Path of Giving, The

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When you practice, it’s always good to keep coming back to basics. There’s a danger, as we focus on where we want to go, that we forget where we’re standing, what the foundation of our practice is. The Buddha started his graduation with a discourse with giving. From there, he worked up to the Four Noble Truths. What’s the connection? Think about a gift. When you give a gift to someone else, you’re breaking down a barrier. It goes across your sense of who you are as opposed to who somebody else is, whether it’s you as an individual or you as a group. If you buy and sell, it reinforces the barrier. When you give, it helps break the barrier down. That’s an analogy for the whole practice. When you practice the Dhamma, you’re trying to break down the barrier between you and the Dhamma. On the one hand, you want to make the Dhamma your own. On the other hand, you read about the results of the practice—states of peace, states of calm, states of total freedom from suffering. And you want them. And that’s a good desire. Don’t ever let anybody tell you that it’s bad or it’s wrong or that you’re supposed to get rid of that desire. Because without that desire, what do you have? Why would you be here? But the paradox is that in making the Dhamma your own, you have to transform yourself into Dhamma. You have to give yourself to the Dhamma. And that’s not just an empty rhetorical phrase. What are you made up of? Your idea of who you are. It’s the body and feelings and perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness. We tend to take these raw materials and fashion our sense of who we are out of them. And then who we are then becomes an end in and of itself. When you’ve got an end, you’ve got a barrier. Things go no further than that. But when you live with yourself as your goal, with yourself as your end, that’s remarkably unsatisfying. Because your sense of who you are is such a slippery thing. It has to be constantly shored up. The consumer who consumed the states of pleasure that you felt in the past, where is that consumer now? Do you have a place where that pleasure is stashed away and you can pull it out any old time you want? No, it’s gone. Gone. Gone. And some people say, “Well, you should make other people the end and the goal of your life.” But that’s just like taking zero and multiplying it by three billion or four billion. You still come back to zero. But if you look at the path of practice, the Buddha says, “Take those raw materials from which you normally fashion a self and turn it into the path in terms of your body.” Learn to do good things with your body. Bring it here to sit and meditate. Make sure that it follows the precepts. Feelings. There are feelings of pleasure and feelings of pain. Learn to use them. Learn to use whatever pleasure you can muster through developing concentration as nourishment for the mind. Use feelings of pain as things to analyze, to understand. Because you begin to see the mind in action right around the pain. You see the perceptions that you place on the pain, saying, “This is the pain. It’s located right here. It has these characteristics.” If you watch the process of perception as it happens, you begin to see how artificial the whole construct is. There’s the actual sensation, and then there’s a label you place on it. And when you place a label on it, it changes the sensation. You see that really clearly when there’s pain. Then you use your perceptions. You learn how to focus on the breath throughout the day. Of course, things get more refined. You focus on space throughout the day, the space all around you, in between the atoms of your body. You can make that your perception. And on up to the levels of consciousness. You have thought constructs. You have feeling perception. You have directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts at the breath, and you evaluate the breath. And then there’s the consciousness of all these things. So what you’re doing is taking those raw materials that you used to make into a self, and now you turn them into the path. That’s how you keep yourself to the Dharma. You disassemble your old sense of who you are and you reassemble it as a path. It’s a different sort of thing. Instead of being an end in and of itself, these aggregates become means to an end. So always keep that in mind. You’re here to give yourself to the practice, to turn yourself into the practice, to turn yourself into the path. It’s not that you’re walking on the path. You take your raw materials that you could have made into your sense of who you are and you turn them into the path. You become the path. And it’s an act of giving, because it erases that barrier between you and the Dharma. So this is why generosity is emphasized over and over again. The Buddha once said, “A person who’s not generous can’t attain the noble attainments.” If you’re stingy, you can’t go there. Because you keep hoarding, you keep putting up these barriers around your sense of self. You try to hold on to things instead of converting them into the path. So when you find yourself resisting a particular part of the practice, say, sitting for long periods of time, doing extra work, anything where it requires that you give of your energy, give of your body, your feelings, your perceptions, your thought constructs, your consciousness, look at that resistance as something you’ve got to overcome. And when you overcome it, you gain. That’s the basic dynamic of the practice. When you give of yourself to the Dhamma, the Dhamma becomes your own. You make the Dhamma your own. So without generosity, there’s no practice. Without giving, there’s no attainment. So recognize whichever parts of your sense of who you are, this self that you keep creating again and again and again, that like to treat themselves as ends in a of themselves. Learn how to break down that barrier by giving. This is one of the special features of the Buddhist teaching, practicing concentration, those states of concentration that he learned from his teachers. They’re actually part of the path. The problem is that his teachers treated them as ends in and of themselves. They got to the road and then they just lay down to sleep on the road. Of course, they got run over. That’s an analogy for our practice. These parts of ourselves, these aggregates that we tend to latch on to, say, “This is me. This is mine.” And the “me” becomes an end in and of itself. You’re going to get run over because you’re lying down on the road. If you learn to treat these things, these aggregates, as a path, learn to give of them, you don’t get run over. You get to progress on the path. You get to the goal. The Dhamma becomes your own. Of course, the sense of “you” when you get there is going to be a very different thing from the sense of “you” that sets out. That’s the whole point. That gets given away, but something of infinite worth replaces it.

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