

Generosity First

March, 2003 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Several years ago, when Ajaan Suwat was teaching a retreat at IMS, I was his interpreter. After the second or third day of the retreat he turned to me and said, "I notice that when these people meditate they're awfully grim." You'd look out across the room and all the people were sitting there very seriously, their faces tense, their eyes closed tight. It was almost as if they had *Nirvana or Bust* written across their foreheads.

He attributed their grimness to the fact that most people here in the West come to Buddhist meditation without any preparation in other Buddhist teachings. They haven't had any experience in being generous in line with the Buddha's teachings on giving. They haven't had any experience in developing virtue in line with the Buddhist precepts. They come to the Buddha's teachings without having tested them in daily life, so they don't have the sense of confidence they need to get them through the hard parts of the meditation. They feel they have to rely on sheer determination instead.

If you look at the way meditation, virtue, and generosity are taught here, it's the exact opposite of the order in which they're taught in Asia. Here, people sign up for a retreat to learn some meditation, and only when they show up at the retreat center do they learn they're going to have to observe some precepts during the retreat. And then at the very end of the retreat they learn that before they'll be allowed to go home they're going to have to be generous. It's all backwards.

Over in Thailand, children's first exposure to Buddhism, after they've learned the gesture of respect, is in giving. You see parents taking their children by the hand as a monk comes past on his alms round, lifting them up, and helping them put a spoonful of rice into the monk's bowl. Over time, as the children start doing it themselves, the process becomes less and less mechanical, and after a while they begin to take pleasure in giving.

At first this pleasure may seem counterintuitive. The idea that you gain happiness by giving things away doesn't come automatically to a young child's mind. But with practice you find that it's true. After all, when you give, you put yourself in a position of wealth. The gift is proof that you have more than enough. At the same time it gives you a sense of your worth as a person. You're

able to help other people. The act of giving also creates a sense of spaciousness in the mind, because the world we live in is created by our actions, and the act of giving creates a spacious world: a world where generosity is an operating principle, a world where people have more than enough, enough to share. And it creates a good feeling in the mind.

From there, the children are exposed to virtue: the practice of the precepts. And again, from a child's point of view it's counterintuitive that you're going to be happy by not doing certain things you want to do — as when you want to take something, or when you want to lie to cover up your embarrassment or to protect yourself from criticism and punishment. But over time you begin to discover that, yes, there is a sense of happiness, there is a sense of wellbeing that comes from being principled, from not having to cover up for any lies, from avoiding unskillful actions, from having a sense that unskillful actions are beneath you.

So by the time you come to meditation through the route of giving and being virtuous, you've already had experience in learning that there are counterintuitive forms of happiness in the world. When you've been trained through exposure to the Buddha's teachings, you've learned the deeper happiness that comes from giving, the deeper happiness that comes from restraining yourself from unskillful actions, no matter how much you might want to do them. By the time you come to the meditation you've developed a certain sense of confidence that so far the Buddha has been right, so you give him the benefit of the doubt on meditation.

This confidence is what allows you to overcome a lot of the initial difficulties: the distractions, the pain. At the same time, the spaciousness that comes from generosity gives you the right mindset for the concentration practice, gives you the right mindset for insight practice — because when you sit down and focus on the breath, what kind of mind do you have? The mind you've been creating through your generous and virtuous actions. A spacious mind, not the narrow mind of a person who doesn't have enough. It's the spacious mind of a person who has more than enough to share, the mind of a person who has no regrets or denial over past actions. In short, it's the mind of a person who realizes that true happiness doesn't see a sharp dichotomy between your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others.

The whole idea that happiness has to consist either in doing things only for your own selfish motives or for other people to the sacrifice of yourself — the dichotomy between the two — is something very Western, but it's antithetical to the Buddha's teachings. According to the Buddha's teachings, true happiness

is something that, by its nature, gets spread around. By working for your own true benefit, you're working for the benefit of others. And by working for the benefit of others, you're working for your own. In the act of giving to others you gain rewards. In the act of holding fast to the precepts, holding fast to your principles, protecting others from your unskillful behavior, you gain as well. You gain in mindfulness; you gain in your own sense of worth as a person, your own self-esteem. You protect yourself.

So you come to the meditation ready to apply the same principles to training in tranquillity and insight. You realize that the meditation is not a selfish project. You're sitting here trying to understand your greed, anger, and delusion, trying to bring them under control — which means that you're not the only person who's going to benefit from the meditation. Other people will benefit — are benefiting — as well. As you become more mindful, more alert, more skillful in undercutting the hindrances in your mind, other people are less subject to those hindrances as well. Less greed, anger, and delusion come out in your actions, and so the people around you suffer less. Your meditating is a gift to them.

The quality of generosity, what they call *caga* in Pali, is included in many sets of Dhamma teachings. One is the set of practices leading to a fortunate rebirth. This doesn't apply only to the rebirth that comes after death, but also to the states of being, the states of mind you create for yourself moment to moment, that you move into with each moment. You create the world in which you live through your actions. By being generous — not only with material things but also with your time, your energy, your forgiveness, your willingness to be fair and just with other people — you create a good world in which to live. If your habits tend more toward being stingy, they create a very confining world, because there's never enough. There's always a lack of this, or a lack of that, or a fear that something is going to slip away or get taken away from you. So it's a narrow, fearful world you create when you're not generous, as opposed to the confident and wide-open world you create through acts of generosity.

Generosity also counts as one of the forms of Noble Wealth, because what is wealth aside from a sense of having more than enough? Many people who are materially poor are, in terms of their attitude, very wealthy. And many people with a lot of material wealth are extremely poor. The ones who never have enough: They're the ones who always need more security, always need more to stash away. Those are the people who have to build walls around their houses, who have to live in gated communities for fear that other people will take away what they've got. That's a very poor kind of life, a confined kind of

life. But as you practice generosity, you realize that you can get by on less, and that there's a pleasure that comes with giving to people. Right there is a sense of wealth. You have more than enough.

At the same time you break down barriers. Monetary transactions create barriers. Somebody hands you something, you have to hand them money back, so there's a barrier right there. Otherwise, if you didn't pay, the object wouldn't come to you over the barrier. But if something is freely given, it breaks down a barrier. You become part of that person's extended family. In Thailand the terms of address that monks use with their lay supporters are the same they use with relatives. The gift of support creates a sense of relatedness. The monastery where I stayed — and this includes the lay supporters as well as the monks — was like a large extended family. This is true of many of the monasteries in Thailand. There's a sense of relatedness, a lack of boundary.

We hear so much talk on "interconnectedness." Many times it's explained in terms of the teaching on dependent co-arising, which is really an inappropriate use of the teaching. Dependent co-arising teaches the connectedness of ignorance to suffering, the connectedness of craving to suffering. That's a connectedness within the mind, and it's a connectedness that we need to cut, because it keeps suffering going on and on and on, over and over again, in many, many cycles. But there's another kind of connectedness, an intentional connectedness, that comes through our actions. These are kamma connections. Now, we in the West often have problems with the teachings on kamma, which may be why we want the teachings on connectedness without the kamma. So we go looking elsewhere in the Buddha's teachings to find a rationale or a basis for a teaching on connectedness, but the real basis for a sense of connectedness comes through kamma. When you interact with another person, a connection is made.

Now, it can be a positive or a negative connection, depending on the intention. With generosity you create a positive connection, a helpful connection, a connection where you're glad that the boundary is down, a connection where good things can flow back and forth. If it's unskillful kamma, you're creating a connection, you're creating an opening that sooner or later you're going to regret. There's a saying in the *Dhammapada* that a hand without a wound can hold poison and not be harmed. In other words, if you don't have any bad kamma, the results of bad kamma won't come to you. But if you have a wound on your hand, then if you hold poison it will seep through the wound and kill you. Unskillful kamma is just that, a wound. It's an opening for poisonous things to come in.

The opposite principle also works. If there's a connection of skillful behavior, a good connection is formed. This sort of positive connection starts with generosity, and grows with the gift of virtue. As the Buddha said, when you hold to your precepts no matter what, with no exceptions, it's a gift of security to all beings. You give unlimited security to everyone, and so you have a share in that unlimited security as well. With the gift of meditation, you protect other people from the effects of your greed, anger, and delusion. And you get protected as well.

So this is what generosity does: It makes your mind more spacious and creates good connections with the people around you. It dissolves the boundaries that otherwise would keep the happiness from spreading around.

When you come to the meditation with that state of mind, it totally changes the way you approach meditating. So many people come to meditation with the question, "What am I going to get out of this time I spend meditating?" Particularly in the modern world, time is something we're very poor in. So the question of getting, getting, getting out of the meditation is always there in the background. We're advised to erase this idea of getting, yet you can't erase it if you've been cultivating it as a habitual part of your mind. But if you come to the meditation with experience in being generous, the question becomes "What do I *give* to the meditation?" You give it your full attention. You give it the effort, you're happy to put in the effort, because you've learned from experience that good effort put into the practice of the Dhamma brings good results. And so that internal poverty of "What am I getting out of this meditation?" gets erased. You come to the meditation with a sense of wealth: "What can I give to this practice?"

You find, of course, that you end up getting a lot more if you start with the attitude of giving. The mind is more up for challenges: "How about if I give it more time? How about meditating later into the night than I usually do? How about getting up earlier in the morning? How about giving more constant attention to what I'm doing? How about sitting longer through pain?" The meditation then becomes a process of giving, and of course you still get the results. When you're not so grudging of your efforts or time, you place fewer and fewer limitations on the process of meditation. That way the results are sure to be less grudging, more unlimited, as well. So it's important that we develop the Noble Wealth of generosity to bring to our meditation.

The texts mention that when you get discouraged in your meditation, when the meditation gets dry, you should look back on past generosity. This gives you a sense of self-esteem, a sense of encouragement. Of course, what

generosity are you going to look back on if there is none? This is why it's important that you approach the meditation having practiced generosity very consciously.

Many times we ask, "How do I take the meditation back into the world?" But it's also important that you bring good qualities of the world into your meditation, good qualities of your day-to-day life, and that you develop them regularly. Thinking back on past acts of generosity gets dry after a while if there's only been one act of generosity that happened a long time ago. You need fresh generosity to give you encouragement.

So this is why, when the Buddha talked about the forms of merit, he said, "Don't be afraid of merit, for merit is another word for happiness." The first of the three main forms of merit is *dana*, giving, which is the expression of generosity. The gift of being virtuous builds on the simple act of giving, and the gift of meditation builds on both.

Of course, a large part of the meditation is letting go: letting go of distractions, letting go of unskillful thoughts. If you're used to letting go of material things, it comes a lot easier to begin experimenting with letting go of unskillful mental attitudes — things that you've held on to for so long that you think you need them, but when you really look at them you find you don't. In fact, you see that they're an unnecessary burden that causes suffering. When you see the suffering, and the fact that it's needless, you can let go. In this way, the momentum of giving carries all the way through the practice, and you realize that it's not depriving you of anything. It's more like a trade. You give away a material object and you gain in generous qualities of mind. You give away your defilements, and you gain freedom.