

# Dharmette: Generosity

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on September 7, 2011

I want to talk about generosity. There is a Zen story from China of a student who asks his teacher “What is the gateway of Zen?” The teacher says “Generosity.” I like this so much because a gate is a gate into something and out of something. The gate of Zen or Buddhism being generosity means that the gate into Buddhist practice is generosity as well as the gate out of it, or the expression, or consequence of it. Generosity is such a beautiful aspect of practice. It supports practice. Classically in Buddhism, there’s an understanding that generosity lies at the foundation of all of Buddhist practice. It’s one of the first virtues that’s taught to people, and in which they train. Generosity is also the natural expression of the awakened heart – of someone who is awakened. As people become freer, they also become less greedy, more open, and their natural expression is to be generous. As people mature in practice, there’s a gradual unfolding from generosity being a practice to generosity being an expression. In different phases of a person’s life, different parts of this spectrum take prominence.

Sometimes it’s useful to see generosity as a practice. It’s a mindfulness practice. It’s a heart-opening practice. It’s also a practice that establishes our relationship to other people. In that generosity is understood to be the foundation of Buddhist practice, it’s useful to think of that foundation as creating healthy relationships with others. Sometimes when people start Buddhism through meditation practice, they forget about the relational part because they close their eyes and it’s all about themselves. But if you start with generosity as your foundation, then you start creating this strong understanding that you do your practice in relationship to other people.

So generosity creates a lot of mindfulness. It creates healthy relationships. It opens the heart. It also teaches you a lot about yourself because sometimes it’s not easy to be generous. When you take on generosity as a practice, it means that you are beginning to explore when to be generous when you might not want to be. It might occur to you to be generous, but something inside of you resists it out of fear, or a sense of lack or scarcity, or various other things. While you may have an impulse to do something nice for someone, you may think, “No, I can’t do that.” “I can’t do that for a stranger.” “If I do that, something will happen.” Or “I need that thing for myself.”

A lot of attitudes, feelings or attachments come into play when we stretch ourselves to act more often on the impulse to be generous, or to be generous in situations where we normally wouldn’t be. You don’t act out of a sense of duty, but because you’re interested in understanding yourself better, and finding how to stretch your heart and your generosity in some new way. A very important part of the practice of generosity is what it teaches us about ourselves. When we do it that way, it is very important that we don’t beat ourselves up over what we learn about ourselves. We don’t say, “How terrible I am that I’m not generous,” but instead use what we learn as a way to stretch, to be challenged, to open up, and to establish better relationships to the world around us.

Many years ago I read a beautiful story about a tribe in the mountains of the Philippines who didn’t have much contact with the modern world. Dreams were a big part of this culture. Every morning they would tell their family about their dreams. It was the practice of this society that if someone they knew came in a dream and was scary, or angry, or was part of a difficult relationship, then when they woke up the next day, they would bring a gift to that person. There is something very significant symbolically and interpersonally about bringing gifts to people with whom the unconscious psyche has some difficulty, or who represent some difficulty in the mind even if there is no real difficulty in life. It isn’t for their benefit that you’re giving the gift, but it’s for your benefit because the unconscious works sometimes in these symbolic ways, and giving a gift makes a difference.

As we practice generosity, one of the guidelines that is really helpful is to give in such a way that you feel lighter and happier. Don’t give in such a way that you feel burdened and depressed – if you give that way, then it is not really generosity. The practice in Buddhism is to cultivate generosity, not the capacity to give. There are phenomenally wealthy people who can give quite freely, but it doesn’t mean that they’re being generous. Generosity involves a spirit of openness and caring for someone. It’s delight in the idea of supporting someone, or doing something for someone, or bringing joy to someone. So part of the practice of generosity is to search for the joy and lightness that comes from it.

If there's no delight or joy, you should be happy that you feel burdened by it because this gives you a chance to turn your attention to understanding what's going on that you feel burdened. What are the limitations? What's going on? Try to understand yourself better. Are there genuine ways that you can do it so that it brings joy and happiness? As this continues, hopefully you will find yourself being more generous, less greedy and clinging to things, and more able to let go of things in a beautiful way. Generally you're generous in situations where it's not expected that you should give anything, but it occurs to you to give. If it's expected, I don't know if it could really be generous.

With time, your motivation of generosity becomes stronger and with that comes the capacity to let go. The Pali word for generosity is *cāga* and it has two meanings. Sometimes it's translated into English as generosity, and sometimes it's translated as letting go or renunciation. Some people feel concerned that the word for generosity also means letting go or relinquishment. The idea is that you're generously or happily relinquishing or giving away something you're not expected or obligated to give. You're open-handedly passing it on as opposed to holding on tight. The joy of generosity has a lot to do with feeling the joy of that open-handed releasing of giving. That relinquishment or open-handed giving away is closely connected to liberation and awakening, because liberation or awakening in Buddhism is the letting go of the clinging, limitations and constriction in which we're living. Generosity is the movement away from that to opening up.

The flip side of generosity is that we can also be the recipients of generosity. It's a beautiful thing to be graciously and openly willing to receive someone else's generosity or goodwill gifts. When you realize how beautiful it is to be generous, you would never want to reject someone's generosity. You are giving them a gift by allowing yourself to be the recipient. If you say, "No, I'm not worthy; don't do that;" or "I'm afraid that now I'm going to be obligated to you," then you actually interrupt that flow of beauty in them.

So part of being generous is to also be willing to receive generosity. As we feel more receptive and open, we perhaps become aware that there are many more gifts in our life than we're aware of. I got a lesson from this when I read something by Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk. When he wrote about Buddhism he said, "The open begging bowl of the Buddhist monk and nun is symbolic of being open to the gifts of the world." Because when a monastic goes out into the world with an open begging bowl, they don't ask and they don't pick and choose what gets put in their bowl. They just go out, available to the gifts that come their way. For Thomas Merton that was symbolic of just being open, receptive and available to all the gifts that are coming into our lives all the time. I think that as people develop in practice, and relax and become more present, it seems really amazing how much is here to support their life, and how many gifts are here all the time.

So the gate of Zen is generosity. We go in; we go out; and in that gate we receive. Who knows what will come in through your gate of generosity if you're open and present in this wonderful world of ours? Those are my thoughts on generosity.

May you experiment a bit with generosity. There's a wonderful practice to do. Take not a lot of cash, but a significant amount. When I first heard about this practice, the suggestion was \$20. During the week that you carry this \$20 in your pocket, figure out someone to whom you'd like to give it in a way in which you're offering it generously. See what happens as you do this exercise.