

Giving

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We tend to think that being a Buddhist means doing lots of meditation. Both Buddhists and non-Buddhists in the US these days tend to think this. But around the world, Buddhism is the fourth largest religion and, as a scholar, I am here to tell you that most Buddhists do not meditate. Many do, but among those only a small percentage maintain a daily meditation practice. So what do these people actually *do* such that they count themselves as Buddhists? Lots of things including making expressions of reliance upon the Buddha, his Teaching (called the Dharma) and the Buddhist community; and chanting words that reflect Buddhist wisdom, listening to Buddhist teachers, making pilgrimages to Buddhist sites. But most of all, the ordinary Buddhists practice Buddhism by *giving*.

2500 years ago in India, the Buddha and the men and women who followed him were what Jack Kerouac called Dharma Bums. They were drop-outs. They rejected all of mainstream values of their society, which included the same things we mostly value: having a family, finding pleasure in music and eating and drinking, serving society as a teacher or soldier or merchant or farmer, and then perhaps someday even gaining some political power. The Dharma Bums rejected all of these values specifically because they felt that devoting oneself to such things hindered the attainment of deep spiritual peace. They felt that by devoting themselves exclusively to an inquiry into the deepest nature of human existence, they could find truths that would set them free from

fear of death. They wandered about, voluntarily homeless and unemployed, accepting and eating only donated food. There was a small but influential subculture of such Dharma Bums in ancient India, and in fact, this remains the case even down to present day India.

Like us, the majority of Indians had and still have little inclination to follow the lifestyle of Buddha and his friends, which included celibacy, poverty, and not eating after noon. At the same time, many were quite impressed with, or even awed by, the dedication and the high ideals of these men and women. To some extent, they shared those ideals—but felt, at least for the time being, unable to live up to them. So when the Buddha's monks or nuns came by in the morning with their bowls and stood silently, they would usually go out and give them some food. And when people came to listen to him, the Buddha taught that such generosity was wholesome and virtuous action, that is to say, good karma. Giving in support of a high ideal not only helps others, but also has an immediate positive effect on your mind. Furthermore, it sets up a long-term tendency, an inclination or disposition, for you to engage in more and similar kinds of generosity in the future.

As Buddhists found that others were willing to support them, they began even in the Buddha's lifetime to build hermitages and temples and monasteries. And these institutions needed ongoing support. So there began a long-standing symbiosis between on the one hand the small minority of Buddhists who give up family-life and careers in the world to focus on practicing and teaching what the Buddha taught, and on the other hand the great majority of Buddhists who listen

to these teachings, practice a bit if they can and aspire to practice more in the future, but now enact their commitment to Buddhist values in large measure by giving food and other material to the monks and nuns, to monastic institutions and temples.

An ironic story from medieval China plays with the question of whose role it is to *give things up* and whose role it is to *give things to* those who have given things up. A merchant was plying happily along the Yangtze river with two boatloads of jewels and money he had accumulated. He pulled to shore at a Buddhist temple and went in. There he heard a Buddhist teaching on the inevitability of death and the utter uselessness of material wealth in the face of death. Deeply moved, he strode out of the temple and ordered his staff to take the boats out into the river and sink them. The first one sank quickly. But then the monks ran out of the temple and implored the merchant not to sink the second one, but rather to earn good karma by donating its contents to the monastery.

The irony of course is that the monks, who are supposed to have renounced material aims, appear to be greedy for the merchant's wealth, while the merchant who is expected to be greedy, instead enacts the ideal of renunciation that the monks themselves were teaching. This sort of story was popular in China, where many ordinary people resented the notion that monks were spiritually above them. But more deeply implicit in the story is the idea that resources ought not simply be destroyed, but instead used to support worthy causes. Traditional Buddhists don't say, "worthy cause," they say "field of merit". That is, if you spread out the seeds of your generosity on the ground of a

worthwhile purpose, they will be richly productive—and it will certainly be much more helpful than just burning up a pile of money or sinking a ship full of jewels.

While there may be greed mixed in the monks' eagerness to receive a boatload of wealth, those who *give* also have a spectrum of motivations. Most Buddhists give in large part because they wish to obtain, for themselves, the karmic benefits of having done virtue. In particular, they believe that via the workings of karma, generosity will lead to prosperity while stinginess is that path to poverty. So giving now simply or mainly in order to get in the future is a legitimate and normal Buddhist practice. In fact, such karmic profiteering can be so institutionalized and mechanistic as to become the target of sharp criticism from the more spiritually inclined.

For example: Famously, Bodhidharma brought the Zen Buddhist lineage from India to China, arriving in Chinese Buddhist kingdom where Buddhism of various other sorts already flourished. The king was a huge patron of Buddhism and was accustomed to being told by monks about the vast stores of merit he had accumulated through his endowment of various Buddhist projects. Hearing a new monk had arrived from Buddha's homeland, he summoned Bodhidharma to the palace, regaled him with tales of his largesse, and then demanded to know how much merit he had earned. Bodhidharma instead of singing his praises, replied simply, "None whatsoever." Needless to say, he had to find some other part of China to launch his Zen lineage.

Bodhidharma expressed in a radical way the Buddhist understanding that self-centered donations that feed the giver's ego play a role in supporting

Buddhist institutions, but are quite far from the sort of virtue that moves one closer to spiritual awakening or peace. Giving, and other virtues such as the practice of patience, meditation, ethical discipline, and so forth, can be gradually perfected through refining our motivation. The Dalai Lama—the best-known Buddhist in the world, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people—has said that we will find greater happiness and peace within ourselves by systematically cultivating a spirit of selfless generosity to others. Here I quote him at some length on how to do this:

“The core of spiritual practice is the practical development and deepening of our wish, our aspiration, to help others. When you live with a sense of dedication to the well-being of others, then you yourself feel fulfilled. This is the very purpose of our life. What is the point of having merely a luxurious way of life, spending lots of money, while on the same planet others are facing terrible difficulties, even starving? Helping others, serving others—this is the real meaning of life. It is clear that we are social beings; among social animals, the very basis of life is taking care of each other, showing concern, helping one other.

“In the case of generosity, the actual act of giving is important, but what is most crucial is the strengthening of our inclination to give, our spirit of generosity. Right now, form within your mind a clear determination that from now on you are going to practice this attitude of helping others. Based on that attitude, whenever it is possible, help others; when it is not possible to help, then at least restrain yourself from harming them. Be

determined to do this . . . Think, “I am determined to keep practicing in this way.”

“I myself do this practice as much as I can. It really brings me immense delight, immense happiness. It gives so much inner strength. One could say that this is the best sort of offering one could make to the Buddha, but it is not an offering just to the Buddha, it is an offering to all living beings.

“In order to carry out any practice—including this practice of dedicating yourself to helping others—you should form a determination, make yourself a promise, right when you wake up in the morning: “Now, for the rest of this day, I will help others when I can.” It is very important that, at the start of the day, we should set out to shape what will happen later. Then, at the end of every day, check what happened. Review the day. And if you followed through for that whole day on your morning’s determination, then rejoice. Reinforce further your motivation to continue in this way. However, when you do your reviewing, you may discover that you did things during the day that are contrary to your commitment. You should then acknowledge this and develop a sense of regret. Build up your resolve not to engage in such actions in the future.

“If you keep practicing in this way, then, it is certain that over time there will be real change, genuine transformation, within your mind. This is the way to improve. It is impossible to really change our character in one session of prayer. But improvement definitely can come by constantly

watching our minds and carrying out the practices to which we have committed ourselves day-by-day, year-by-year, decade-by-decade. This is not just Buddhism; this understanding is common to believers of all religious traditions.”

While motivation is crucial when we give, there is also the immediate and practical question of what will actually be of help to others? Citing traditional sources on giving service, the Dalai Lama says,

“For example, if someone has trouble walking, then just help that person. Help others when they are confused or ignorant about a particular task they are trying to do. Go out of your way to reach out to others, welcoming them and so forth. Stand by those who are in difficulty and afraid, giving them companionship. Support and comfort those who are suffering in grief and sorrow. Respond with help to those who have immediate material needs. Be a refuge, a shelter, for those in need of emotional support. Take care that, in trying to help others, whatever you do is done in a manner that is attuned to their states of mind and thus can actually bring benefit. If someone seems to be headed down the wrong path, counsel that person so as to gently steer him or her toward virtue. When necessary, take a firm stand—especially when it involves standing up for someone who is being harmed.”

Many Buddhist texts specify three types of giving based on just what is being given: giving of material things, giving security or freedom from fear, and

giving spiritual teachings. Of course, the most important thing in deciding what to give is to think about what will really most help others.

My teachers routinely give “saving a bug from drowning” as an example of the second type of giving, giving protection. But the category has often functioned to honor the country’s leader and his or her security forces, who make sacrifices to create a safe zone within which we can live safely and freely practice our spiritual tradition. When the Dalai Lama takes up the theme, he shifts the focus: “Working to protect the environment can be a case of giving protection. The work of those in the caring professions, including doctors and nurses, can also be a form of giving protection from fear.”

Mark Twain quipped that it is better to give than receive, especially in the case of advice. Quite commonly, Buddhist teachers will emphasize that the most important form of giving is giving spiritual advice and teachings, which is interesting because of course that is just what they are at that moment doing as they say that. When the Dalai Lama comments on this point, he emphasizes that what is crucial is the teacher’s *motivation*.

“When ministers and professors and teachers give talks, this might be a form of generosity, giving spiritual teachings. But if their motivation is just to get the pay, then it is not actually generosity. It is a business transaction like any other business. If I, the Dalai Lama, give a lecture for the purpose of getting some money, then that is just a business deal, not a form of generosity. People want to give teachers money, but teachers cannot allow themselves to be motivated by that. One extraordinary Tibetan

teacher made a vow never to accept any material offerings given as a result of his Buddhist teachings. He explained that taking money for sharing the Dharma was just doing business—and a very bad kind of business.

When I told Dawn this story, she wondered if this implies that ministers should not be paid. But as I hear the Dalai Lama, he is saying that when ministers or teachers *are motivated BY* their pay, then they are doing a job, plying a trade, doing business; when or to the extent that they are instead motivated to help the other person, then they are really giving. While he tells of one teacher who vowed to refuse offerings in order to purify his motivation, most Buddhist teachers—from the Buddha to the Dalai Lama—accept and are supported by donations offered by those inspired by their teaching.

Let me bring these reflections to a conclusion by telling two related stories about my personal experience with giving. In 1985 I lived and studied for a few months with a Buddhist teacher in India. He taught me a great deal that helped me personally, intellectually, and also practically in my professional work. I lived with him, paying neither tuition nor rent simply because he saw that I was eager to learn. At the same, other Buddhists assured me that it would appropriate for me to make my teacher some sort of offering. I truly felt very grateful to him, but I felt disoriented and anxious in the absence of even the vaguest “price tag”. I did not want to offer too little or too much. I was almost paralyzed with self-consciousness about how I would be seen or rated on the basis of how much I offered the teacher. So I finally told another Buddhist monk whom I knew and

trusted of my dilemma. He assured me, really, REALLY, there is no “expected amount”. Everyone’s capacity is different. So, he said, *give just as much as you can possibly give without regret*. Strangely, this created in me a huge sense of relief. Within a short time I was able to offer from my heart much more than I had imagined, and to do so without self-consciousness or pride or regret. Later I put it together that the notion of giving just as much as you can without regret derives from the Buddhist conception of karma wherein sincere regret about an action—whether the action is virtuous or non-virtuous—weakens its karmic force.

That is the first story. The second story is that one time when I told the first story, there happened to a rabbi there listening. Later, when he got his turn to talk, he openly heaped scorn on my idea that the marker to give people is “give as much as you can without regret”. He claimed that if he used that model, his synagogue would soon have to close down. Instead, he said, he had always to urge upon the faithful that painful sacrifice, “giving until it hurts,” is what God demands, just as he demanded of Abraham even the sacrifice of his son.

Later, reflecting on my sense that I had somehow been weirdly bested in this exchange of viewpoints, I realized that there are actually dozens of famous heroic stories of very extreme and painful self-sacrifice in Buddhism. On the path to perfect peace, people become able to surrender when needed all of their possessions, their comfortable family life, even their bodies and their lives. But these are not stories about sacrifices demanded by gods or buddhas; they are stories of people whose hearts have grown exceptional in their capacity to give. And when telling the more extreme stories, my teachers insist that they are not to

be taken as models for our current behavior. Instead, they such stories inspire us to keep expanding what we are capable of sharing with others in need, never assuming that we have reached the limit of how generous we can become. And as we grow, it is counterproductive to berate ourselves into sacrifices we are not yet ready for and will later regret. We have to look within and see how large our heart has grown—and then and work to make it bigger.

I offer these thoughts as today we begin to reflect upon our appreciation for and support of this self-sustaining fellowship. I am a Buddhist and yet this fellowship is my sangha, my primary spiritual community. It is among you that I have come deeply to understand what it means to be a liberal Buddhist, a UU Buddhist, a free-thinking Buddhist. Giving in support of UUFCM helps others and also gives me an immediate sense of delight. It helps me become accustomed to and inclined to become more and more generous.

Everything we have done and are doing at UUFCM comes do from what we ourselves find it in our hearts to give. I say: Let us not give in a way that leaves us resentful of the fellowship and the burdens of stewardship. And yet, let's not assume too quickly that we can give only this much or that much. Let us see look deeply and see whether we cannot, in good spirit, give more than we would have imagined.