



# Tricycle Teachings:

## GENEROSITY

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A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

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## INTRODUCTION

Generosity, or *dana*, lies at the very foundation of Buddhist practice. As vipassana teacher Gil Fronsdal writes in Chapter 13, “the Buddhist path begins and ends with this virtue.” In this Tricycle e-book you’ll find 14 teachings on generosity delivered by well-known Buddhist teachers from a variety of traditions. Handpicked from Tricycle’s Wisdom Collection, these teachings offer insight into the transformative practice of generosity so central to all Buddhist schools.

—The *Tricycle* editors

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## GENEROSITY AND GREED

“When you are practicing generosity, you should feel a little pinch when you give something away. That pinch is your stinginess protesting. If you give away your old, worn-out coat that you wouldn’t be caught dead wearing, that is not generosity. There is no pinch. You are doing nothing to overcome your stinginess; you’re just cleaning out your closet and calling it something else. Giving away your coat might keep someone warm, but it does not address the problem we face as spiritual practitioners: to free ourselves from self-cherishing and self-grasping.”—*Gelek Rinpoche*

“Buddhist teachings emphasize that the manner in which we give is as important as what we give—we should give with respect, with happiness, and with joy. When we are practicing generosity, and it does not bring happiness and joy, we should pay close attention to our motivations for giving, and perhaps even reevaluate whether to give at all.”  
—*Gil Fronsdal*

“You can measure the depth of a person’s awakening by how they serve others”—*Kobo Daishi (774–835 C.E.)*

“Shakyamuni Buddha and his monks and nuns based their survival—day-to-day food, clothing, and shelter—on the layperson’s giving practice, *dana*. Today in our Western Buddhist world, we give generously to our own places of practice. We help support the center or temple,

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the teacher, and the sangha, and in return we get retreats, scheduled meditation, teachings, and a Buddhist community. What we still don't see is the Buddhist equivalent of Catholic Charities, Jewish Federation, and the American Friends Service Committee—organizations founded on Buddhist study and practice, relying on Buddhist constituencies to serve the unmet needs of individuals and communities around the world, whatever their race, color, creed, gender, or sexual orientation. We haven't yet established our own Buddhist Community Chest to encourage and oversee donations and become a visible Buddhist presence in the world of social action and philanthropy. Only a few private foundations hold this larger vision.

Regardless of our resources, I think our generosity should benefit ourselves and our family, our dharma center or temple, and the world. This will really expand our hearts and practice from self-concern to Self-concern, and serve all beings.”—*Roshi Bernie Glassman*

“Greed is the salty water consumed by those who thirst for self-centered gratification. This kind of thirst can never be quenched and becomes the source of increasing torment.” —*Matthieu Ricard*

“Generosity is revolutionary, counter-instinctual. Our survival instinct is to care only for ourselves and our loved ones. But we can transform our relationship to that survival instinct by constantly asking ourselves, ‘How can I use my life’s energy to benefit all living beings?’”  
—*Noah Levine*

“Generosity is not limited to the giving of material things. We can be generous with our kindness and our receptivity. Generosity can mean the simple giving of a smile or extending ourselves to really listen to

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a friend. Paradoxically, even being willing to receive the generosity of others can be a form of generosity.”

—*Gil Fronsdal*

“When we give, we need to do so with the awareness that our gift will be both appropriate and helpful. It is not an act of generosity, for example, to give money to a wealthy person or alcohol to a child. We also give what we can afford; we don’t jeopardize our own health or well-being. At the same time, we can give what is precious to us, what is difficult to give, because of our attachment to it.”

—*Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche*

—*Tricycle*, Spring 2010

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# THE WISDOM OF GIVING

A Q & A with Andrew Olendzki

*Dana*, the voluntary giving of materials, energy, or wisdom (dharma) to others, is regarded as one of the most important Buddhist virtues. Yet even simple acts of generosity—whether material, emotional, or spiritual—are often hampered by ambivalence arising from craving and attachment. This section offers thoughts for reflection and practical suggestions to help you take a next step on the path to true generosity.

**What is dana? Why do we practice it? What is the “right” way to give? What are some benefits of and obstacles to giving?** Dana is the most fundamental of all Buddhist practices. It is the first topic in the Buddha’s graduated talks, the first step on the bodhisattva’s path to perfection, and the first of the ten *paramitas* (perfections) in the Mahayana tradition. It therefore sets the tone for all that follows in the spiritual journey.

The act of giving purifies intention, the quality of mind with which any action is undertaken. For a brief moment, the giver’s self-absorption is lifted, attachment to the gift is relinquished, and kindness towards the recipient is developed. All actions—of thought, word, and deed—that are undertaken for the sake of others rather than for one’s own selfish purposes become transformed by the power of generosity.

Giving needs to be practiced and developed because our underlying

tendency toward attachment, aversion, and confusion so often interferes with a truly selfless act of generosity. Consummate observer of human nature that he was, the Buddha pointed out the many ways we can give with mixed motives: we give out of fear, or in accordance with tradition; we give with the expectation of return; we give in hope of gain, or a favorable reputation or rebirth; we give to adorn our mind, or simply because giving brings joy.

All generosity is valuable. When asked by King Pasenadi of Kosala, “To whom should a gift be given?” the Buddha replied, “To whomever it pleases your mind.”

All schools of Buddhism recognize that giving brings the most benefit when coupled with wisdom. In the Mahayana tradition, this means recognizing the inherent emptiness of any true distinction between giver and recipient. In the earlier schools, less attention is paid to the metaphysics of giving and more to its psychology, focusing upon the intention of the giver, the nature of the gift, and the worthiness of the recipient.

An act of giving is of most benefit when one gives something of value, carefully, with one’s own hand, while showing respect, and with a view that something wholesome will come of it. The same is true when one gives out of faith, respectfully, at the right time, with a generous heart, and without causing denigration. Under such circumstances, according to the Buddha, “before giving, the mind of the giver is happy; while giving, the mind of the giver is made peaceful; and having given, the mind of the giver is uplifted.” One who is accomplished in *dana* is said to “dwell at home with a mind free from the stain of stinginess, freely generous, openhanded, delighting in relinquishment, devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing.”

The nature of the gift itself is less important, and is adapted to suit



various populations. It is appropriate for people of means to give freely to those in need, for laypeople generally to give the basic requisites of a simple life to monks and nuns, and for all people to give less tangible—but much more valuable—gifts to one another at every opportunity.

One of the most important acts of generosity involves Buddhism's five precepts. By giving up killing, stealing, false speech, sexual misconduct, and intoxicants, one "gives to immeasurable beings freedom from fear, hostility, and oppression." And the highest gift of all is the gift of dharma—by teaching (if qualified) or by facilitating the teaching of others.

In a profoundly interdependent world, generosity is fundamental to the entire economy of life. Even the simplest biological function involves receiving something from others (nutrients, oxygen, life), processing it in some unique way, and then passing it on to all other members of the matrix of life. We all do this whether we want to or not, and whether or not we are aware of it. The practice of giving becomes perfected when we align ourselves very deeply with this truth, by consciously and mindfully offering everything we do or say—even everything we think—as an act of universal generosity.

**Andrew Olendzki, Ph.D.**, is the executive director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, in Barre, Massachusetts. His latest book is *Unlimiting Mind: The Radically Experiential Psychology of Buddhism*.

—*Tricycle*, Summer 2003

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# THE PRINCE AND THE ELEPHANT

## The Vessantara Jataka Tale

The Jataka tales, collected in the *Khuddaka Nikaya* of the Pali canon, are 547 stories recounting the previous incarnations of the Buddha. Together, the tales illustrate the perfection of virtues on the path to enlightenment.

In this tale the Buddha is born as Prince Vessantara, renowned for his generosity. On the day of his birth, an auspicious white elephant is also born, and is given to the newborn as a childhood companion. Years later, a delegation of brahmins arrives from a neighboring kingdom and explains that their citizens are suffering from famine and drought. They beseech the eminently generous prince to donate his white elephant, believing it will help allay their suffering. Vessantara gladly assents, and pours water over his guests' hands to signify that he does not expect repayment.

Vessantara performs acts of ever-greater generosity, eventually relinquishing even his children. His generosity is ultimately tested, however, when a god descends and asks Vessantara for his wife as a servant [depicted in the painting]. When Vessantara complies, the gods bestow blessings upon the prince, and he is reunited with his wife and children.

—*Tricycle*, Summer 2003

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# THE GIFT THAT CANNOT BE GIVEN

An interview with Marcia Rose

**Can you suggest some ways to develop my dana practice?** The Buddha taught and lived what is really a way of life: giving and receiving—the practice of dana. The cultivation of dana offers the possibility of purifying and transforming greed, clinging, and self-centeredness, as well as the fear that is linked to these energies of attachment. Dana practice is the foundation of Buddhist spiritual development. Generosity is the ground of compassion; it is a prerequisite to the realization of liberation.

The Tibetans have a practice to cultivate generosity. They take an ordinary everyday object such as a potato or a turnip, and hold it in one hand and pass it to the other hand, back and forth, until it becomes easy. They then move on to objects of seemingly greater value, such as a mound of precious jewels or rice. This “giving” from hand to hand ultimately becomes a symbolic relinquishment of everything—our outer material attachments and our inner attachments of habits, preferences, ideas, beliefs—a symbolic “letting go” of all the ways that we create a “self” over and over again. In our Vipassana practice, this is really what we are doing, but without the props. We learn to give and to receive, letting go of control, receiving what is given—receiving each moment of our lives just as it is, with the trust that it is just right, just enough for our spiritual growth to unfold from.

As our dana practice deepens, we begin to know more directly the

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ephemeral nature of all things. What can we really possess, after all? Our realization that there is actually nothing that can be held on to can become a powerful factor in cultivating our inner wealth of generosity, which is a wealth that can never be depleted, a gift that can forever be given, a seamless circle that feeds itself. As the Buddha tells us, “The greatest gift is the act of giving itself.”

The Buddha taught kingly or queenly giving, which means giving the best of what we have, instinctively and graciously, even if nothing remains for ourselves. We are only temporary caretakers of all that is provided; essentially, we own nothing. As this understanding takes root in us, there is no *getting*, *possessing*, and *giving*; there is just the spaciousness that allows all things to remain in the natural flow of life.

Someone once asked Gandhi, “Why do you give so much? Why do you serve all these people?” Surprisingly, Gandhi answered, “I don’t give to anyone. I do it all for myself.” The aim and the fruit of our dana practice is twofold: we give to help and free others, and we give to help and free ourselves.

Here are some questions we can ask ourselves to help determine if we are giving and receiving with mindfulness:

- What is happening in my body when I give?
- What is happening in my mind?
- Is there a sense of ease, openness, and nonsentimental lovingkindness and compassion in my heart, body, and mind?
- Is there a feeling of depletion, weakness, fear, anger, or confusion—a contraction of my heart, body, and mind?
- Can I go beneath my stories, ideals, and beliefs about how I want the exchange to be or not to be, or how I believe it is “supposed to be” or “not supposed to be”?

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- Can I mindfully recognize when I am caught in stories, beliefs, or wishful or aversive thoughts in relation to generosity?

Mindful attention can also help us to know more clearly how much to give in particular situations—or whether or not it's appropriate to give at all. Here are some questions to consider:

- Am I giving beyond what is appropriate, or giving beyond what may be healthy for myself emotionally and/or physically?
- Are my heart, body, and mind relaxed, open, and joyful when I feel I've given “just enough,” or do I experience anguish and contraction of the heart, body, and mind in giving “too much”?
- Am I aware of when the most generous act might be to step back and simply let people take care of themselves, to let go and allow a particular situation to “just be” and work itself out?

Using these questions as guidelines, we can begin to understand the “middle way” of the Buddha's teaching of *dana*. Mindfulness is what allows insight to arise in a perfectly natural way and what allows us, in turn, to let go—to recognize ourselves as aspects of the natural flow of life, and in this recognition to give and receive effortlessly in healthy and wise ways.

**Marcia Rose** is the founding and guiding teacher of Taos Mountain Sangha Meditation Center and the Mountain Hermitage, both in Taos, New Mexico. She also teaches in Barre, Massachusetts, at the Insight Meditation Society and the Forest Refuge.

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THREE GRAPEFRUITS

TAITETSU UNNO

A few days before my family and I were leaving Japan in 1968 after a six-year sojourn, my friend from California came to visit and gave us three grapefruits from a carton that he had brought with him. Because of import restrictions, fruits from abroad, such as grapefruits, melons, and grapes, were a rarity and hence ridiculously expensive. A single grapefruit, for example, would cost several thousand yen, equivalent to twenty dollars at the exchange rate at that time. People bought these exotic, imported fruits primarily to give away as gifts on special occasions.

Since we were returning to California shortly, where grapefruits are in abundance, we decided to give away the three grapefruits. It so happened to be the day that my wife went to her weekly flower-arranging class, so she gave the grapefruits to her teacher. We thought nothing about it, but a couple of days later we received a special delivery letter from the teacher. Written with a brush on traditional Japanese paper and folded carefully, the letter had to be something special. People today use ballpoint pens to dash off missives.

The teacher's letter began with very formal words about the weather, then she expressed appreciation for the three grapefruits. She wrote that she shared the first grapefruit with her grandchildren, who were thrilled with the fragrance and taste of an exotic fruit that they had never seen before. The second grapefruit she peeled and ate together with an old friend whom she hadn't seen for over twenty years, making the reunion

a very special event. The third grapefruit she took to a hospital, where her best friend was dying of a terminal illness. She hadn't eaten for more than a week, but when she saw the grapefruit she wanted to try tasting just a little piece. When she finished the first morsel, she asked for one, then another one, until she ate half the grapefruit. The family members watching all this were in tears, happy that their loved one was enjoying something to eat.

The teacher thanked us profusely from the bottom of her heart for the three grapefruits. My first reaction on reading the letter was, "Thank the grapefruits!" But I also reflected on what Hua-yen Buddhism [a Chinese tradition based on the *Flower Garland Sutra*] says about a small act of giving that has repercussions in an interdependent and interconnected world. According to this tradition, one small act of charity (*dana-paramita*) is said to be equal to countless acts of charity. No one can measure the effects of a single act of giving, for its repercussions are beyond our limited imagination.

The grandchildren will always remember the sweet aroma and taste of their first grapefruit, overlapping with the loving image of their grandmother, even after she is long gone. The two women's reminiscence about the past was made all the more memorable with each bite of grapefruit, the good feeling emanating and embracing those around them. The dying friend will live forever in the hearts and minds of her loved ones as she enjoyed each morsel of grapefruit. The letter from the flower-arranging teacher reminds me of the possible relevance of Hua-yen Buddhism for the contemporary world.

In reflecting on *dana paramita*, however, I am reminded that it requires "three kinds of purity." That is, according to Buddhism, true giving involves the awareness that there is no giver, no gift, and no receiver. Attachments of any kind—whether it be to self as the benefactor, the

value of the gift, or the acknowledgment by the receiver—nullify the pure act of giving. In our case we had no attachments, not because we were selfless but simply because we didn't pay for the grapefruits and merely passed them on to the teacher. This might be considered true giving, but it was a fortuitous act and had nothing to do with dana-paramita as an act of selfless giving, free of self-interest, which leads to the other shore of enlightenment.

In fact, the true act of dana-paramita involves giving up what we cherish the most—ultimately our ego self. I know a schoolteacher who encourages the practice of dana in children by setting an example. Once, he took his students to give fruits to the homeless. In doing so, he purchased the most expensive fruits at the grocery store. When one mother complained that the homeless did not deserve such extravagance, he explained two important things about true giving. First, it requires some sacrifice on the part of the giver. To give away something that one doesn't need is not dana. Second, the act must not be condescending but must show respect to the one who receives the gift. In fact, one is grateful to the recipient who makes the act of giving possible.

Although dana paramita in the true sense is our goal, it is not easy to actually practice it. But, as in the case of our three grapefruits, even if giving does not come from our hearts, we want to return something to the world. When such a practice is repeated as often as possible, we may come to realize that just to be alive is a gift, a gift made possible by countless good causes and conditions. Whether we know it or not, every act of compassion, real or simulated, may have a positive significance far beyond our powers of imagination.

**Taitetsu Unno** is the Jill Ker Conway professor emeritus of religion at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. He lectures worldwide



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about Japanese Buddhism, religion, and culture. Excerpted from *Shin Buddhism: Bits of Rubble Turn into Gold*, © 2002 by Taitetsu Unno. Reprinted with permission of Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.

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## GIVING FULL CIRCLE

A meditation on the ideal of circular giving, founded in  
an ancient Hawaiian land-sharing custom.

ROBERT AITKEN ROSHI

The Sanskrit word *dana* is often translated as “alms.” One of the *paramitas*, or “perfections,” on the Bodhisattva path, *dana* is traditionally understood as the full circle of giving, from lay supporters to the ordained sangha, in the form of material support, and back again to the laity, in the form of dharma teachings.

*Dana* is the practice of *pratitya samutpada*, mutually dependent arising. Everything is contingent upon everything else. Plants transpire, the moisture evaporates and returns as rain. The earth is dampened, allowing rootlets to absorb nutrients in the soil. The nutrients themselves are released by worms that eat the earth, and by the casts of countless other beings as they give themselves in death. People, animals, and other plants flourish, and give themselves in turn. The Buddha suggested that human beings can get along best by following this natural way of things. Giving creates happiness; greed creates misery.

The circle of giving can be found in the stories of people everywhere. In Hawaii, where I live, the land was traditionally divided by the *ahupua'a*, a pie-shaped parcel extending from a point in the mountains down the tops of two ridges bounding a valley to the sea. Some people foraged for herbs and harvested timber for house and canoe construc-

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tion in the highest elevations, others grew taro and vegetables lower down, and still others fished in the sea. They gave the products of their labor to their neighbors, and everyone—foresters, farmers, and fisherman—had what they needed to live creative lives.

How do we make such stories on our own?

**Robert Aitken Roshi** was a Zen master and cofounder of the Diamond Sangha and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship.

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## THE POWER OF RECEIVING

A Q & A with Judy Lief

**When I am given something, I sometimes feel indebtedness, which makes me uncomfortable. What is this discomfort in receiving? Is there a way to receive with grace and generosity?** The practice of true generosity is rare; it is an exchange in which both giver and receiver are enriched. In the Tibetan tradition, the custom of exchanging ceremonial scarves, or *khatas*, perfectly evokes this spirit of giving and receiving freely. When you offer a scarf to someone, it is received with grace and immediately offered back to you, completing the circle. Today, however, the culture of giving and receiving is often burdened by a complex mix of social obligations and expectations.

To cultivate a practice of graceful giving and receiving, you can begin by examining the patterns and assumptions you bring to the exchange and by becoming more aware of what inhibits your ability to give and receive freely. The next time someone gives you something, pay attention to the memories and associations that arise in your mind. For instance, in the past, you may have experienced receiving as a surrender of power to the giver. As a child, most likely you were taught that it is better to give than to receive; giving is considered to be a virtue, but receiving is seldom regarded as such; rather, it is viewed warily as a potential path toward vanity. In contrast, you may also have been taught to

be suspicious of people who offer you gifts, as in the proscription against accepting candy from strangers.

Next, it's important to work through the expectations and assumptions that such past associations engender. When you give, pay attention to the expectations you place on the gift and on the recipient's response, and gently let them go. Gift giving can be a way of seeking love and approval. There is tenderness and vulnerability in the moment of offering a gift, and an attempt to communicate one's intimacy and connection with another person.

For the recipient, there is similarly a kind of vulnerability in accepting a gift from a loved one. If you are disappointed—or even insulted—by the gift, or if you sense that the giver is not really in tune with who you are, how do you respond in a way that is not hurtful? Some people are close enough to each other to see the humor in this vulnerability, so that even failed gifts become occasions for deepening the bonds of affection. However, often people expect their gift to be a success, and if it is not, they take offense. Receiving a gift in that atmosphere puts pressure on the recipient. Not being appropriately enthusiastic could imply a rejection of that person and your relationship. It can also sometimes be tempting to use the act of giving to develop power or influence over the recipient. When you are given a gift, although you may have opinions as to the motivation of the giver, try to accept whatever is given to you simply and directly, with dignity.

Receiving is a powerful—and intimate—practice, for we are actually inviting another person into ourselves. Rather than focusing on our own practice, or on our own virtue, we can focus on providing an opportunity for someone else to develop generosity. In spite of its complexities and entanglements, the moment of exchange is one of simple connection and opening. That moment itself is unsullied. For that reason it

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is said that generosity is the discipline that produces peace.

**Judy Lief** was a student of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and is a teacher in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition. She is the author of *Making Friends with Death: A Buddhist Guide to Encountering Mortality*.

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AS IF THERE IS  
NOTHING TO LOSE

Giving comes from gratitude.

SALLIE JIKO TISDALE

Once I was young and poor—and generous. I shared an old house with several people and slept on the porch and owned nothing more valuable than my bicycle. I volunteered many hours every week at community organizations. One day, when I had only five dollars, I treated a friend to dinner, and afterward we laughed about my now total poverty. It was easy to give away what I had; I never doubted that the world would somehow provide for me in turn.

Now I have a house and a car and a savings account, and I am not so generous. I do give—my money, my time, my attention—but sometimes I give reluctantly, with a little worry. Sometimes I want a nicer house, a newer car. I wonder if I have enough money saved. I want more time to myself. It is not just a matter of youth and age. I have many more things now, and that means I have more things to lose.

When I had little, everything I had was important. If I found a sweater I liked at Goodwill, it felt like my birthday. In a way, having nothing meant everything in the world was mine. Even a sandwich was cause for celebration, and nothing distracted me from enjoying it. Every gift was a delight, and I was grateful for everything I had.

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Gratitude, the simple and profound feeling of being thankful, is the foundation of all generosity. I am generous when I believe that right now, right here, in this form and this place, I am myself being given what I need. Generosity requires that we relinquish something, and this is impossible if we are not glad for what we have. Otherwise the giving hand closes into a fist and won't let go.

This generosity, arising from abundance, is natural. We see it in the world around us all the time. Haya Akegarasu loved spring. “Young grasses,” he wrote, “I can't help it—I want to kiss you.” To him the spring grasses were great teachers, because they made a “whole effort” to simply live their lives. “Their growth is a long, wide tongue that covers the whole world,” he said. I see a fearless generosity in the flowers and trees, in the way birds sing out at dawn, in the steady drumming of the rain. As I grew older and found I had things to protect, I forgot. I completely forgot that I had always had enough in the first place. Now I am trying to learn this once again—total abundance, nothing begrudged.

**Sallie Jiko Tisdale** is a dharma teacher at Dharma Rain Zen Center, in Portland, Oregon. She is the author of *Women of the Way: Discovering 2,500 Years of Buddhist Wisdom*.

—Tricycle, Spring 2010



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THE  
BODHISATVA'S GIFT

DALE WRIGHT

When we examine our own giving, we often discern that we give for a wide variety of reasons, often with mixed motives. Although we may have the well-being of the recipient in mind when we give, we also give in order to receive.

Giving often creates the expectation that it's now our turn to get something. We give because we like the other person and hope to be liked in return. We give in order to be accepted or recognized in a particular community, to be admired, honored, or praised. Often we give in order to think well of ourselves, in order to think of ourselves as truly generous people. Even the admirable desire to become a profoundly generous person still maintains the primacy of self-concern. It focuses on me, the giver, rather on those who might need my help. But it is a mistake to simply reject these mixed and sometimes immature motivations, because for most of us these are the motives that do in fact drive our lives.

The movement from ordinary states of self-concern to selfless giving always involves a gradual transformation of character, not a sudden leap. Like any form of strength, generosity needs to be intentionally cultivated over time, and everyone must begin in whatever state of mind they already happen to be. Understanding and accepting who you really are right now is as important as the commitment to become someone

more open and generous. Whatever the quality of motivation, when we intentionally reach out to others in giving, some degree of transformation occurs. We become what we practice and do in daily life. When we engage in acts of giving, we begin to feel generous, and the force of this feeling encourages our wanting to give.

Generous feelings are not always enough to make someone truly generous, however, because there are other important capacities entailed in effective giving. One of these is receptivity, a sensitive openness to others that enables both our noting their need and our willingness to hear their requests. If we simply don't notice the problems and the suffering around all around us, our generosity won't amount to much. And if we don't present ourselves as open and willing to help, we probably won't, because we won't be asked. Our physical and psychological presence sets this stage and communicates clearly whether or not we care about the plight of someone there before us.

The traditional Mahayana embodiment of receptivity is the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteshvara, whose multiple arms are always extended in the gesture of generous outreach. The Bodhisattva of Compassion welcomes and invites all pleas for help. Other familiar forms of presence, other gestures, restrict the field of asking and giving. Eyes down and arms folded tightly around ourselves communicate that we are self-contained, not open outwardly. Arms raised in gestures of anger or self-assertion say even more about our relations to others. The extent to which we are sensitively open to others and the way in which we communicate that openness determine to a great extent what level of generosity we will be able to practice in daily life. Practicing mindfulness, we open our minds to the very possibility that someone may need our assistance, and we welcome their requests for our help.

If we are both open to offering help and notice when help is need-

ed, but are mistaken and ineffectual in how we go about giving it, then what we intend as an act of generosity may in fact just compound the difficulties. Without practical skill and wisdom, giving may be counter-productive or misguided in a number of ways. First, giving is best when it is based on a sound understanding of the overall situation. Effective generosity requires understanding who might benefit from your giving and how that giving might affect others beside the recipient. It is important to know when to give, how much to give, and how to do it with integrity, both for the well-being of the recipient and for that of others, including yourself. Wisdom is involved in knowing how different ways of giving might be received by others, and to what effect. There is also wisdom involved in asking how often to give and at what intervals. Intelligent giving is learned through practice, both as a meditation when we reflect on possible giving and as an activity in the world. Moreover, wisdom includes mindfulness that is watchful for our deepest ingrained habits, most especially the intrusions of self-concern and the always-present manipulations of self-interest.

One of the reasons that practicing generosity is so closely linked to Buddhist enlightenment is that the quality of our giving always proceeds from the true state of our character. Normally, we act as separate and self-contained beings who need to attend to our own well-being and security. Grounded in that ordinary but limited self-understanding, the generosity that we are able to practice is at least partially self-concerned. Still, as we practice generosity in the spirit of selflessness, we develop a sense of interdependent connection to others, a sense of community and reciprocal responsibility, and we begin to understand and feel all the ways in which our selves are in fact interlinked with others. When barriers separating the self begin to dissolve, generosity becomes easier—more natural—because it is more in alignment with our self-under-

standing. When this occurs, the motives that initiate giving become less patently selfish, and the meaning of the Buddhist sense of no-self begins to become clear. Indeed, every act of generosity reminds us of the possibility that we might actually live the bodhisattva's vow, the vow to engage in everyday life as though the well-being of others is just as important as our own.

To act generously is to awaken a certain kind of freedom: freedom from the stranglehold of self-concern, and, consequently, freedom to choose a level of responsibility beyond the minimal charge most of us have for ourselves. To give unselfishly is at least momentarily to be free of ourselves, free of greed and attachments, resentments and hatreds, habitual and isolating acts of self-protection. This experience is exhilarating because it entails an expansion out beyond the compulsive anxieties of self-protection. In this sense, the practice of generosity is the practice of freedom, and it carries with it all the joy and pleasure that are associated with liberation. Indeed, there may be no greater sense of fulfillment in life than the simultaneous feelings of human interconnection and pure freedom that arise from an authentic act of selfless generosity.

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—*Tricycle*, Winter 2011

10

THE ECONOMY OF GIFTS

An American monk looks at traditional Buddhist economy.

THANISSARO BHIKKHU

According to the Buddhist monastic code, monks and nuns are not allowed to accept money or even to engage in barter or trade with laypeople. They live entirely in an economy of gifts. Lay supporters provide gifts of material requisites for the monastics, while the monastics provide their supporters with the gift of the teaching. Ideally—and to a great extent in actual practice—this is an exchange that comes from the heart, something totally voluntary. There are many stories in the texts emphasizing the point that the returns in this economy depend not on the material value of the object given, but on the purity of heart of the donor and recipient. You give what is appropriate to the occasion and to your means, when and wherever your heart feels inspired. For the monastics, this means that you teach, out of compassion, what should be taught, regardless of whether it will sell. For the laity, this means that you give what you have to spare and feel inclined to share. There is no price for the teachings, nor even a “suggested donation.” You give because giving is good for the heart and because the survival of the dharma as a living principle depends on daily acts of generosity.

The primary symbol of this economy is the alms bowl. If you are a monastic, it represents your dependence on others, your need to accept generosity no matter what form it takes. You may not get what you want

in the bowl, but you realize that you always get enough. Once a student of mine went to practice in the mountains in northern Thailand. His hillside shack was an ideal place to meditate, but he had to depend on a nearby hilltribe village for alms, and the diet was mostly plain rice, occasionally accompanied by some boiled vegetables. After two months on this diet, he was in conflict over whether or not to stay. One rainy morning, as he was on his alms round, a woman called out from a shack asking him to wait while she got some rice from the pot. As he waited, he couldn't help grumbling inwardly about the fact that there would be nothing to go with the rice. It so happened that the woman's infant son was sitting near the kitchen fire, crying from hunger. So as she scooped some rice out of the pot, she stuck a small lump in his mouth. Immediately, the boy stopped crying and began to grin. "Here you are, complaining about what these people are giving you for free," my student told himself. "You're no match for this little kid." That lesson gave him the strength to stay in the mountains for another three years.

For a monastic, the bowl also represents the opportunity one gives others to practice the dharma. In Thailand, this is reflected in one of the idioms used to describe going for alms: *proad sat*, doing a favor for living beings. There were times on my alms round in rural Thailand when, as I walked past a tiny grass shack, someone would come running out to put rice in my bowl. Years earlier, as a lay person, I would have wished to give them some material help. Now I was offering them the dignity that comes with being a donor.

For the donors, the monk's bowl becomes a symbol of the good they have done. On several occasions in Thailand people told me they had dreamed of a monk standing before them, opening the lid to his bowl. The details differed as to what the dreamer saw in the bowl, but in each case the interpretation of the dream was the same: the dreamer's merit

was about to bear fruit.

The alms round itself is a gift that goes both ways. Daily contact with lay donors reminds the monastics that their practice is not just an individual matter. They are indebted to others for the opportunity to practice, and should do their best to practice diligently as a way of repaying that debt. Furthermore, walking through a village early in the morning, passing by the houses of the rich and poor, the happy and unhappy, gives plenty of opportunities to reflect on the human condition and the need to find a way out of the grinding cycle.

For the donors, the alms round is a reminder that the monetary economy is not the only way to happiness. It helps keep a society sane when there are monastics infiltrating the towns every morning, embodying an ethos very different from the dominant monetary economy. The gently subversive quality of this custom helps people to keep their values straight.

Above all, the economy of gifts allows for specialization, a division of labor from which both sides benefit. Those who are willing can give up many of the privileges of home life in return for the opportunity to devote themselves fully to dharma practice. Those who stay at home can benefit from having full-time dharma practitioners around on a daily basis. The Buddha began the monastic order on the first day of his teaching career because he saw the benefits that come with specialization. Without it, the practice tends to become diluted, negotiated into the demands of the monetary economy. The dharma becomes limited to what will sell and what will fit into a schedule dictated by the requirements of family and job. In this sort of situation, everyone ends up poorer in things of the heart.

The fact that tangible goods run only one way in the economy of gifts means that the exchange is open to all sorts of abuses. This is why

there are so many rules in the monastic code to keep the monastics from taking unfair advantage of the generosity of lay donors. There are rules against asking for donations in inappropriate circumstances, against making claims as to one's spiritual attainments, even against covering up any exceptional morsels in one's bowl with rice in hopes that donors will then feel inclined to provide something more substantial. Most of the rules, in fact, were instituted at the request of lay supporters or in response to their complaints. They had made their investment in the merit economy and were interested in protecting their investment.

On their first contact with the sangha, most Westerners tend to see little reason for the disciplinary rules; they regard them as quaint hold-overs from ancient Indian prejudices. When, however, they come to see these rules in the context of the economy of gifts, they too become advocates of the rules. The arrangement may limit the freedom of the monastics in certain ways, but it means that the lay supporters take an active interest in how the monastic lives—a useful safeguard to make sure that teachers walk their talk. This ensures that the practice remains a communal concern. As the Buddha said,

Monks, householders are very helpful to you, as they provide you with the requisites of robes, almsfood, lodgings, and medicine. And you, monks, are very helpful to householders, as you teach them the dharma admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, and admirable in the end, as you expound the holy life both in its particulars and in its essence, entirely complete, surpassingly pure. In this way the holy life is lived in mutual dependence, for the purpose of crossing over the flood, for making a right end to suffering and stress.

By its very nature, the economy of gifts is something of a hothouse creation that requires careful nurture and a sensitive discernment of its benefits. I find it amazing that such an economy has lasted for more than



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2,600 years. It will never be more than an alternative to the dominant monetary economy, largely because its rewards are so intangible and require so much patience, trust, and discipline in order to appreciate them. But then, there is no way that the dharma can survive as a living principle unless it can be offered and received as a gift, in an atmosphere where mutual compassion and concern are the medium of exchange, and purity of heart is the bottom line.

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—*Tricycle*, Winter 1996

11

THE EROTIC LIFE  
OF EMPTINESS

We are the world unfolding.

JOHN TARRANT

*Form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form.  
There are no walls in the mind. —The Heart Sutra*

*“What is not given is lost.” These words were spoken by Father Ceyrac, a French Jesuit missionary who has devoted himself to the well-being of children in South India for over 60 years. A similar thought is found in Buddhist teaching: “What is not done for the benefit of others is not worth doing. Seeking happiness just for yourself is the best way there is to make yourself, and everyone else, unhappy.” —Matthieu Ricard*

Whenever you think about generosity, one of its opposites appears along with it—greed, or stinginess or acquisitiveness. A well-known Thai abbot, Achaan Jumnien, invented a long-running spiritual practice organized around these opposing themes. Perhaps ten years ago, he had a canvas harness made for himself—something like a fisherman’s vest. Whenever anyone gave him anything—a watch, money, a bottle of water, a radio, a cup, healing medicines, an amulet or two—he would fix it on the harness. He bristled with objects; it was the kind of thing that would have made him a career in the art world. He accumulated things

and from time to time passed them on, but first he wore them. He said the whole apparatus weighed about 60 pounds. He took it off to sleep, but otherwise he walked around in it, carrying the burden of everything he received.

He had come to Spirit Rock, in Northern California, where we talked together through translators. In one of those conversations, he mentioned a friend of his who was an even more successful abbot than he, and very wealthy. That wealth was good, Achaan Jumnien said, because it allowed his friend to help people. “Perhaps,” he said, amused, “he is wealthy because he is more generous than me.” But the abbot with the harness was also generous in many ways—with his teaching, with his smile, with his unsolicited advice, and with his homemade healing medicines. He was generous with appreciation, too. When Jack Kornfield introduced us, he explained that I, too, was an abbot, which was a generous estimate of my importance. Achaan Jumnien immediately commiserated, saying what a rotten job it was. He was so enthusiastic about how dreadful it was that I took the message that it was an excellent rotten job and not to be given up.

Achaan Jumnien had his own origin myth about how he took up the Buddha way, and it went like this: as a child he once sat in meditation all day without moving, just to prove that he could. He fell into a deep inward place, and after that his mind changed completely. He did seem to have a tremendous feel for the emptiness shining inside things.

When I saw him a year later, he had ended the experiment with objects and taken off the harness. His performance left me with an image of someone exploring the theater of ownership, gifts, and generosity—how we love to receive things and how they begin to own us, and also how we can be free of them and in some way step into emptiness by passing them on. It was an example of the way art can be more instruc-

tive than a sermon.

The discovery of emptiness is a kind of falling in love. There is a vertigo in it: we step off the cliff of what we know and are certain about. During a retreat, for example, when I'm doing interviews, someone will bring in a common object—an oak leaf, a rusty pipe wrench found on a path—and put it on the altar. That object then becomes the thing that contains all the trees and the stars and belongs with the Buddha statues and other representations of eternity. We can allow objects to act on us so profoundly that afterward we are not the selves we thought we were.

When I first started to notice emptiness, it went like this: “Oh, I thought I was a man, but actually I'm like that branch,” or “Oh, I'm like the checkout girl with the nose piercings and the graffiti tattoo around her bicep. I'm not one tiny bit different from her.” This is an appreciation of the varied ways of life—that the dog has buddhanature and so do I. Next the understanding of emptiness becomes “Oh, I'm not like that tree; I *am* that tree. I'm not like that girl; I *am* that girl.” The erotic falling-in-love quality comes from noticing that I'm not outside the world any more, watching—instead I *am* the world unfolding—the eager dog, the drought in Australia, the homeless person in Santa Monica who offers me some excellent chocolate cake. Vertigo is a natural reaction: “I thought I knew who I was, but I'm not sure anymore.”

The earth is generous, giving me tomatoes and basil and lemon verbena and marjoram and chardonnay grapes, all now withering in the autumn. And the generosity comes out of a relationship: I planted the tomatoes in spring, gambling on whether or not there would be another frost. The fact that there might be a frost that would ruin all the work is part of the game.

The *Heart Sutra* records the discovery of emptiness, and I like to imagine that the template for this discovery is a naked meeting with the

world. The lover takes off her clothes, and stretches alongside you, and you both become lost. It's not so hard to see that the lover becomes you. This is such a fundamental act that perhaps it is the model for all giving.

Suffering might be the absence of such a meeting. Suffering is what happens when we are lonely and forget that we participate in the world. People often complain about love, or at least about its consequences, but welcoming the consequences is part of the game of generosity too. The earth gives a Yes without regard to what is given back, and being a human is also a gift, not a purchase. Even the Nos we get are gates to the generosity of the world.

Those gifts that are precious to the giver are especially interesting. A friend told me a story on this theme: "When I was in kindergarten, a little boy had a White Stag jacket. He took off the zipper pull, which had a little deer on it, and gave it to me. It was a lovely thing to him, and I still remember it." When someone gives you something precious it means that, beyond the usefulness of the gift, you are precious. The gift marks a moment when you are welcomed into the other person's heart.

Inside the teaching of Zen there is an understanding that gifts are like that zipper pull: They drag us into a world in which dogs and deer and even we have buddhanature. Generosity trusts the emptiness that runs through things, even ungenerous or ungainly things—it links to the clarity that underlies all our madness. Whenever my thoughts turn toward greed, acquisitiveness, or stinginess, my shoulders tense up, and it feels as if I'm holding my breath. To find a remedy, I don't have to improve my thoughts, though—just be generous with them. Then freedom seems to appear automatically.

In the end, generosity doesn't have reasons. Generosity might be strategically effective or virtuous, but that's not important. The point is that there is no good reason to love life or each other, yet we do. Gen-

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erosity keeps faith with our appreciation of each other; it stems from a natural empathy with everything that, like us, has the courage to take a shape in the world.

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12

RICH GENEROSITY

On transferring merit

MASTER SHENG YEN

When a candle is lit in a dark room, it illuminates the room to some extent, but its power is limited. But if you use the same candle to light another candle, the total brightness increases. If you continue to do this, you can fill the room with brilliant illumination. The idea of transferring merit to others is like this. If we keep our own light selfishly hidden, it will only provide a limited amount of illumination. But when we share our light with others, we do not diminish our own light. Rather, we increase the amount of light available to all. Therefore, when others light our candle, we issue forth light. When out of gratitude we use our candle to light other people's candles, the whole room gets brighter. This is why we transfer merit to others. This kind of light is continuous and inexhaustible.

When we achieve a mind of gratitude and dedicate ourselves to helping others, we can practice generosity. We can be generous with our wealth, with ourselves, and with the dharma. In some ways, giving wealth is the easiest. If we consume less and live more frugally, we can give away what we save.

It is also useful to remember that the nature of giving is not necessarily dependent on the size or the value of the gift. Once, the Buddha was about to teach the dharma to a congregation in the forest, but it got

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dark. Several people offered their lamps, but there was a homeless woman whose only possession was an alms bowl, which she offered to serve as an oil lamp. On realizing this, the Buddha exclaimed to his congregation that the old lady's virtue was the most excellent, as she had offered her total wealth, the begging bowl. By making her offering, do you think she lost anything?

So when out of gratitude we dedicate ourselves to benefit others, this is practicing generosity or giving. This is something we can learn. Some people think by giving everything away, you end up with nothing. But the dharma is an inexhaustible well. However much you give of it, you can always go back for more, because in this well the more you take from it, the higher the water will rise. As long as you give the dharma to nourish others, it will be there. As long as you are alive and are able to practice, this will be true. Being alive, you can learn more and more, and give more and more. Being alive, you can also take time to rest and recover, then go back to the source. This is how giving the dharma works.

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13

THE JOY OF GIVING

Cultivating generosity through a generous spirit

GIL FRONSDAL

If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would the stain of selfishness overcome their minds. Even if it were their last bite, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared, if there were someone to receive their gift.—*Itivuttaka* 26

The practice of giving, or *dana* in Pali, has a preeminent place in the teachings of the Buddha. When he taught a graduated series of practices for people to engage in as they progress along the path, he always started by talking about the importance and benefits of the practice of generosity. Based on that foundation, he talked about the importance and benefits of the practice of ethics. Then he discussed the practices of calming the mind, and after that he described the insight practices, which, supported by a calm and stable mind, lead to enlightenment. Once a person had awakened, the Buddha often instructed him or her to go out to benefit others, to be of service. Service can be seen as an act of generosity, so the Buddhist path begins and ends with this virtue.

*Dana* refers to the act of giving and to the donation itself. The Buddha used the word *cage* to refer to the inner virtue of generosity that ensures that *dana* is connected to the Path. This use of *cage* is particularly

significant because it also means “relinquishment” or “renunciation.” An act of generosity entails giving more than is required, customary, or expected relative to one’s resources and circumstances. Certainly it involves relinquishment of stinginess, clinging, and greed. In addition, generosity entails relinquishing some aspects of one’s self-interest, and thus is a giving of one’s self. The Buddha stressed that the spiritual efficacy of a gift is dependent not on the amount given but rather on the attitude with which it is given. A small donation that stretches a person of little means is considered of greater spiritual consequence than a large but personally insignificant donation from a wealthy person.

For laypeople, the Buddha considered the morally just acquisition of wealth and financial security to be a skillful source of happiness. However, he did not consider wealth to be an end in itself. Its value lay in the uses to which it was put. The Buddha likened a person who enjoyed wealth without sharing it with others to someone digging his own grave. The Buddha also compared the person who righteously earns wealth and gives it to the needy to a person with two eyes. The stingy person was compared to someone with only one eye.

The Buddha understood giving to be a powerful source of merit with long-term benefits both in this life and in lives to come. While the teachings on merit do not carry much meaning for many Western dharma practitioners, these teachings suggest unseen pathways by which consequences of our actions return to us.

One way that the giver sees his or her generosity return is found in “instant karma,” the Buddhist idea that acts that you do have direct consequences on the state of your mind and heart, even as you do them. The consequences of giving are quite wonderful in the present moment; if we are present for them, we can receive these wonderful consequences during the act of giving.

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The Buddha emphasized the joy of giving. Dana is not meant to be obligatory or done reluctantly. Rather dana should be performed when the giver is “delighted before, during, and after giving.”

At its most basic level, dana in the Buddhist tradition means giving freely without expecting anything in return. The act of giving is purely out of compassion or good will, or the desire for someone else’s well-being. Perhaps dana is more about how we are than what we do. Through generosity, we cultivate a generous spirit. Generosity of spirit will usually lead to generosity of action, but being a generous person is more important than any particular act of giving. After all, it is possible to give without it being a generous act.

Although giving for the purposes of helping others is an important part of the motivation and joy of giving, the Buddha considered giving for the purpose of attaining nibbana as the highest motivation. For this purpose, “one gives gifts to adorn and beautify the mind.” Among these adornments are nonclinging, lovingkindness, and concern for the well-being of others.

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14

THE EVOLUTION  
OF HAPPINESS

JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

It is said that after his enlightenment the Buddha was motivated to teach by seeing that all beings were seeking happiness, yet out of ignorance were doing the very things that brought them suffering. This aroused his great compassion to point the way to freedom.

The Buddha spoke of different kinds of happiness associated with various stages on the unfolding path of awakening. As we penetrate deeper into the process of opening, the happiness of each stage brings us progressively closer to the highest kind of happiness, the happiness of *nibbana*, of freedom.

What are the causes and conditions that give rise to each of these stages of happiness? How does this joy come about? The events and circumstances of our lives do not happen by accident; rather they are the result of certain causes and conditions. When we understand the conditions necessary for something to happen, we can begin to take destiny into our own hands.

The first kind of happiness is the one that's most familiar to us—the happiness of sense pleasures. This is the kind of happiness we experience from being in pleasant surroundings, having good friends, enjoying beautiful sights and sounds and delicious tastes and smells, and having agreeable sensations in the body. Even though these pleasures are impermanent and fleeting, in the moments we're experiencing them, they

bring us a certain delight.

According to the Buddha, each of the different kinds of happiness is created or conditioned by a different level of purity. The level that gives rise to sensual happiness is purity of conduct, sometimes called purity of action. Purity of conduct is a fundamental way of coming into a true relationship with ourselves, with other people, and with the world. It has two aspects. The first is the cultivation of generosity—the expression of non-greed and non-clinging. It is greed or attachment that keeps us bound to the wheel of samsara, the cycle of life and death. With every act of giving we weaken the power of grasping. The Buddha once said that if we knew as he did the fruit of giving, we would not let a single meal pass without sharing it, so great is the power of generosity.

The Buddha spoke of three levels of generosity. He called the first beggarly giving—we give the worst of what we have, what we don't want, the leftovers. Even then, we have a lot of doubt: "Should I give it? Shouldn't I? Next year I'll probably have a use for it." The next level is friendly giving—we give what we would use for ourselves, and we give it with more spontaneity and ease, with more joy in the mind. The highest kind of generosity is queenly or kingly giving. The mind takes delight in offering the best of what we have, giving what we value most. This is the perfection of generosity.

Generosity takes many forms—we may give our time, our energy, our material possessions, our love. All are expressions of caring, of compassion, of connection, and of renunciation—the ability to let go. The beauty of generosity is that it not only brings us happiness in the moment—we feel good when we give—but it is also the cause for happiness to arise in the future.

The other aspect of purity of conduct is *sila*, the Pali word for morality. In the Buddha's teaching there are five precepts that laypeople

follow: not killing, not stealing, not committing sexual misconduct, not using wrong speech—false or harsh speech—and not taking intoxicants, which cloud or delude the mind. The underlying principle is non-harming—of ourselves, other people, and the environment.

Just as generosity is a practice, so, too, is commitment to the precepts. Consciously practicing them fosters wakefulness and keeps us from simply acting out the habit patterns of our conditioning. The precepts serve as a reference point, giving us some clarity in understanding whether our behavior is wholesome or unwholesome. They are not a set of commandments—“Thou shalt not do this” and “Thou shalt do that”—but rather guidelines for exploring how our actions affect our mind: What happens when we’re in conflict with the world? What happens when we’re in harmony with other people and ourselves? In the traditional teachings of the Buddha, morality is the foundation of concentration, and concentration is the foundation of wisdom. When the mind is in turmoil, it’s very difficult to concentrate. The power of virtue is a steadfastness and ease of mind. And when we’re in harmony with ourselves, we give a wonderful gift to other people—the gift of trust. We’re saying with our lives, with our actions, “You need not fear me.” Just imagine how the world would be transformed if everybody observed one precept: not to kill.

The joy we experience when we’re practicing generosity and morality gives rise to the second kind of happiness, the happiness of concentration. The Buddha called this purity of mind. When the mind is steady and one-pointed, there’s a quality of inner peace and stillness that is much deeper and more fulfilling than the happiness of sense pleasures. We enjoy sense pleasures, but at a certain point we tire of them. Just how long can we listen to music or eat good food? By contrast, the happiness that comes with concentration of mind is refreshing. It energizes us.

There are many techniques for developing concentration. We can focus on the breath, on a sound, on a light, on a mantra, on an image, on walking. We can practice *metta*, lovingkindness, or *karuna*, compassion. We can each find the way that for us is most conducive to strengthening the state of one-pointedness, of collectedness. We learn how to quiet the inner dialogue. As concentration becomes stronger, we actually start living from a place of greater inner peace. This is a source of great happiness, great joy.

The happiness of concentration makes possible the next kind of happiness, the happiness of beginning insight. When the mind is still, we can employ it in the service of awareness and come to a deeper understanding of who we are and what life is about. Wisdom unfolds in a very ordered way. When we sit and pay attention to our experience, the first level we come to is psychological insight. We see all our different sides—the loving side, the greedy side, the judging side, the angry side, the peaceful side. We see parts of ourselves that have been covered up—the jealousy, the fear, the hatred, the unworthiness. Often when we first open up to the experience of who we are, we don't like a lot of it. The tendency is to be self-judgmental. Through the power of concentration and mindfulness, we learn how to rest very naturally in the simple awareness of what's happening. We become less judgmental. We begin to get insight into the complexities of our personality. We see the patterns of our thoughts and emotions, and the ways we relate to people. But this is a tricky point in the practice. Psychological insights can be very seductive—who's more interesting than oneself?—so it's easy to get lost on this level of inquiry. We need to be watchful and keep coming back to the main object of meditation.

Through the practice of very careful momentary attention, we see and connect very directly with the nature of thoughts and emotions,

not getting so lost in the story. What is the nature of anger? What is the quality of happiness? What is the quality of compassion? The momentum of mindfulness begins to build.

At this point there's a real jump in our practice. The Buddha called this level purity of view, or purity of understanding. We let go of our fascination with the content of our minds and drop into the level of process, the flow of phenomena. We see clearly that what is happening in each moment is knowing and object, arising and passing away.

The Buddha once gave a very short discourse called "The All" in which he described the totality of our experience in six phases:

The eye, visible objects, and the knowing of them.

The ear, sounds, and the knowing of them.

The tongue, tastes, and the knowing of them.

The nose, smells, and the knowing of them.

The body, sensations, and the knowing of them.

The mind, mind objects, and the knowing of them.

This is our first clear glimpse of the nature of the mind itself. We see that all we are is a succession of mind moments—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, feeling. At this stage, we have a very direct understanding of what the Buddha called the Three Characteristics. We have a visceral experience of the truth of *anicca*, impermanence: everything is changing constantly. And out of this intimate understanding of the momentariness of phenomena, we begin to comprehend more clearly what the Buddha meant by *dukkha*, suffering—the unsatisfactory nature of things. When we see that even pleasant things are changing—and changing rapidly—it becomes obvious that they are incapable of satisfying us. Not because they are inherently bad but be-



cause they don't last. This insight leads to an understanding of the characteristic that is most difficult to see—*anatta*, or selflessness. There is no one behind this process to whom it is happening; what we call “self” is the process of change.

Purity of view is a gateway to greater insight and even deeper levels of happiness. The momentum of mindfulness becomes so strong that the perception of phenomena arising and passing away becomes crystal clear. Concentration and awareness are effortless. The mind becomes luminous. This point in the practice is called Vipassana happiness. It is a very happy time in our meditation. The joy of it far exceeds the happiness of concentration or of sense pleasures, because we experience such precise, clear insight into the nature of things. It's our first taste of coming home. We feel tremendous rapture and overwhelming gratitude: after all the work we've done, we're finally reaping a great reward.

But there's a problem here. This stage is often called “pseudo-nibbana.” Everything we've practiced so hard for—clarity, luminosity, rapture, lightness, joy—is reflected back to us as what the Buddha called “the corruptions of insight.” The qualities themselves are not the problem; indeed, they are the factors of enlightenment. But because our insight is not yet mature, we become attached to them and to the happiness they bring. It takes renewed effort to come back to simply noting these extraordinary states. At this point we hit a bumpy stage. Instead of the arising and passing of phenomena, we begin to experience the dissolution of everything—our minds, our bodies, the world. Everything is vanishing. There's no place to stand. We're trying to hold onto something that is continually dissolving. As this stage unfolds, there is often tremendous fear.

In Vipassana happiness, we can sit for hours. But at the stage of dissolution we sit for ten or fifteen minutes and become disgusted. This

phase is colloquially known as the “rolling up the mat” stage because all yogis want to do is roll up the mat and quit. It’s a very difficult time, with a lot of existential suffering. This is not the suffering of pain in the knees or of psychological problems but the suffering inherent in existence. We think our practice is falling apart, but actually this is a stage of deepening wisdom. Out of our opening to dukkha comes what is called “the urge for deliverance,” a strong motivation to be free.

From this urge for freedom emerges another very happy stage of meditation, the happiness of equanimity. This is a far deeper, subtler, and more pervasive happiness than the rapture of the earlier stage of seeing things rapidly arising and passing away. There is softness and lightness in the body. The mind is perfectly poised—there is not even the slightest reaching for or pushing away. The mind is completely impartial. Pleasant or unpleasant, whatever arises is fine. All the factors of enlightenment are in the final maturing stage.

It is out of this place of equanimity that the mind opens spontaneously and intuitively to the unconditioned, the unborn, the unmanifest—nibbana. Nibbana is the highest happiness, beyond even the happiness of great insight or understanding, because it transcends the mind itself. It is transforming. The experience of nibbana has the power to uproot from the stream of consciousness the unwholesome factors of mind that keep us bound to samsara. The first moment of opening to the highest reality uproots the attachment to self, to the sense of “I.” And it is said that from that moment on, a being is destined to work through the remaining defilements, such as greed and anger, on the way to full awakening.

What the Buddha taught on so many levels was how to be happy. If we want the happiness of sense delights, there are causes and conditions, namely, purity of conduct. If we want the happiness of stillness, of peace,

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we need to develop concentration—one-pointedness of mind. If we want the happiness of insight, we need to develop purity of view, purity of understanding through strengthening mindfulness. If we want to experience the happiness of different stages of insight, all the way through equanimity, we need to continue building the momentum of mindfulness and the other factors of enlightenment. And if we want the highest happiness, the happiness of nibbana, we simply need to walk this path to the end. And when we aim for the highest kind of happiness, we find all the others a growing part of our lives.

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