

## Generosity of Attention

**“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.”** -- Simone Weil

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- Amy Ward Brimmer

There are three words you might like to bring into your practice for 2020— Perseverance, Play, and Generosity. These are important aspects of mindful living that we can work to understand more deeply and cultivate in the professional and personal realms. We can try to remember to hold them in mind and heart as we move through the day, often ask questions, such as “where is the play in this?” or “how can generosity help here?”

Generosity is a wonderful thing to keep in mind, because it instantly transforms the attitude and energy of any given situation. Although we typically think of financial giving when we hear this word, there are many ways to be generous: one can give time, information, assistance, space, and attention. Generous giving in Buddhism is the practice of cultivating a generous spirit. It is a foundational practice the Buddha taught. This understanding is necessary to attain awakening.

We are keenly aware of what's known as “scarcity mentality” these days, in both our own mind and in the culture at large. This is the persistent belief that there is not enough time, money, talent, intelligence, etc. Not enough. Less than. This kind of thinking is typically so ubiquitous that we aren't aware of it, even as it colors our day-to-day experiences. Scarcity mentality creates a barrier to abundance and the free flow of material and emotional energy in our lives. Becoming more generous and acting in generous ways counteracts the fearful attitude of the tightwad, who says, “I got mine” and “if you get some, I get less.” In truth, this is a completely unnatural way to be. Nature is itself gloriously abundant. Humans are plagued by greed, it's true. But it turns out we also have a very natural capacity to be generous.

How many times have you become frustrated in a conversation because you can sense the other person is not fully there? Maybe they're hearing your words but their mind is elsewhere, waiting for their turn to speak or for the conversation to be over.

Conversely, how does it feel when you are being fully heard by another person? Especially when we are troubled or confused, it's often enough just to know we have another's full attention.

Perhaps the most important way to be generously attentive – and the least developed or understood is to extend it to ourselves. Being fully, open-ended attention is essential. You're not really strengthening presence or moving mindfully if you're not attending to yourself and your experience. This is not self-indulgent fantasizing or repeating affirmations or strategizing about how to be a better person. It's a matter of opening the heart-mind and feeling into the natural capacity for care and interest. It's a way of saying, “the life which has been entrusted to me matters, and deserves my willing connection to it, as often and as completely as possible.”

There's a well-known story about an old man who was dying and as he prepared for the inevitable, he looked back on how he had lived his life. He considered all the ways in which he had been loving and helpful to his dear ones and colleagues. He saw that he really hadn't done such a bad job, that in fact he had been pretty generous with his possessions, had openly shared his knowledge and expertise, and had been supportive of the goals and needs of others. He reported this to his family as they sat at his bedside, and then he began to cry. “Why are you crying?” they asked. “You were a good and generous man, we all agree.” But he shook his head, and said, “No. You know who I was really stingy with, the one person I constantly ignored? Me. I didn't open up to hear what I honestly wanted or needed, didn't trust my own authentic voice, pushed away the things that could have brought me joy and happiness, put myself last. Is it too late?”

Developing the skill to be spaciously present with yourself is an act of generosity. It's not selfish obsession with getting or having, but just the opposite. The generosity of attention activates our natural field of awareness and “enoughness”. This allows you to start from a foundation of authenticity to share your attention generously with others.

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## Gift of Generosity

- Phillip Moffitt

Every year at this time, I am reminded of a lesson in generosity that I received many years ago. As a teenager living in the Appalachian Mountains, I worked as a bag boy in a supermarket. To my dismay, it was the working poor who were most likely to give tips, people who often seemed needier than me. I would either refuse the tip or sometimes slip the money back into one of the bags as I put them in the car. I felt quite proud about this until one cold, rainy Christmas Eve when a man wearing worn-out clothes and driving a beat-up old car filled with many wide-eyed, unkempt children insisted on giving me a large tip. I was embarrassed at the idea of taking his money and flatly refused. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "This is something I can do for you. It is my Christmas."

Suddenly I got it—the tips weren't about me; they were about the giver, his values, and his life. I'd believed I had the right to decide the appropriateness of another's generosity. Such arrogance! I accepted the man's money, deeply thanked him, and kept walking through the parking lot pushing the empty shopping cart in the freezing air rather than returning to the warm store. My ears burned from shame, but my heart was warm, for a generous spirit had touched me. I knew then that I had received a teaching, but it would be many years before I could make it my own.

## The True Meaning of Generosity

True generosity arises out of unconditional caring and compassion for another. Each of us is dependent upon others for our blessings. We flourish or perish together through interwoven acts of generosity arising from the benevolence and integrity of others, many of whom we shall never meet. This is the power of generosity. When we mindfully practice generosity, we come into contact with its joyful, healing power.

Practicing generosity is the intention to find release from attachment to gratifying our ego needs by giving freely of what we have that is of value. What we have to give may be material in nature, or it may be our time, energy, or wisdom. We practice generosity to eradicate the attachments that come from our feelings of scarcity and separateness. The practice of generosity allows us to see the world from the point of view of what we have and what we have to give, instead of seeing it from the perspective of what we don't have and desperately want.

## For Your Reflection:

During this season of gift giving, reflect on how you might practice generosity throughout the year. There are many ways to cultivate an attitude of generosity in daily life. Here are just a few that I have found to be quite powerful:

Be generous with your attention when you're listening to someone.

Be generous in celebrating another person's happiness.

Be generous with your sympathy toward someone who has experienced loss.

Be generous with your compliments and praise of others.

Be generous with your unconditional respect of others.

Be generous with your willingness to be helpful.

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## The Buddha's Word on Generosity

"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

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