

Notes and Quotes for April 16, 2023 Dharma Reflections:

What's On the Path?

Part Five: The Dana Paramita (Perfection of Generosity)

It all started with a gift. This is true for so many worthwhile elements of life. We studied the twelve links of independent co-arising (the way in which things come to arise in dependence upon everything else); what is this “everything else” if not a gift? The Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—how could knowledge of them have come into our lives without the boundless generosity of boundless beings? The Four Immeasurables (Great Compassion, Loving-Kindness, Sympathetic Joy, Boundless Equanimity) are nothing if not gifts that keep on giving. There are profound reasons why giving and a generous heart is the first Perfection to be discussed. Let us explore this together.

“Why, then, are these six practices.... explained now as unique Mahayana practices?”

“Let’s use generosity as an example. It is practiced not only in all Buddhist traditions but also in all religions. People who are not interested in any religion but value kindness and compassion also practice generosity. A difference exists, however, between the mere practice of generosity and the perfection of generosity. The perfection of generosity is not simply an absence of miserliness when giving or a casual wish to share things. Nor is it being generous with the motivation to be rich in future lives. Rather, it is giving done with the aspiration to become a buddha in order to benefit all beings most effectively.

“In addition to being motivated by bodhicitta, the perfection of generosity is sealed by the wisdom of emptiness. That is, when giving, we reflect on the ultimate nature of the giver, the gift, and the action of giving. All of them are empty of inherent existence but exist dependently on one another. Through this reflection, any attachment or misconceptions that could arise from generosity are purified. Based on bodhicitta and assisted by the wisdom of emptiness, the perfection of generosity encompasses both the method and wisdom sides of the path and is enriched by them....

“Seeing all the elements of generosity as appearing but empty makes our generosity extremely powerful, transforming it into the supramundane practice of the perfection of generosity.”

- The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, *Courageous Compassion—Volume 6, The Library of Wisdom and Compassion*, Wisdom, 2021, pp. 11-12.

“In the reality of the Buddha’s awakening, these six practices all occur together simultaneously, and each practice includes all of the others. However, they are often taught and learned sequentially. In the *Samdhinirmocana Mahayana Sutra*, Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion, asks the Buddha, ‘How does one know the order of the teaching of these six perfections is like this?’ The Buddha replies, ‘Avalokiteshvara, it is because the six perfections serve as bases for progressively higher achievements. Bodhisattvas who do not focus on their bodies and physical resources—those who practice generosity—achieve ethical discipline. Those who guard their moral practice become patient. Those who have patience initiate heroic effort. Those who initiate effort achieve concentration. Those who achieve concentration attain wisdom that transcends the world.’ Each of the paramitas is supported by the practices that precede it, and each supports what succeeds it. In turn, each one deepens and transforms the practices it is built upon....

“Generosity is the foundation upon which all of these bodhisattva practices rest. Traditionally, in Asia, the first thing people learn about Buddhism is generosity. Children are taught to practice giving. Then they are taught ethics.... They learn to be patient.... They are not usually taught meditation right away....

“When we [in the West] start with [meditation] practices, we may struggle and feel frustrated if we begin without first establishing a foundation of generosity. When we encounter difficulties with concentration, if we look carefully, we may notice that we are not being generous with our difficulty with concentration. We may be trying to practice focused tranquility before we have established a gracious and welcoming attitude toward distractions and tension....

“Generosity is joyful, and we need joy in order to devote ourselves continuously to these challenging practices....

“Generosity comes to life in the world of living beings by welcoming them and by being gracious to whatever arises and ceases. Other words for generosity include giving, graciousness, and welcoming. In the training of generosity, we focus on giving and receiving our life and our practice wholeheartedly, and on offering our life and practice as a gift. As the practice develops, we come to understand that every arising and ceasing is a gift. When we are generous, we become fully grounded in the way things really are. Thus, when our giving fully flowers, it becomes perfect wisdom.”

- *Entering the Mind of Buddha—Zen and the Six Heroic Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Reb Anderson, Shambhala, 2019, pp. 4-8.

“Jamgon Lama said:

The wish-fulfilling jewel, generosity, the fulfiller of the hopes of beings,
Is the supreme weapon that cuts through the knot of miserliness.
Giving rise to courage without losing heart is the conduct of bodhisattvas.
It is the basis of renown in the ten directions.
Understanding this, the wise rely on the excellent path
Of giving away their body, possessions, and virtue.

“The subcategories of generosity are (1) the generosity of material goods; (2) the generosity of dharma; and (3) the generosity of protection from fear.

“For the first, the generosity of material goods, there is giving, great giving, and extraordinary giving....

“Giving... is to give one’s possessions to others, even as little as a tiny package of tea or a cupful of grain. If your intention in doing that is completely pure, then the size of the object is not important.

“The *Sutra of the Three Parts* says that even giving just a morsel of food to one born as an animal is virtuous.

“If you hold on to your possessions until you die, you are not able to use them for the sake of this life or the next. Thinking you have nothing, no matter how much you have, and ranting about that is a concordant cause for rebirth as a hungry ghost....

“Great giving is giving to others things that you consider highly valuable, such as horses, oxen, jewels, and various types of rare things.

“Extraordinary giving means giving one’s life and body, such as when Prince Mahasattva gave his body to the tigress and when Nagarjuna gave his own head to the prosperous prince. Such actions are the conduct of beings who have attained the levels and not for us ordinary beings to practice. Now, without attachment, dedicate your life and body for the sake of sentient beings and make the aspiration that in the next life you will actually be able to give up your life for other beings.

“The generosity of dharma refers to bestowing empowerments and giving dharma discourses and reading transmissions for the sake of others as a method for joining their mind streams with virtue. However, until we extinguish our own self-interest, our intention to accomplish benefit for the sake of others will merely be an imitation....

“The generosity of protection from fear means giving courage, refuge, and protection, without bias, to those sentient beings without refuge or protection and to those without courage or friends. In particular, protecting the lives of others is of great benefit.

“The Teacher said:

Of all composite virtues, protecting the life of a single being is the greatest.”

- *A Guide to the Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*, Dzatrul Ngawang Tenzin Norbu, Snow Lion, 2020, pp. 131-134

“In order to practice generosity, when you have things like food, clothes, money, and so on, you should be eager to offer them to the Buddhas or give them to beggars. Then, if you meet a beggar, all favorable conditions for an act of generosity will be present. You should take advantage of these three occurring together and give away as much as you can without being influenced by niggardliness. If you think, ‘I won’t give now; I’ll give later,’ or ‘This beggar doesn’t look desperate enough, I’ll give to one who is more in need,’ you will never manage to be generous. Look at the bees, who gather so much honey and store it, only to have it taken away in the end by someone else. And mice, who spend their time hoarding grains that are then taken by others. Look at the many immensely rich people in this world who still never think of making an offering to the Three Jewels or giving to the needy. Their wealth is piled up for no purpose; it is a complete waste. Someone who is very poor who offers just a single butter lamp with a pure intention will have inconceivably greater merit when he dies than an apparently rich person who is unable to give anything away or make offerings....

“Do not be selective in your generosity, thinking that it is better to give to one cause than to another. All forms of offering and giving are equally good. You should not imagine that making an offering to the Buddha is something very superior and dignified while giving to a beggar is very limited (‘He will just eat what I give him, and that will be the end of it’). The Buddha himself became a Buddha by perfecting generosity and giving to the needy. It was because he was so generous that great compassion and wisdom grew in him. So there is no difference between making offerings to the Buddha and giving to the poor. In fact we should consider all the beings we meet, beggars and so on, as teachers showing us the path and helping us fulfill our wish to attain enlightenment. We should make offerings to them and give without discrimination.”

- *Zurchungpa’s Testament: A Commentary on Zurchung Sherab Trakpa’s Eighty Chapters of Personal Advice*, in Volume Three of *The Collected Works of Dilgo Khyentse*, Shambhala, 2010, p. 84.

“Giving Material Possessions and Money

“Giving material goods is a wonderful opportunity to connect with others, especially when we give with a pleasant expression and use both hands. It’s important to give at an appropriate time, without harming or inconveniencing anyone. We can also encourage others to be generous by inviting them to join us in making a gift or offering....

“Some people fear that if they give they will be impoverished because they won’t have that object later when they need it. Karmically, the opposite occurs: according to what we give, generosity is the cause to receive wealth, protection, love, and Dharma teachings. Even people who selfishly seek wealth will reap good results in future lives by being generous now....

“In addition, those who are generous will come in contact with holy beings who will guide them on the path in this or future lives....

“(W)hen bodhisattvas hear someone say, ‘Please give me....’ they feel an overwhelming joy....

“(W)hen giving a particular item is too much of a stretch for your present mental capacity, acknowledge your limitation without feeling ashamed or denigrating yourself. At the same time, resolve to put energy into eliminating this hindrance so that you will be able to joyfully give in the future....

“Be practical so that you do not become a burden to others by being unable to take care of yourself. Remember, it is the strength of your kind motivation that is the most important factor, not the size of the offering....

“Giving the Body....

“(P)ractice giving your possessions and making offerings as much as you can—for example, by offering water bowls to the Three Jewels each morning, offering your food before eating, and giving to those in need. Doing practices in which you imagine giving your possessions and virtues of the past, present, and future are also beneficial. With each actual or imagined action of giving, remember to contemplate that agent, action, and object are empty of inherent existence but exist dependent on one another....

“Giving Protection from Danger and Fear

“Helping travelers, providing medical services and medicine, teaching Dharma to the incarcerated, providing aid to refugees, and volunteering in a homeless shelter are examples of giving protection from danger and fear. Tutoring and acting as a mentors for at-risk youth, helping single mothers apply for social services, running a no-kill animal shelter that facilitates animal adoptions, providing legal services for immigrants, migrants, and refugees—there are many ways to reach out and help living beings experiencing fear and danger in the world today. All actions to protect the environment—whether it be recycling, researching renewable energy

sources, planting trees, helping endangered species, taking injured wild animals to a wildlife shelter or sanctuary, and so forth—are also included in the generosity of protecting others. Rescuing insects drowning in water is another form of giving protection....

“Giving Dharma

“Giving the Dharma is said to be the supreme form of generosity because it enables others to create the causes for temporal and ultimate happiness. As with all forms of generosity, our motivation is important; when sharing the Dharma, the purity of motivation is of even greater importance, because sharing the Dharma with a corrupt motivation could cause widespread and long-term harm....

“As Buddhist practitioners, share whatever knowledge you have of the Dharma when people ask for advice. When sharing Dharma, do not expect special treatment, respect, or offerings, but simply give Dharma instructions or advice to others as one friend to another....

“Not everyone wants to teach the Dharma and not everyone is qualified to be a Dharma teacher; but there are many other ways to give the Dharma... such as chanting mantras to children.... Doing our recitations out loud so that animals and insects around us hear them, reading texts and prayers to those recovering from an illness or whose lives are coming to a conclusion, contributing funds to print Dharma books for free distribution, and donating books on Buddhism to college libraries as well as public libraries are also acts of giving the Dharma. Volunteering at a Dharma center, monastery, or temple supports sharing of the Dharma....

“Train so that your generosity is like a snake shedding its skin; there is no regret. Be like a deer who doesn’t have any sense of ownership.... Although our generosity may fall short of this, remember we are *practicing* generosity; the expectation is not that we will be perfectly generous at the beginning. As the old adage goes, ‘practice makes perfect.’”

- The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, *Courageous Compassion—Volume 6, The Library of Wisdom and Compassion*, Wisdom, 2021, pp. 28-41.

“The ancient meditation master Huanbo instructed us to meet whatever comes with no mind. This could be rephrased as an instruction in meeting whatever comes with complete relaxation. I see the bodhisattva spirit of generosity at the heart of this teaching.

“In the early years, the Buddha’s teachings did not occur in monasteries or formal training centers. Whenever the Buddha met people, he met them with complete relaxation and openness. He gave them the teaching of kindness, and they practiced it. We could say that the Buddha’s presence transformed each place he went into a training center. When we practice being kind and generous to whatever is happening, welcoming our lives with a generous heart and mind, we are also in a training center....

“The buddhas recommend that we remember to practice generosity as we practice all of the other paramitas. For example, if we don’t practice giving, our practice of ethics will not become fully mature. The river of generosity flows through all of the other practices.... (pp.15-16)

“Welcoming is the act of graciously receiving whatever comes. It may be clear to most of us that we do need some training in order to be gracious toward unpleasant events. It is often less apparent to us that we also need to train ourselves in generously meeting pleasant events....

“Sometimes it is possible to have a generous response immediately, without missing a beat. But often we have an unwelcoming response first. Our ungenerous responses may be embarrassing to notice; however, noticing them is integral to realizing the perfection of giving. When we see that this is not how we want to respond, we can remember our aspiration to be generous and return to our practice. This is a way to train in generosity.

“Being generous with pleasant experiences is exemplified in the practice of concentration wherein highly pleasant states of being arise and our concentration is perfected by not being attached to bliss and giving it away....

“The perfection of giving is wisdom that realizes the interdependence, inseparability, and insubstantiality of giver, receiver, and gift. All three are present in each moment of generosity, whether we see this or not. This means that the perfection of generosity is one of the forms of the perfection of wisdom....

“Generosity sets us up to be present, silent, and still with what is real. Through the practice of giving, we are warming up to letting go of everything in every moment, which is perfect wisdom.” (pp. 27-29)

- *Entering the Mind of Buddha—Zen and the Six Heroic Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Reb Anderson, Shambhala, 2019

Possible Discussion Points:

1. What do you find easy to give?
2. What do you find difficult to give?
3. Reb Anderson ties generosity to the acceptance of whatever arises in our life. Does this make sense to you?
4. Roshi Kapleau often encouraged his students to be open and honest when answering questions about Zen or your practice, saying, “You can always speak from your own ex-

perience.” Are you shy about giving the Dharma when asked?

5. Zen doesn't usually talk about the emptiness of the “three wheels” (e.g., giver, recipient, and gift), but demands that we *demonstrate* this with our life energy. Can you recall a time in your life when the giving “just happened”? What did that feel like?
6. What do you think about chanting mantras for children, doing recitations for animals, or rescuing drowning insects? What are some other meaningful ways of giving that you have made part of your life?
7. In what ways can difficulties, frustrations, obstacles, and illness be a gift for one experiencing them, but alleviating those same sorts of ills for others can also be a gift?