

## *Better to Give than to Consume*

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In the Novice's Questions, the most interesting question is the very first: What is one? And the answer is: All beings subsist on food. This is what defines us as beings: the fact that we need food to maintain our existence. And for most of us that's pretty much all our lives. What we consume is the big issue.

Years back, there was a TV series, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, and they didn't show any rich and famous people making their own things or showing off things that they had produced themselves. It was all about what they had bought, what they were consuming. Our culture is obsessed with consuming. One of my favorite *New Yorker* cartoons shows a couple sitting in a living room, talking to some friends, and the husband is saying, "Of course, it's had its ups and downs, but by and large Margaret and I have found the consumer experience to be a rewarding one."

That's the attitude many of us bring when we come to the Dhamma. We're used to consuming not only things but also experiences. There's a huge industry—the experience industry—where they'll create experiences for you to buy. Remember back a while when they advertized the Ford experience? They weren't selling you Fords; they were selling you the experience of having a Ford. Park rangers talked about maintaining the Yosemite experience or the Zion experience for people to come and consume. So it's understandable that when people come to the meditation, they think of the meditation experience as something they can consume as well. We want the bliss; we want the pleasure, the sense of freedom that we've heard that will come from mindfulness and concentration. But in order to consume those things, we first have to produce them.

This is why, when the Buddha starts his teachings on the most basic levels, he starts with generosity. It's the first of the perfections, the first of his teachings in the gradual discourse, when he's leading people step-by-step up to the four noble truths. He starts with generosity and then moves on to virtue, the rewards of virtue in heaven, then the drawbacks of those rewards, and then finally the value of renunciation. Once the mind can see that renunciation would be a good thing, then it's ready for the four noble truths.

In many ways, renunciation is a continuation of the principle of generosity. You learn that you have to give something away or give it up in order to get something of greater value in return. So instead of encouraging us to come to the meditation as consumers, the Buddha encourages us to come as givers. What are you going to give to the practice?

Some of the famous Ajaans in Thailand talk about how the practice is one thing clear through. In other words, it starts with one principle and just works out the implications of that principle all the way through to the end. And the one thing is this principle of giving. This is what raises us up beyond and above the level of just being beings that have to consume and feed. Remember, the arahant is someone who is no longer defined by any desire and so is no longer defined as a being. Because arahants have fully comprehended food, their path can't be traced. Even their consuming of food is a gift. Those who give to the arahant get rewarded many times over. That's why the arahant is the only person who can eat the alms of the countryside and not incur a debt.

So the practice is one of giving from the very beginning. All too often we encounter talks about dana as thinly disguised requests for money, which is why some people have a real aversion to the topic. But the Buddha had an etiquette around this. There's a story in the Canon of some monks who were building huts. They started getting into a contest with one another as to who could build the nicest hut. They were constantly asking for materials and workmen, and the householders were getting harassed with all the begging

and requests. When they'd see a monk, they'd turn away, run away, close the door. As the story says, sometimes in the evening they might see a cow coming in the distance and, assuming that it was a monk, they'd run away. Things got that bad.

So the Buddha called the monks together and gave them a series of stories about how people don't like to be begged from. One story told of two hermits, an older brother and a younger brother, living near a river. A naga, a very beautiful naga, would come up out of the river every day and just show itself to the younger brother. This frightened the younger brother, as he had no idea what the naga's intentions were, and who knows what the naga might try to do to him. So he went to the older brother and asked him, "What can I do to keep this naga from coming?" So the older brother said, "Does the naga have anything of value?" The younger brother said, "Yes, he's got a beautiful jewel on his chest." So the older brother said, "Well, the next time you see the naga, ask for the jewel."

So the next day the naga came and as the naga was in front of the younger hermit, the hermit asked for the jewel. So the naga went away. The following day, as the naga was halfway up from the river to the hermit's cave, the hermit asked for the jewel. So the naga went away. And the third day, as soon as the naga came out of the river, the younger hermit asked for the jewel, and the naga said, "Okay, enough. I'm not coming back. You're asking for too much." And then of course, after the naga stopped coming back, the younger brother missed him. It was kind of cool seeing a naga in your meditation like that. But by that time he'd driven him away.

So when generosity is presented as part of a begging talk—that's what those "dana talks" are; they're begging talks—it's not really welcome. As a result, we miss the meaning of generosity, and we miss a lot of the other aspects of the practice, too, because the practice has to start with generosity. Generosity is not just a matter of giving things. You learn how to give of your time, to give of your energy, to give of your knowledge, and in doing so you're changing your whole relationship to the world around you. You're not just a being who's eating and eating and consuming things and experiences. You're finding that you've got things inside that you can share, things you can give, and there's a sense of wealth that comes with that. If all you're thinking about is consuming—"What can I get out of this? What can I get out of that?"—you're poor. No matter how much you have, you're poor—because there's always a big lack. But if you come to every situation with the question, "What can I give?" you're coming from a position of wealth. And you find that you do have reserves of energy and knowledge that you can share, and in sharing you gain a lot in return, a lot with more value.

Both generosity and renunciation are forms of trade. There's a passage where a monk says, "I will trade what dies for the deathless. I'll trade what is limited for unbinding." You're trading up. You can't get the better thing without giving up the lesser thing. When you understand that, you realize that whatever you're doing in the practice, you want to come with the attitude of What Can I Give. If you don't have material things to give, how about your time? How about your energy, your knowledge, your skills? When you're dealing with other people, the question is not so much, "How much are they entertaining me?" or "What can I get out of them?" It's: "What can I give? What can I give to the situation?" There are times, for instance, when there's a lot of tension in the room. Can you give some peace? Can you give some humor? Something to make it better.

Virtue is also a gift. As the Buddha said, when you make up your mind not to harm anyone under any circumstances—no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants—you're giving limitless protection to all beings. In other words, at the very least, from your quarter, they have nothing to fear. As you give them limitless protection, you gain a share in that limitless protection as well. So virtue, too, is a gift.

Meditation is a gift. You have to give your energy, you have to give your attention, to develop your mindfulness. When you're focused on the breath, it's good not to hold anything back. Just think of yourself plunging into the breath and the body, totally. The reward is that you develop an all-around experience of ease and refreshment. If part of you is pulled back, there's a part of you that's not sharing in this, that's not gaining anything of real value.

So try to come to the practice with the attitude that it's all about giving. Ultimately, you'll be giving up

your greed, aversion, and delusion, giving up even your sense of self or your many senses of self. First you give up your unskillful selves as you develop the skillful ones, but then after you've worked so hard on developing the skillful ones, the Buddha said you've got to give those up, too, for the sake of your long-term welfare and happiness. There's a reward that comes from not hanging on.

You're always trading up—but you can't trade up unless you start giving to begin with. Otherwise, if you're just in consuming mode, you're living off your old goodness.

One of the Buddha's foremost disciples was a woman Visakha, whose nickname was Migara's mother. It wasn't because she had a son named Migara. Her father was named Migara. The reason she was called his mother was because she saw that he was just living off his old merit. He was just in consuming mode all the time, and she made him realize this. She'd learned the Dhamma from the Buddha and so she taught him, "You're just living off all your old merit and if you don't create any new goodness, you're going to run out." That was the teaching that convinced him to change his ways. Because she was his teacher, she was called his mother. She had given him the gift of Dhamma.

So remember, we're here to go beyond ourselves, to go beyond just being beings that are consuming all the time. We try to redefine ourselves, not by what we eat or what we own or what we consume, but by what we produce, what we can give. Making this switch in the mind changes everything. Difficult patches come up in the meditation and you ask yourself not, "Why is this so bad? Does this mean I'm a miserable meditator?" You say, "No, what can I give to this situation so that it doesn't snowball? What resources do I still have? What can I draw on to give to the situation to turn it into a different kind of situation?" When things are going well, again, what do you give to make sure that they continue to go well? You don't just sit there slurping up the pleasure and the rapture. You look after them. You give your energy to protect them—so that as you get more and more into the giving mood, when you finally do have your taste of the deathless, instead of trying to grab onto it or hold onto it, which places a separation between you and the experience, you give up any clinging you might have around it. That's how you reach the deathless.

So in giving up you're not being left adrift. You're giving up things of lesser value for things of greater value. But remember the only way you can trade up is to be willing to give something in the first place. Otherwise there's no exchange.