

The Practice of Generosity

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on
08-18-2013.

Suppose you were driving down the Interstate and pulled into a rest area that wasn't located close to any towns. As you pulled into a parking lot, you saw a large man walk up to the car that had pulled in just before you. He spoke to the woman who was driving. She shook her head "no" and rolled up her window.

Then as you were getting out of your car, he approached you. He explained that he was on his way to St. Louis because his daughter was having a baby but he was almost out of gas and didn't have the money to buy more. He apologized for bothering you, but it was his daughter and he really wanted to be there for her and with her.

What would you do? How would you respond? Would you respond with a simple "no" like the woman he first approached? Would you respond from a place of compassion and generosity? Would your response be different if the smallest bill you had was a \$20? Would it be different if you had no cash to offer?

This was a real life situation and there is no one correct answer. Each time we find ourselves in a situation like this, what could be called "an opportunity for generosity," we have to discern for ourselves what is the most skillful response we can make given the circumstances at that moment.

The fundamental principle that underlies all of Buddhist practice, the principle of kamma, is the understanding that our actions have consequences, whether the actions are in the form of thoughts, words or deeds. One example of why this is important is expressed in this quote from the Buddha:

"Bhikkhus, whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of sensual desire, he has abandoned the thought of renunciation to cultivate the thought of sensual desire, and then his mind inclines to thoughts of sensual desire." (MN 19.6, Bhikkhus Nāṇamoli & Bodhi, trans.)

So, in a similar vein, the more we train ourselves in the practice of generosity, the more likely we are to respond in the moment from a place of generosity and compassion.

Besides the fact that doing something generous increases the likelihood that you and others to will engage in further acts of generosity, there are other benefits that arise from this wholesome activity. There is the simple joy, the delight that comes from giving, from responding to another's needs. This is a quality that we actually don't give enough attention.

We're more likely to focus on the thought and emotion of "not enough." Sometimes it is "I don't have enough." At other times it is "I gave, but it wasn't enough." And then there's also the thought and emotion of "too much" as in "Oh no, I just gave too much." Or another form of that is "Did I just get scammed?"

When we give attention to the joy of giving, it lifts our moods, relaxes our hearts and bodies and opens us further to the life that we have. And, most simply, it is just plain pleasant. It is a spiritual pleasant feeling, one that is wholesome.

Ajahn Passano, the abbot of Abhayagiri Monastery in California, describes another one of the benefits:

"... one of the common ways of teaching the training fundamentals is to emphasize the qualities of generosity, virtue, and meditation (dāna, sīla, bhāvanā). When one is generous and delights in giving, the heart tends to be satisfied and joyous. This supports the cultivation of virtue, as a heart that is satisfied and contented easily inclines to restraint and composure. With this composure, together with the lack of remorse that virtue affords, the heart is easily settled and focused. Meditation thus progresses more smoothly and the mind naturally brightens, making it suitable for seeing things as they truly are.

"It is helpful to recognize this tendency for good qualities to foster further good qualities, so that we can nurture the appropriate causes for the results we are seeking. Otherwise we can be prone to wanting to experience the fruits of the training before the ripening has fully taken place." (commentary by Ajahn Passano in: Ajahn Passano and Ajahn Amaro, *The Island*, Redwood Valley, CA: Abhayagiri Monastic Foundation, 2009, pp. 231-232)

So generosity is actually a condition that makes it easier to meditate, something that makes us more effective meditators.

I've also noticed that over time as the tendency to be generous grows, there is also a greater sense of gratitude. In some way, having a sense that you have enough to give, to share, leads to a greater appreciation for what you have.

We can easily limit ourselves by thinking of generosity only in terms of giving money. In the example I began with, even if one couldn't give any money, taking the time to listen to the man's story and responding with empathy would have been an act of generosity. How often do we recognize that such a simple act of presence is an act of generosity? Have you ever considered that simply opening the door for someone else is an act of generosity? Or that, especially on retreat, shutting a door quietly could be an act of generosity?

Over the years I've heard a number of teachers recommend that, if a generous thought or impulse arises in the mind-heart act on it rather than inhibiting it. I've taken this up as a practice myself and I have to say that it has strengthened both my joy and my tendency to give.

Of course like anything wholesome we can corrupt it by identifying with it and making a big self about it: "I am such a hugely generous person, blah, blah, blah." But that's just another thing to notice, to give attention to and to let go. It's not a reason to avoid generosity.

So what I'd suggest you to do this week is to just give your attention to generosity.

- Try to notice when the impulse to be generous arises.
- Try to pay attention when you're being generous.
- Notice the variety of forms generosity can take.
- Notice, if circumstances allow, how the recipient seems to feel after you've acted with generosity.
- And notice how you feel, especially when you've been wholeheartedly generous.

Noticing the results of generosity can help to reinforce the tendency to act with generosity.

Also, spend some time recollecting the times when you've been generous. It will be for your benefit. The Buddha tells us that:

"When a noble disciple recollects his generosity, on that occasion his mind is not obsessed by lust, hatred, or delusion; on that occasion his mind is simply straight, based on generosity." (AN 6.10, Bhikkhu Bodhi trans.)