

Sensitivity through generosity

I was talking recently to someone who had given a gift to a lay-run meditation center last year. He came back this year to find that it disappeared. When he asked the people at the center about this they said: "Well, that's impermanence."

Which is not the Dharma of the Buddha.

There is a danger in trying to boil everything down to just a few principles. Like the idea that all the Dharma teachings come down to the three characteristics: "You just have to accept that things are impermanent, stressful and non-self, just let go at that."

The Buddha didn't teach that way. That was a particular teaching to be applied in particular circumstances. And there are much larger frameworks which include a much larger picture, it means he actually taught Dharma and Vinaya. We tend to forget that.

And the Vinaya's not just rules, but protocols, patterns for behaviour. And it's through the Vinaya that you get a sense of how to apply some of the more abstract principles. How the Buddha would apply them in specific situations. And a lot of the protocols have to do with learning how to look after the people around you, learning how to look after the things around you. This is an important part of the practice. One of the ways of being unburdensome is that, when someone gives you a gift, you take good care of it, so that it stays around, and people can get a lot of use out of it. Don't have to keep giving it again and again and again.

So even though it may seem that we are attached to our things, because we take such careful care of them, it's actually a principle of the Dharma. Which is being unburdensome. It's in that list that the Buddha gives to Gotami. And there are other protocols for how to help other people, how to look after people who are sick, how sick people should behave, so they're not a burden on the people looking after them. How teachers should look after their students, how students should look after their teachers. It's a very well-rounded training.

And I remember something about Ajaan Fuang; that occasionally he would get students that he felt were not really ready yet for meditation. What he'd do would be to get them involved in doing projects around the monastery. The generosity he wanted to teach them was not so much giving of material things but just looking after what needed to be looked after. Running errands, caring for things, cleaning things up.

I myself, when I have dreams of the Ajaans, it almost always follows the same pattern. That Ajaan shows up and I got to do something for them. One time I had a dream with

Ajaan Lee. And what it is about Ajaan Lee is when he comes in my dreams he comes with body hurts. He needed some betel nut, so I'd find him a betel nut. With Ajaan Fuang it's washing his robes, boiling the water for his bath. And for some of the more famous Ajaans, they got huge groups of monks in their monasteries, and they go running off and leave a huge mess, and I'm there cleaning it up. It's an interesting pattern. It was part of the training I got, all those years with Ajaan Fuang, I'd be caring for him when he was sick, looking after his hut, looking after things around the monastery. It was an important part of the training. I learnt a lot of Dharma that way.

So when you come here, either as a visitor, or as a more permanent resident, you have to realize, it is not just for the meditation. The meditation is the heart of the practice, for sure. But the heart needs other organs as well. Or you can compare it to the heart wood of a tree. The heart wood, if it doesn't have bark, and soft wood and leaves and branches, is dead. There's a lot of the little things that we tend to overlook. They contribute to the practice. There's willingness to give. If you don't have material things, give of your knowledge, give of your time, give of your energy. You look around for opportunities to give. Don't wait for them to be forced on you. That's the true nature of generosity.

We've got this problem in the West where there are certain events and certain situations where you have to give. You get invited to a wedding, you've got to send a gift. Christmas cards, you've got to give a gift, lots of gifts. And the little spontaneous acts of generosity, those tend to be forgotten. But those are the ones that really do show a generous spirit. Where you see a lack, and you have the opportunity to fill that lack. That's an important lesson. And it's a way in which we become sensitive to one another. We all become sensitive to one another this way. This is something that's really lacking, especially now, as computers are taking over people's lives. People grow up with computers and don't grow up with people anymore. They're more comfortable looking on a screen. You, we see this all over the world now. It's not just here in America. I was recently in Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. You see groups of people sitting around, and they are all staring at their little screens. And they're not learning the lessons that come from looking at the people around you, looking at their expressions, listening to their tone of voice, seeing what they are doing and casting around in mind to ask yourself: "What do they need? What are they lacking? Is there something I've got that they could have?"

It's how we reestablish human contact, but we also reestablish a kind of sensitivity within ourselves. Cause there's willingness to on one hand be generous and on the other hand knowing how to look after the gifts that other people do give you, learning how to appreciate them, learning how to care for them, if they are material objects, learning how to be gracious and accepting other people's help. These are the habits that are really helpful as you meditate. Cause it develops sensitivity, and that is what discernment is all about. Sensing things that are not pointed out to you. The Buddha gives you lessons on where to look, and tells you what to look for. But for you to see the actual movements of your own mind you have got to be very sensitive, often in unexpected ways. And that quality of sensitivity is best developed through generosity, through virtue and all the standard parts of the path.

Then reading up on Dharma and Vinaya. The Vinaya is not there just for the monks, as Ajaan Suwat once said. It's there for everybody. That is, when laypeople come and deal with the monks they've got to learn about the monks' Vinaya, to have a sense of what

the monks can do and of what the monks can't do. And that way they look for ways of being of help. That sensitizes them to other people's needs. And they start looking at their own needs in a different way. So this principle of generosity is an important foundation for wisdom. Whether it's learning how to be generous, learning how to accept generosity, learning how to take care of other people's generosity. Not just in terms of things, but also in terms of things they do for you. That kind of sensitivity then gets turned into your own sensitivity into yourself, what the mind is doing, what it needs, where and when it needs it. Cause the most satisfying acts of generosity are the ones that are unexpected. You see an unexpected gap and you've discovered in an unexpected way that you've got the means to fill in that gap. That's the talent that you need to be a good meditator.

So all of these aspects, when you think of the teachings the Buddha gave to Gotami, they boil down to three principles. One is: What you're aiming at as you go on in life. Two: What you're doing to develop your mind in that direction. And three: How your relationship with other people relates to that as well. Not getting entangled, being unburdensome, learning to be content. These things all interpenetrate. And if you miss one of the dimensions the others are gonna suffer. There we see other people who are just generous and don't meditate, and we see what's lacking there. Or the same problem is there with people who just meditate, and they don't really understand generosity. For the practice to be successful has to be complete. It's an all around practice. That helps you develop an all around sensitivity. So that eventually you can see things you never saw before, and realize things you never realized before and attain things you never attained before. These things really do make a difference.