

The Energy to Be Generous

August 28, 2012

We talked earlier about the issue of when to be compassionate to others and when to show equanimity. But it's not really an issue of compassion versus equanimity. Goodwill, compassion: These are things that we should develop at all times with all beings.

The issue is the distinction between compassion and generosity. You can have compassion for all beings but you can't be generous with everybody. Your time, your money, your energy: These things are limited.

So as you try to decide whom to help, how much help to give, think of what the Buddha had to say about generosity, because that's the framework for understanding the issue.

One of the most important things is that when you give, you don't want to harm yourself or harm the other person—or anyone else. If you're giving to the point where your own energy is beginning to get drained, that's not appropriate generosity. If you're giving in a way that's teaching the other person to be lazy and irresponsible, that's not good generosity, either.

So always keep in mind the fact that you have your limitations. Then try to parcel out the energy you have, the time you have, the knowledge and the material things you have, to see that they're put to the best use.

Now, you can add to your energy through the practice. In fact, this is one of the main purposes of developing concentration: It gives you more energy with which you can practice. It's like food for the mind. This is why we say that practicing meditation is a gift, not only to yourself but also to others. When you have more energy, at the very least it's easier to be more forgiving, it's easier to be less of a burden to others. Sometimes you find that you can actually have the strength to take on some of their burdens.

The strength of concentration, the strength that comes from the meditation, makes you less of a victim of the situation around you. You begin to see where you're adding unnecessary weight to your own mind, unnecessary burdens that you're carrying around.

A phrase they have in Thailand is "the old woman carrying straw." She knows that someday she's going to need some straw so she has a big straw bale that she carries around on her back all the time. As a result, she can't carry anything else of more value. So she's weighed down, can't carry the things that she herself needs, can't carry anybody else's burdens, because she's got this huge bale of straw.

So you've got to look where you're carrying *your* bale of straw around. If you find that your goodness depends on situations around you, it's a sign that you're weighing yourself down unnecessarily. You've got burdensome thoughts, burdensome attitudes. That's already weighing down the mind. Then when someone else says something you don't like, you feel like you're being oppressed.

Well, part of the human world is that people are going to say a lot of things you don't like. That's one of the reflections that the Buddha has you think about on a regular basis: The fact that you've got ears means that you're going to hear unpleasant speech. The fact that you're a human being means that there are going to be unkind words said, words that are not timely, words that are not well-intentioned.

There's a long list of good and bad kinds of words you're bound to hear. So you have to expect that you're going to hear both. But if your goodness depends on hearing only nice words and being only around nice people, you've got to turn around and look at your goodness again. Where are you weighing yourself down unnecessarily?

Look first at how you breathe. I've seen people who are depressed and I've often noticed that the way they breathe is adding to the problem. They breathe in ways that feel burdensome, heavy. It's just a struggle sometimes to breathe.

So one way you can have more energy for helping other people—or at the very least being good to other people in situations where they're not good to you—is to learn how to breathe in a way that feels good and energizing.

As for the unpleasant things that get done and said around you, learn to reflect: This is the human realm. You're not the only one who's being subjected to these things. You're the one who wanted to be born here. This is what comes with this realm. This is a realm for those with a mixture of good and bad karma, so you're going to be experiencing a mixture of good and bad karma here. If you find that when your bad karma comes back at you and you respond in an unskillful way, that just adds more bad karma to the equation and puts you into a tailspin.

So you've got to learn how to think: "Okay, this is not unbearable." The fact that people say bad things, learn how to let it go right past. Don't think of it as an imposition on you; don't think of it as being unfair. It may be unfair, but if you're going to go around demanding justice in this world, trying to straighten out every situation, you won't have much energy left.

So for the sake of your own goodness, you've got to figure out how to cultivate a source of energy inside that's independent of your surroundings. That way, you can be in a pleasant quiet place, and your mind is in good shape; you can be in an unpleasant place, and your mind can still be in good shape. That's what we're

working on.

We do it with the three fabrications. Bodily fabrication: working with the breath so that it feels comfortable and nourishing, energizing. Verbal fabrication: how to think about things in a way that's more energizing. In other words, when things are difficult, think of it as an opportunity. Here's your opportunity to show your stuff, that you can be skillful in spite of the fact that there are unskillful people around you.

Don't keep thinking of yourself as a victim, because you start turning into a scorpion. Scorpions, when they can't sting other animals, start stinging themselves. You want to see where your thoughts are stinging you and learn how to counteract them. Think in the opposite way. Think in a way that gives you energy, that puts you up for the challenge.

Then there are feelings and perceptions. These are mental fabrications. Try to cultivate feelings of well-being in the body. Learn to have an attitude of gratitude for the people who have been helping you, so that you can show that the help they gave you was well-given, wisely given. You're going to make good use of it.

And then the perceptions: As I said, you've got this opportunity to do good, even in difficult situations. You're writing the story of your life. If the narrative is, "They did horrible things to me, and I just couldn't help but do horrible things back," then you're going to be blaming other people for your unskillful behavior. That narrative doesn't go anywhere good.

The narrative of your life should be, "Okay, things were difficult, but I was able to overcome those difficulties." That's the narrative you want to write.

So look at the ways in which you're weighing yourself down unnecessarily, because those things are putting a limitation on the amount of generosity you can manage as you deal with other people. They put a limitation on the extent to which you actually can express your compassion for others.

The attitude of mind that feels like a victim all the time is a very narrow attitude. Remember the Buddha's image of a cup of water into which someone throws a large lump of salt. If your mind is always thinking about how much you've been burdened and victimized by things, you're making your mind into a little tiny cup with not much water in the bottom of the little cup. When some salt gets thrown in, you can't drink the water.

You've got to develop thoughts of goodwill every day. Make them unlimited. And make them not just kind of vague and flowery. You have to think: "Are there people out there that I have ill will for?" And remind yourself, ill will doesn't accomplish anything, no matter how much you've been mistreated.

Goodwill means that you wish that everyone would understand the causes for

true happiness and be willing and able to act on them, so that everybody could find true happiness. The world would be a much better place that way.

There's no need to go over old injuries, because again, you weigh yourself down with that kind of thinking.

So look at ways in which you're placing a limitation on the possibility of your generosity, placing a limitation on the possibility of giving expression to your thoughts of goodwill and compassion. Because that's where the limitations are coming from: They're coming from within.

When you can learn to let go of those bales of straw, you find you're in a much better position. It's a much better world. Whether the people around you change or not, *your* attitude changes. And that's the world that matters.

Your opportunity is always to do the skillful thing. You've got the energy now to do the skillful thing. That's how you break through these limitations.

So let your compassion be unlimited. And look at ways in which you're placing limitations on your own generosity. Because even though your generosity can't be totally unlimited, you can expand its range.

And that makes a huge difference in your life.