



## Flow of Giving Naturally

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### Giving

- Judy Lief, Jan Chozen Bays, Norman Fischer

The practice of generosity may seem simple—it is learning how to give—but it is the ground that allows discipline, patience, exertion, meditation, and wisdom to flourish. It establishes the basic attitude of magnanimity that is the defining characteristic of the path of the bodhisattva.

The word magnanimous, like the Sanskrit term mahatma, means “greatness of soul.” With magnanimity you are not pinched in your outlook or heart, but rather you have a quality of richness and spaciousness. There is room for everyone.

I once visited a temple that claimed to have one thousand Buddha statues. Among all of those buddhas, the one that most invoked the feeling of generosity for me was a statue of a very chubby Buddha embracing piles of children who were tumbling all over him. Laughing with delight, he maintained a sense of peace in the midst of their chaos. Instead of shooing the children away because he had more important things to do, he gathered them in with a big hug. He radiated love and happiness and acceptance.

That kind of effortless bounty is what generosity is all about, but to get there a little effort and reflection may be in order. To cultivate generosity it is necessary to understand the mental obstacles that cause us to hold back.

One obstacle is self-doubt. We may have an impoverished sense of our own capacities and doubt that we have all that much to offer. Another obstacle is stinginess. We may have a lot of resources, but no matter how wealthy we are, deep down we are afraid of letting go of even a small portion.

Generosity is based on interconnection, on looking outside oneself, noticing where there is a need and responding to it. So a third obstacle is self-absorption, being oblivious to what is going on around you. Generosity has the power to cut through such obstacles and it is available to us all.

The sense of richness that allows generosity to flourish isn't dependent on external factors like wealth or social status. (In fact, studies have shown that the wealthiest Americans' level of philanthropy is less than half that of the poorest Americans.) No matter how poor or rich we may be, we all have something to offer. And when we let go of our clinging and extend our hand to others, we find that we ourselves are blessed. Our pinched state of mind, which was so alienating and unpleasant, suddenly relaxes and we are brought into a larger and more inspired sense of the world and our own capacities. Instead of feeling that something is being taken away from us, we find that the more we give, the wealthier we feel.

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The Buddha said, “If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving and sharing...even if it were their last bite...they would not eat without having shared, if there were someone to receive their gift.”

But we cannot force ourselves to be generous. True generosity comes from a deeper place than acquiescence to the Buddha's admonition. Generosity, like all aspects of our enlightened nature, lies partially dormant within us. It has been obscured by the inevitable wounds, duties, and worries of our busy human lives.

When we meditate and quiet the mind, we get a deeper look at the true nature of our life and see that it is interconnected. This uncovers in us a well of gratitude. Can we open the mind's awareness and investigate what we're being given right now?

We notice our breath. What in the breath is given to us? We are given the air and the body that breathes. We cannot make air. We cannot build and manage our minutely complex body ourselves. We notice the pressure of the cushion under our seat. We are given its firm support. We notice the touch of clothing on our skin. We see the people who planted, weeded, and harvested the cotton, who wove the cloth, who cut and sewed, packaged

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and shipped, who drove the trucks, who opened the fitting-room doors, who took our payment. We realize that the life energy of many people covers and warms us in the form of this shirt, this pair of pants.

We are not self-made. We are made of the raw ingredients of sunlight, soil, and water, shaped into the flesh of plants and animals, shaped into our life. Our life is one big gift, given by countless beings. When we truly see this, gratitude naturally arises, as does the question, “How can I repay the many beings who are continually giving to me?”

The greatest gift is the gift of dharma, the gift of relief from suffering. Who would not receive this gift gladly? We give this gift first to ourselves, studying and practicing it, transforming our own suffering into a greater measure of ease and happiness. As we do this, we naturally pass this gift along to others in our lives. It could be a smile for the grocery-store checkout lady still reeling from an angry customer’s words, a nutrition bar and a look into the eyes of the homeless man asking for recognition on the corner at the stoplight, a hug for our child distressed by bullying.

We naturally know what to give. We don’t have to work to produce generosity. We just have to embrace our practice fully. True and accurate generosity is the natural outcome.

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“May we with all beings realize the emptiness of the three wheels, giver, receiver, and gift.”

Zen practitioners chant these words before eating a meal. They remind us that the food about to be eaten has not been earned; it’s a gift. But this gift is not to be understood in the usual way. “The emptiness of the three wheels” means that this giving isn’t a beneficent act one performs for another, an act you can take credit for or feel worthy or unworthy of. A Zen practitioner about to eat a meal remembers that giving is life—that everything is giving, everything is given. There are no separate givers, receivers, or gifts. All of life is always giving and receiving at the same time. This is our practice and our joy. So we practice giving—both receiving and giving gifts—in this spirit.

Some gifts we see as gifts (the birthday or holiday gift) and others we usually don’t see as gifts (the gift of sunlight, the gift of breath). The practice of giving extends to all forms of giving.

Traditionally, there are three things to give: material gifts, the gift of dharma, and the gift of freedom. But really there are many more things to give: the gift of listening, the gift of love, the gift of creation, attention, and effort. To make a poem or a painting is to practice giving, as is cooking a meal, cleaning a room, putting a single flower in a vase. In his fascicle “Four Methods of Guidance for Bodhisattvas,” Dogen writes that to launch a boat, build a bridge, and earn a living are acts of giving. To be willing to be born—and to die—is to practice giving.

I usually think of four simple ways to practice giving: giving yourself to yourself (that is, to be generous in your attitude toward yourself); giving materially to others (giving money or other material gifts to those in need and to those not in need); giving fully and without reservation the gift of your presence and respect; and giving yourself completely in your meditation practice.

There are six paramitas or perfections of wisdom that define the Buddhist Mahayana path:

giving,  
ethical conduct,  
energy,  
patience,  
meditation,  
and wisdom.

It is no wonder that giving is the first of these. The more you study it, the more it seems that giving is the whole of the Buddha way.

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