Give Your All

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If you’ve ever been to a retreat center, you’ve probably heard the famous Dhana talk. The Buddha never charged for the teachings because the teachings were priceless. That’s not really why he didn’t charge for the teachings. He charged because the teachings are inaccessible to anyone who’s not generous. It doesn’t come with an attitude of giving. If you’ve plunked your money down for a retreat, you expect something in return. You’ve already given, but it’s not really a gift. It’s a fee you pay. Once you’ve paid, you want your money’s worth. But when the teachings are offered freely, you realize there’s no way in the world you can get something without giving. So it focuses you more on the question of what exactly has to be given here. In terms of the meditation, you have to give it your time, you have to give it your energy. Ultimately, you literally have to give it your all. That passage we chanted just now from the fire ceremony, they define the all. Eye, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind, sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, ideas, contact, the senses, the feeling that arises based on that contact. Ultimately, that’s the all, and you’re going to have to give it your all eventually. And you have to work up to it step by step. So in the beginning, it means being good-natured about giving it your time, putting up with whatever pain may be involved in sitting here and meditating. Going against your impulses to jump up and run away when things get heavy, either physically or mentally. What the Thais call “fighting off tigers” with the good nature of your heart. And then you give it all your attention. Focus on the breath with your whole awareness. If you’re working on the butto, think of it as giving your whole body over to butto. Every cell in your body is saying “but” with the in-breath, “to” with the out. You’re not holding anything back. If you think to yourself, “Well, I can’t give it all my energy right now because I’ve got a whole hour. I’ve got to sit here. I’ve got to save something for the rest of the hour,” you never get fully involved. Tell yourself, “You have no idea how much longer you’re going to be sitting here. It might only be a few seconds. Earthquakes come to this part of the country without much warning, or little clots in your bloodstream could start wandering around at any time.” Get lodged in your heart, and that’s it. So don’t think of how much time there is for the rest of the hour. Think of it as giving yourself totally right now to this breath, and then this breath, and then this breath. If you’re stingy with your energy, stingy with your involvement in the practice, you’re not going to get much in terms of results. If you think, “Well, I’ve already given so much today,” you just keep on giving, giving, giving. The more willing you are to give your full energy, full attention to the practice, the more the results are going to come. There’s a passage in the Canon that says, “If you’re stingy, you can’t attain the first jhana, you can’t attain any of the noble attainments.” There’s something reassuring about this, that the Dhamma is available only to people because of their goodness, the goodness of their hearts, the generosity of their hearts. Think of all the things in the world that people can attain by being sneaky and underhanded. Or all the people in the world have specific talents that make them wealthy and famous, but when you come right down to it, they’re pretty mean and nasty people. The Dhamma is not like that at all. You have to give it the goodness of your heart, and then it responds. So you give it all of your attention and bring all your mental faculties to bear, your persistence, commitment to what you’re doing, and your powers of observation. If you really pay attention to what’s happening, you can’t help but see things that you otherwise wouldn’t see. If you’re holding back, if you’re waiting for the end of the hour, you miss an awful lot. Or if you sit and ask, “What am I going to get something out of this?” You’re constantly getting results of one kind or another. The question is, are they the results you want or not? Use your powers of observation, and you’ll see. This is how discernment is developed. Your powers of observation may not be all that sharp yet, but how are you going to develop them unless you use them? Come to some tentative conclusions about what seems to be working, and then test them again and test them again. Think of your observations as post-it notes so that you’re ready to change them when experience shows you something new. As you get more and more precise in observing things, you begin to get a sense of what kind of breathing is really good when certain things come up in the meditation, which things are worth pursuing, which things are worth leaving alone, because you’ve been around. You’ve given time to the practice, and that’s one of the payoffs, is that you get more and more familiar with the potentials of different types of breathing, the potentials of different ways of focusing. This leads to a greater and greater sense of well-being, being at home with the breath, because you’ve been through a lot together. Give attention to the breath. Give attention to your mind. They start paying you back. This is important because a lot of the practice of letting go of really refined things in the mind requires having a good basic sense of well-being here in the present moment, a willingness to just stay here without much of an agenda, but with that sense of well-being. So when the time comes up to make more refined sacrifices, giving up certain attitudes, certain ways of thinking, certain ways of doing things in the mind, you’re in a good mood about it. You’re letting go from a place of well-being rather than from a place of desperation. Without this sense of well-being, it’s hard to let go. If you’re always grasping at whatever little thing comes your way, there’s no way you’re going to be able to let go of the really subtle things, but deeply entrenched things in the mind that are causing you to continue suffering. Greed, anger, and delusion seem to be our old friends because they seem to have brought us pleasure in the past. You have to give yourself an even greater pleasure that comes from learning how to let go so that you can really see them for what they are, the kind of pleasure they give. How minimal it is, how short-lasting, how it turns on you, how traitorous it is. And so you let go because you’ve seen something better. And then, as I said earlier, ultimately you give it your all. You even let go of just basic sensory awareness, ultimately even of the contact of the mind. And this has to come from a very stable sense of well-being so that you’re very, very sensitive to even the slightest bit of stress that comes when the mind moves in one direction or another. You basically get it cornered so that it can’t move at all. It can’t intend anything, can’t even intend not to intend. That’s when it’s totally got to let go of intention. And as the Buddha said, it’s our intention that shapes our experience. It’s the potential for the different aggregates that comes from the past, but it’s our fabrication of these things, our intention with regard to them, that turns them into actual experiences. So when you let go of that intention, that disbands all the aggregates of the present moment. That’s when you see what lies beyond the all that you gave up. So it’s a path of letting go, a path of learning to be generous and good to others. Be a little bit natured about your generosity, because knowing that it’s not going to leave you poor, there’s always a return, there’s always a trade-off. It’s just developing the sensitivity to realize, one, the possibility of the trade-offs, and two, realizing that the letting go really does take you to a better spot. So the idea of giving it your all, which, at the beginning, seems kind of daunting, finally becomes possible. This is why the path is a gradual path. It’s a path of gradually letting go and getting more and more sensitive about what needs to be let go. As you develop a greater and greater capacity to do it, based on the greater sense of well-being that you’ve been developing all the way along, it builds up a kind of momentum. That comment by Ajahn Suwat that people are grim about their meditation because they don’t have experience in the practice of generosity comes from precisely this point. Once you see the kind of well-being that comes from being generous on the day-to-day level, you’re more willing to apply the same attitude towards the meditation. So it’s not a matter of that you came and paid for this instruction in a better way or pay you back, but a realization that you’ve got to give and you’re happy to give. Because you’ve seen the results that come from giving on one level, and the Buddha keeps saying, “Well, it goes deeper and deeper.” Then you’re more and more willing to listen to him. So the Dhamma is available only to those who give, who are happy to give. That’s one of the ways in which it’s a really amazing thing.

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