really is harmless, what kind of happiness really is lasting. That's a good use of this body and mind—and something that we have to do for ourselves. Nobody else can do this for us.

It *is* a gamble, but as the Buddha says, it's a safe one. If you're going to end up with nothing anyhow, you might as well give it away in a good way, give it away in terms of what you think is skillful, what you see as leading to more and more solid happiness. Because if you just abandon the possibility of developing goodness, and say, "Well, maybe this isn't going to really last, maybe this is something I can't really trust," it's like declaring war on your abilities. Your body is bound to suffer; your mind is bound to suffer. You've got all these good things, but you don't develop them, you don't explore their possibilities while you have the chance.

This body we have, the mind we have: They're like the gold you hear about in fairytales. The gremlin or the goblin gives you the gold, but it turns out that if you try to hoard the gold, it turns into

ashes. It turns into feathers. But if, when you get the gold, you give it away, it keeps replenishing itself. It keeps repaying you in more and more ways. So as long as you have a body, as long as you have a mind, give them to whatever you find is noble, whatever you find is inspiring.

And the Buddha offers a noble path. As he says, the noble search is for a happiness that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die. All your other searches are for things that are going to age, grow ill, and die. Our bodies are going to grow ill and die, so nothing much is really gained by devoting them to fleeting and uncertain pleasures. But if you make up your mind to attempt a noble search, that's what the Buddha did himself. He said that this is what makes life worth living. Even when he wasn't sure he was going to have success, he said the fact that he made the effort, the fact that he was willing to give of himself in this way, gave some nobility to his life.

It gives meaning to the fact that you have this body that can do things, you have a mind that can do things. Give them over to things that are good to do. You're going to lose your body, you're going to lose these feelings, perceptions, and fabrications. Even the consciousness of this realm you're going to lose at some point. So why not give these things away in a noble way, rather than have them wrenched from your grasp, or see them wear out because you're not putting them to proper use.

So look at what you can do with your life that's noble; look at what you can do with your life that's a gift of your abilities. And that's what gives meaning to life.

That's a question that keeps coming up and again and again: What's the meaning of life? The answer is that the meaning of life is the meaning you give to it. If you decide it has no meaning, you're declaring war on it. You went through all this difficulty to get this human life, so at the very least put it to good use. Give it to generosity, give it to virtue, give it to concentration and discernment. And in the act of giving, you experience a lot of good right there.

We've got the Buddha's promise that it's not empty giving, that the results last for a long, long time, and that they lead to higher and higher stages of the practice. We can decide whether we believe in this principle or not, but as he points out, it's not a question of

believing in *him*. These things are good things to believe in and of themselves. If you don't believe that there's any use or meaning to your life, then if it turns out there is a use to your life, you've wasted it. And if life doesn't come with a use or a meaning, but you try to give it a meaning, at least you've given something good to it—and to yourself. So you win both ways. That's why the Buddha said it's a safe bet.

So think long and hard about that statement: There is giving. And see where it resonates inside you.

The Buddha wouldn't teach people who wouldn't listen to that teaching. If you rejected the idea that there is giving, he wasn't interested in you. As many Thai ajaans have said, when you get to the end of the path and you look back, you see it was all the same thing clear through. It starts with giving and ends with *cago patinissaggo mutti analayo* – relinquishing your craving; giving your craving back. Letting it go. Giving some freedom to your craving.

That's an interesting concept: that the craving gets released. In other words, you let it have its freedom and then *you're* free. You don't hold on to your cravings, you don't hold on to your laziness. And by not holding on to these things, they gain their freedom and so do you.

It's like the image of a fire back in those days. They believed that fire burned because it was clinging to the fuel, devouring the fuel. The act of clinging to the fuel not only trapped the fuel, it also trapped the fire. When the fire let go of the fuel, it was freed.

So try to find what there is inside yourself that needs to be freed. When you can give it its freedom, you find freedom, too.

As you stick with the practice, the giving gets better and better. And in that way, you give meaning to your life.