

Generosity of Spirit

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Sometimes it may seem like a very selfish and self-centered thing we're doing here, trying to get the mind into concentration, have a sense of ease and well-being inside. And although it is centered in yourself, it's not self-centered in a selfish way. After all, the more well-being you can find inside, the less you feel oppressed by the world outside.

So many people go through life with a long litany of how they've been mistreated, and they feel very impoverished inside. It's hard for them to take what other people have done to them with a measure of equanimity, with a measure of what I call generosity of spirit. After all, we're living in a world where everybody is imperfect. We'd like to have perfection all around us, but you have to look inside. Are you perfect? Well, no. You've got your weaknesses; you have your failings. So you have to learn how to live in a world where other people have weaknesses and failings, too.

The best way not to feel oppressed by that is to learn how to develop your own inner resources so that you don't feel so dependent on other people's good treatment of you. That was something I noticed about Ajaan Fuang. He was extremely independent. Even when he was sick, he did his best to take care of himself as best he could. He was like that monk in the Theragatha who finds himself sick in the wilderness. He asks himself, "Am I going to go back into civilization to find a doctor? Well, no, I'm going to stay here and I'm going to treat my illnesses with the five strengths and the seven factors for awakening.

In other words, find resources inside that you can depend on. By giving yourself a sense of well-being in the way you breathe, you're making yourself more immune to things that people outside can do to you. It helps to lift the level of your mind, what the Buddha calls *adhicitta*, the heightened mind. The image he gives is of a person going up into a tower and then looking down at people below. You see people jostling around and running around, running into one another. But the person in the tower is apart. He doesn't feel affected by their jostling and running into one another.

When you think about the Buddha's vision of the world, it's a vision that has a lot of compassion, because you're not feeling wounded by the people around you. When you're feeling wounded, it's hard to feel compassion. The big problem, of course, is that we're wounding ourselves as well. The wounds that other people

can give us: There's not much we can do about that, but the wounds that we inflict on ourselves are things we can change.

It comes down to those three fabrications that the Buddha talks about so much. Right after ignorance in dependent co-arising, there are the three fabrications. You've got the breath, that's your bodily fabrication; you've got directed thought and evaluation, verbal fabrication, and your feelings and perceptions are mental fabrication.

For the most part, as we go through life—especially if we have little training in meditation—we wound ourselves by the way we fabricate the present moment. We breathe in ways that are uncomfortable. We talk to ourselves in ways that magnify our sufferings, magnify the mistreatment that has been done to us. We hold in mind perceptions that are harmful. We focus on feelings inside that sap our strength, sap our energy. Even with people who meditate and learn how to fabricate skillfully while they're sitting with their eyes closed or doing walking meditation, sometimes their old habits intrude. And then they take over when you leave meditation.

You can look at a lot of the Buddha's teachings as recommendations for how to fabricate in new ways. All of his instructions on the breath, learning how to breathe in a way that makes you sensitive to pleasure inside, makes you sensitive even to rapture and refreshment inside: There are the potentials for these things inside, but we ride roughshod over them, so they don't have the opportunity to show that they can give us a soothing energy inside, a comforting energy inside.

All those suttas where he talks to people about how to change the way they look at things. That's basically advice on how to change the way you talk to yourself. Use your verbal fabrication in a way that lets you see that the real problems are not out there. The problem is inside. But the problem inside can be cured from inside. Learning how to talk to yourself in a way that gives you more energy for the practice lifts your mind up above your ordinary concerns.

Think about that monk who is going to go to a savage part of India. The Buddha asked him, "What if the people there curse you?" He says, "I'm going to tell myself it's good that they're not hitting me." "What if they hit you?" "I'll tell myself it's good they're not stabbing me." "What if they stab you?" "I'll tell myself it's good they're not killing me." "What if they kill you?" "I'll tell myself at least my death wasn't a suicide."

That's a really wise way to talk to yourself. It's so easy for the mind to focus on irritations or irritants and to magnify them. It's good to develop the skill where you can minimize them. Think of that image in the Canon: the sound making

contact at the ear and then stopping right there. But we're like a gong. Once you hit the gong, it keeps on ringing inside.

Actually, you can let the unkind words, stupid words, whatever other people say to you, just stop at the contact. You can learn how not to reverberate if you make your mind like a broken gong. You can learn how not to suffer. So a lot of this has to do with how you talk to yourself.

That image of the broken gong is just one of the many, many images the Buddha gives you to change the way you perceive things. All those analogies he gives are meant for you to use as perceptions that will more skillfully shape the present moment, so that you can develop a wealth of well-being inside.

If you're going to develop any generosity of spirit, you've got to have some wealth to be generous with. The good news is that you can generate that wealth from within, as if you have your own treasury, your own mint, minting money. But for the most part, what have you been doing? Minting play money. You can create actual treasures from within. You should develop these feelings of well-being. They nourish you. When the mind is nourished like this, it doesn't feel so afflicted by the world outside.

Think about the body. As the Buddha points out, it's subject to abrasion, subject to rubbing and striking up against things. But when you're young, it has the ability to repair itself. Then as you get older, that ability begins to wear away. You begin to see how much the body gets worn down just by living in this world. But as long as your ability to do some self-repair is strong, you don't see the ravages of the world around you. Well, you can train your mind to be that way, and it doesn't have to wear away as you get old. Do some self-repair work inside.

When we talk about having a sense of well-being with the breath, it's not that you can do that only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed. When you're doing walking meditation, you want to be able to get a sense of good energy inside and learn how to maintain it. And then from walking meditation, you can carry it into other activities. As you go into the hellhole that's the kitchen, you don't have to suffer, because you've got that sense of well-being inside. That lifts the mind, so you don't feel that you're under the bar that someone else is beating you with. You're above it.

When you're above these things, then you can treat other people with a generosity of spirit. That becomes your good kamma. For most of us, our lives are negative feedback, negative in the sense that your unskillful qualities feed on one another. Technically, that's a positive feedback loop, positive in the sense that it takes one quality and strengthens it, like the howling of a speaker when you place a microphone next to it. But it's negative in the sense that it pulls you down.

What you want is a doubly positive loop, in which your good qualities feed off one another and lift you up. Then you can be open-handed with your good qualities.

The Buddha describes a person who's generous as someone who lives open-handed to the request of others. He's talking about being generous with material things, but you can also be generous with your goodness, too. All too often we treat our good qualities like fine china in our homes. We don't like to bring it out for everyday use because we're afraid it's going to break, so we bring out only our old broken things to use. That's the way a lot of us are. Other people treat us with their broken pottery, well, we show them our broken pottery, too, and nobody benefits. But you can be generous with your good qualities, and you find that as you're generous with your good qualities, they don't wear out—because you have this source of wealth inside.

So even though you're centered inside yourself, this is not self-centered in a selfish way. Realize that the source of your genuine wealth, the source of your genuine well-being, is centered in here, within. So as you center the mind with the breath, that opens a channel so that the potential for goodness that you have inside can grow, and as it grows, it can spread around, to come out your mouth, come out your hands, come out your eyes. And you can actually be a blessing for the world.

Has that idea ever occurred to you? Give it a try.