

Joshua Bee Alafia

*The Three Beautiful Roots: Cultivating the Three Wholesome Qualities in Unwholesome Times*

Week One: “The Vulnerability of Generosity”

May 7, 2022



Hello, my name is Joshua Bee Alafia, and my Buddhist journey has been a beautiful one. I became interested in Buddhism in college. Back then, the second wave of Tibetan Buddhists were coming, and I was just really attracted to the Dalai Lama and his cause, as well as the clarity and the elegance that Tibetan Buddhism offered. Lama Tharchin was one of our local lamas in UC Santa Cruz, which is where I went to college. I ended up becoming a student of Sogyal Rinpoche as one of my housemates in college became one of his attendants, and then a good friend of mine introduced me to Namkhai Norbu, who also was a very influential teacher, a beautiful Dzogchen teacher. Around 2005, I became really interested in Theravada Buddhism, mostly coming to New York Insight to sit with Gina Sharpe, especially on her people of color monthly nights, and then becoming a student of Larry Yang as well. I had no interest in teaching initially, but I really responded to my inner teenager, especially my inner adolescent, who could have used some mindfulness practice, and I decided that I wanted to teach so that I could teach incarcerated youth. I did the Community Dharma Leaders Program, as recommended by my mentor, Gina Sharpe, and I found myself teaching with the Lineage Project in New York, working with system-vulnerable youth.

I'm really happy to be here talking with you all about the courage to be wholesome, especially in these times that seem unwholesome. We're going to be talking about the three wholesome states of mind, *alobha*, *adosa*, and *amoha*, or generosity, goodwill, and wisdom. Today, we're going to be talking about generosity, the courage to be generous, developing and cultivating a heart that is inclined towards generosity. It's not easy. It requires a certain vulnerability. It requires a certain faith. It requires so much dharma, really. And it's no mystery when we explore generosity that Siddhartha Gautama and his wife Yasodhara—I like to call them the collective Buddha because I recognize her as a Buddha as well—taught generosity first whenever traveling to a new town or village because it requires so much generosity to practice. We have to be generous to ourselves, to commit to being authentic and actually undergo this purification of the heart, this journey into

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healing each wound of the heart and having the courage to face them. Presence requires generosity. It requires courage. It requires a commitment to coming back into the now.

There’s a really beautiful passage where the Buddha is talking about generosity, and he says, “As you’re washing your alms bowl in the river, just having the generosity of thinking of how the debris and grains of rice can feed the river life; just having this generosity that everything we do can affect others in a positive way if we have the mind to offer it that way.”

I think a lot of us have a sense of lack. We’ve been conditioned to feel like there’s a lack, and we cling for this reason. It’s one of our clings. It’s hard to give. We live in a time of fear of intimacy, this fear of vulnerability, this fear of giving and then just being caught out there without reciprocity. What can we do to cultivate this spirit that is inclined toward giving, to cultivate this heart that gives freely?

We give. This is what we do. And this is why *dana*, which translates as giving, is done to cultivate *caga*, which is generosity. We give to our teachers. We give to our institutions that provide space for our meditation and the cultivation of our hearts. We give to causes that we really are moved to. We give to those in need. We give to the homeless when they ask. This has been a really powerful practice in my life, not wondering or judging or thinking that the money is just going to drugs when people are asking for it but giving without any discrimination when I can.

The invitation, especially with the practice of *dana*, is to give right up into the point of discomfort and a little past it—in other words, a little uncomfortable but not so much that it’s really devastating us financially and putting us in harm’s way. It’s also important to know that generosity is not just about money. It’s about energy, which is really what money boils down to. It’s about time and presence. So we give in so many ways. I’m giving so much patience as a

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parent of an eight-year-old son. It's funny, I caught myself recently expecting my son to have a sense of the sacrifices I make sometimes as a parent. He has no sense of that. He's a child. He shouldn't have to think about that. Recently, he got really upset that we left the park after school after an hour. He was on the playground, and other families were leaving. He was having such a great time, and I said, "It's time to go," and he got really upset. He said that I was mean. I was like, "You do not understand what it's like as a parent. I enjoy watching you play, but I also know that I have things to do. I have to teach tonight, I have to make dinner. It's a sacrifice standing in the chilly weather. But I do it because I love you. But you just have no idea. I'm not mean." And he's a child.

This was an example where I got caught giving expecting him to appreciate what it is for me to give, which is so often the case. We want to be appreciated. We want to be honored for our generosity in some way. And this practice of giving without attachment has been so powerful. That's also one of the definitions of *alobha*: detachment or nonattachment, the opposite of attachment. Pali is such a waxing gold ancient language with so much functionality and so many layers to each word. English is very different, and it's hard to hit it completely. I think of *alobha* as the inclination of the heart toward generosity. I might add that I think there's some correlation with *aloha*, meaning breath of life. There's also a sense of generosity as being sparks of life.

So we give as best we can without this feeling of needing compensation, just the wisdom of knowing interconnection and interbeing. As I'm on a trip to Japan getting gifts and liking them and actually wanting to cling to them, I know that giving is so rewarding and that it's actually much more joyful knowing that someone else is going to be appreciating this thing and that it may be like a talisman to them, as so many things are. I'll never forget how my little brother became really attached to an old skateboard that I left at my mom's house. We're 20 years apart, and he grew up with this skateboard, but it used to be mine. I wanted to take it to Cuba and give it away. I think he was eight or nine years old, and he got really sad. I ended up just getting a

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cheaper, newer skateboard to give away, but it was a good instruction in the sentimentality that we have with objects that become like talismans to us. They become so symbolic. And so the challenge is as an adult, giving those things which we really care about.

It's a beautiful practice. I could go on and on about it. I really feel passionate about it. But I'm going to stop for time's sake because you have a life to live. This is meant to be a very short dharma talk broken up over four sessions. Thank you so much for joining me in this exploration. I invite you to keep exploring it.