

Give Before You Get

January 31, 2017

We live in a society where everything comes with a lot of advertising copy, talking about all the benefits you'll gain by buying this or mortgaging that. Even meditation comes with advertising copy about all the gains you'll get from meditating.

But when the Buddha taught meditation, he didn't start with the gaining side. He started with the giving side. When he talked about the four noble truths—which are basically truths focused on the fact that you're suffering and there's a way out—even before mentioning the four noble truths, he'd prepare people's minds with what he called the graduated discourse. And the graduated discourse started with giving: how wonderful it is to give, what good mind states you develop by giving. But you gain the mind states, you gain the rewards, by giving first. After giving came virtue: all the good things that come when you give up certain kinds of unskillful behavior.

So the principle is there: You have to give before you get. And it's good to carry that attitude into the meditation. You're going to have to give up a lot of time. You're going to have to give up all the thoughts that you could have entertained yourself with when allowing your mind to wander around as it likes. You're going to focus on one thing, and the rewards of that one thing may not appear right away. You have to give some time to it; you have to give some energy to it. And in the course of sticking with the one thought, you'll find that there are a lot of other things you have to give up as well. The practice is a lot of that: giving up, giving up a lot of your likes and dislikes.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha told Rahula, “Make your mind like earth. Earth doesn't react to negative things thrown on it—dirt, garbage—it doesn't react at all. Make your mind like fire. Fire can burn garbage and it doesn't get upset, doesn't react, doesn't get disgusted. Make your mind like water. Water can be used to wash away garbage but it's not upset. Make your mind like wind. Wind can blow all kinds of trash around but the wind doesn't get disgusted by the trash.”

You need to think in these ways as you meditate and as you practice in general. After all, the mind will find things that it doesn't like about the practice. Some people don't like chanting; some people don't like the work periods; some people don't like the precepts. But it's never a question of whether you like it or not. This is what the training is. You have to learn how to step back from your mind and from the reactive side of the mind and tell yourself, “I'm just going to do this, give this some time, give it an opportunity.” Have an open mind about what you have to give up. Have an open mind about the things you have to do that you don't like doing. Give the training a chance to see what beneficial impact it'll have on your mind.

When you read the biographies of the great ajaans, you find again and again that they reached a point in the practice where things seemed to be leveling out, reaching a plateau, and nothing new was happening. So they had to stop and ask, “What do I need to give up now to ratchet up the practice?” That was how they were able to come out winning.

The Buddha himself said that the secret to his awakening was that he never let himself rest content with skillful qualities. In other words, as long as he saw that there was still something more to do, still some dis-ease, some sense of stress, some sense of suffering in the mind, he wouldn't rest content. He'd try to figure out what more had to be given up, what more had to be abandoned. Of course, the path isn't all about abandoning. It's also about developing. But to develop, you have to give up a certain amount of time, a certain amount of energy.

So you have to learn how to give, in a lot of ways you may not have expected. After all, the Buddha's analysis of suffering is the clinging-aggregates. The clinging-aggregates are how we define who we are, so we're going to have to give up how we define who we are. That's a pretty radical giving up. You have to work at it gradually from the beginning. Anything that you see is obviously unskillful, you give it up. Even if it's not all that obvious, you say, “Try giving it up and see what happens.”

Ajaan Lee talks about how when he was a young monk and he read about the Buddha extolling the virtues of going into the forest. As a young man, Ajaan Lee had lived in a village near a great forest, and he never saw any advantage of going into the great forest. It was a place of danger, a place of discomfort. But, as he said, he saw that the Buddha and all the great disciples said there was something really good about going out and living in the forest. So he decided: “Okay, I'll give it a try.” It wasn't easy. “They talk about eating only one meal a day, well, give it a try,” even though it wasn't easy. He found that by putting himself under the training—rather than stepping aside from the training and talking about how much he disliked it—he learned a lot that he wouldn't have learned otherwise.

There's that Zen saying that “The Great Way is easy for those with no preferences.” That doesn't mean that you don't prefer to put an end to suffering. You do prefer that. But whatever comes up in the path that you have to do, you decide, “I'll do it, regardless of whether I like it or not.” And then make your mind like earth, so that it doesn't sit and complain about giving things up. You can view all this with a certain amount of calm. You step back from it and say, “Okay, there must be part of the mind that doesn't like this. Is this a part of the mind I want to continue identifying with? Or is this something I need to give up—that I'd be better off giving up?”

Try to develop the attitude that this is a practice where you give. You may be giving up a lot of things you like, but you get something much better in return. The getting comes from the giving. The Buddha never has you give anything up without the sense that you'd gained something better from letting go. After all, that's the lesson in the third of the noble truths. You let go of the craving, and that's the end of suffering. It's not that the clinging-aggregates

are clinging to you. You're clinging to them. That's something you have to let go of. But when you let go, there's freedom. The trade is more than worth it. Just don't let your likes and dislikes get in the way of making that trade.

Develop that mind like earth, because that's what'll hold you in the practice. Just as the earth is supporting us right now, the mind like earth will support your practice for a long time to come.