

Going Out of Your Way

January 7, 2021

There are two ways of doing good: One is to avoid doing things that are harmful, and the other is to go out of your way to do something especially nice for somebody. The first is basically a matter of virtue; the second, a matter of generosity. And it's interesting to note that when the Buddha teaches, he brings generosity up first. When he explains mundane right view, it starts with: "There is what is given." In other words, the times we go out of our way to be helpful to other people, generous with other people, there's a value to that action.

When he was going to explain the four noble truths and wanted to prepare his listener, he would start out with generosity. And even though generosity is not mentioned in the noble eightfold path, it *is* mentioned as one of the precursors to the path. As the Buddha said, if you're stingy with material things, stingy with the Dhamma, there's no way you're going to get into the jhanas—and no way, of course, you're going to get into nibbana.

So it's good to reflect: How often do you go out of your way for other people? Of the forms of goodness, it's the one that can involve the most ingenuity—and this may be one of the reasons why the Buddha emphasizes it. You think of other people: What they might want? Or what they might lack? Or what they might need? Then you try to think creatively of how you can provide it.

That requires going out of yourself somewhat. The desire not to harm other people also requires that you think of their well-being, think of their feelings. But when you're generous, it requires a more active involvement. You start thinking: What do I have that I can share? What do I have that I can do without that would please other people if I gave it to them?

This doesn't have to be a material thing. It can be a gift of your time, a gift of your knowledge, a gift of your forgiveness. But it requires some ingenuity, and the more you get into being generous, the more you find that you enjoy this exercise of your ingenuity: trying to think of an unexpected gift, something that would be especially appreciated because it was unexpected.

This is developing a good habit that's going to serve you well as you meditate. As the Buddha said, when you're avoiding unskillful thoughts, that can mean either that the mind is in concentration, or simply that it's thinking things that are skillful: not based on sensuality, not based on ill will, not based on harmfulness. But that's not necessarily special. What makes it special is when you decide you're going to focus in on one thing and get the mind to stay there.

Now, in some forms of concentration there's not much ingenuity involved. Simply repeat a word over and over again, and force the mind down, beat it down.

But the way the Buddha teaches breath meditation requires that you think, as when he says, "Breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture, breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure." What kind of breathing would that be? We have Ajaan Lee's recommendations, but his recommendations may not work for you right now. After all, the mind's relationship to the breath energy in the body is going to be very different from person to person, and even for one person, things can change over time.

So use a little imagination. Think about what kind of breathing would be really good now. Think of that as a gift to yourself. And here again, you can get the mind to settle down, it feels really good, and you could decide, "Well, this is plenty good enough." The thing about the Buddha, though, was that he had an imagination that told him there must be something better. What if there were something better? What if there were pleasure or well-being that wasn't fabricated at all? How would you find that? That requires strategizing, it requires thinking, it requires ingenuity. You can't cause that unfabricated, but you can get the mind trained so that it's ready to sense it.

That requires sensitizing the mind, and this is where practicing generosity can help you, because when you're generous and you're trying to make it into a skill, you're trying to be sensitive to what other people need, what they might want. When you're used to putting yourself in their shoes, then you can look back at your own needs, seeing them from the outside, from a new perspective. That was what the Buddha was doing as he practiced. He'd be following a particular line of practice and he'd come up short. He'd step back and look at himself: "Okay, what am I doing? What are my assumptions? How can I change them?" He was going into uncharted territory, which required an active imagination. And the same

with being generous: It requires an act of imagination to figure out what another person might like. So think of generosity as practice for your meditation.

Virtue of course has a role to play as well, in teaching you that certain things are just out of bounds. Think of the image of the quail wandering out of its ancestral territory. When you're meditating, you're going to stay in your ancestral territory, but simply staying there won't be enough. You've got to keep asking yourself: What could be better than this? You get the mind to calm down, you settle in, and at first you learn how to content yourself with whatever newfound concentration you've found. You have to learn how to get there solidly, so don't be too much in a hurry. But there will have to come a point when you really know that spot, and you have to say, "Okay this is still not quite as good as it could be. What could be better? What am I doing that's unnecessary? What can I drop?" Step back when the practice has ended. Trying to think in the way other people might think, looking at the world the way they might look at it, will give you new eyes for looking at what you're doing. Taking on their perspective will show you things you wouldn't have seen otherwise.

So these practices of goodness—virtue and generosity—are not just an alternative second best for people who don't really want to meditate. They're preparation for meditation. That quality I mentioned this morning—*cai bun*, a meritorious heart, the one that's willing to go out of its way, go the extra mile—that's precisely what you need as you meditate. You can follow the instructions and they can take you to a certain point, but then you have to use your ingenuity to learn how to go beyond that. Think of Ajaan Mun out in the forest: It was because he had exercised his imagination that he could think that there must be something better than what he'd been taught before. There were twists and turns in the path that he might not have anticipated, but his ability to step back and use his imagination, look at himself from a new angle: That's what enabled him to see a lot of subtle things he otherwise would have missed.

So think of generosity as a practice that develops your sensitivity, develops your subtlety, and develops that part of the mind that's willing to put itself out for others. It's not always staying in its comfort zone. That'll have a good effect on your meditation.