Strategies for Generosity

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Buddhist teachings are a teaching of generosity, goodwill, and harmlessness. Those are the underlying motivations for the practice, the underlying motivations for the teaching. So it might seem strange that there are so many military similarities in the Buddhist teachings. The ideal monk is compared to a warrior. The ideal meditator is compared to an elephant in battle, to an archer. In fact, in those days, archers didn’t just set up targets in the backyard. They actually were used in battle, too. We don’t usually think of military strategy as having anything to do with generosity, goodwill, or harmlessness. In fact, we don’t think of strategy as having anything to do with these things at all. But it’s important to realize that strategy is important. This is where the military analogies come in, because even though our goodwill is limitless, our resources are limited. When we want to be generous, even if we gave everything that we had away, it still would only benefit a certain number of people. If we gave all of our time to the rest of the world, we’d only have a limited amount of time. So you have to strategize. Where is your generosity most helpful? Where is your gift of time most helpful? Even though you’re operating on the wish that all people be happy, you can’t go out and make everybody else out there happy. We have those reflections every evening before the meditation, “May I be happy, may all living beings be happy,” to give the right attitude. But in terms of our gift of our things, our gift of our time, that has limitations. So we’ve got to work within those limitations. There’s only one gift, the Buddha said, that is limitless, and that’s the gift of virtue, i.e., you make a promise to yourself that you’re not going to kill anybody, you’re not going to steal from anybody, you’re not going to have illicit sex, you’re not going to lie to anybody, you’re not going to take any intoxicants at all. In this way, you give limitless safety to other beings. In other words, you don’t kill when it’s convenient to kill or make lots of exceptions for these promises. You make the promise to yourself, no exceptions at all, and try to maintain those promises to yourself. That way, you do give a limitless gift. In other words, these people know or could rest assured that you are not going to kill them, you’re not going to steal from them. The Buddha says that when you give this limitless security to other beings, you get a portion of that security as well. But what about the limitations? What limitations do you place on yourself, on your own energy and time? Because if you do want to be helpful to others, one of the first things you can do, one of the best gifts you can give to them, is to look at how you place unnecessary limitations on your energy, on your time. This is where the meditation comes in. Simply the way the mind relates to itself uses up a lot of excess energy in a very unnecessary way. You give in to greed, anger, and delusion. You’re destroying your energy. There’s a battle that goes on in the mind all the time. The mind doesn’t know how to relate to the body in a healthy way. You’re missing an opportunity to develop energy that can be used for your own good and the good of all the people around you. This is why we work with the breath, because the way the mind relates to the body goes through the breath. When mental troubles cause illness, it’s basically the mind’s contact with the energy flow in the body that creates the illness. And the way we know the body is through the breath. So to create a good relationship inside, you work with the breath energy. Focus on what way of breathing feels comfortable, what way of holding your body as you breathe feels comfortable. In what way does the breath energy suffuse throughout the body and feed all the cells? In the text, they compare your meditation, your practice of the teaching, to living in on a frontier. And the meditation is compared to the food stores. There’s a sense of well-being you can create inside simply by the way you relate to the breath. You can develop a sense of fullness. You can develop a sense of ease, a well-being inside the body and mind. That’s your food. Because when you have a sense of well-being inside, it’s a lot easier to be kind to other people. It’s a lot easier to be generous with other people. You’re not hoping to feed off of them emotionally, mentally. In other words, your acts of generosity really are more generous. You give just because it feels good to give. You’re not weighing yourself down inside all the time. You’re not hungry inside all the time. So often, we’re generous because we’re hoping to get something else back from somebody else. In other words, if we let them feed off of us for a while, then we can feed off them. But if you’ve got this store of energy inside and you know how to tap into it at any time, you don’t need to feed off of other people nearly so much. So it’s in this way that selflessness is spending the time to work with the breath energy in the body, get it comfortable enough so the mind can settle down and have a sense of well-being. It’s a gift not only to yourself, but to other people. Even more so when you can take this sensitivity that you develop inside and look deeper into what are the more subtle ways that you’re causing unnecessary stress and suffering for yourself and the way you manage the mind. One of the roles of concentration is that it gets things really, really quiet, really, really still, and you become more and more sensitive. It’s like listening to a piece of music. If you’re humming to yourself inside, you don’t hear a lot of the subtlety in the music. But if you make yourself very, very quiet inside, some of the more subtle things begin to impinge on your awareness. You notice them. It’s the same with the mind. We create so much stress for ourselves inside, so unnecessarily. It seems part of the background of just having a mind. We hardly notice it at all. But if you can make the mind really quiet, really still, with a very refreshing sense of ease, it feels good to breathe in, it feels good to breathe out, and sometimes it feels so good you don’t have to breathe anymore. Energy fills the body to the point where the in-and-out breath gets more and more shallow, more and more gentle, until finally it stops. You get all the oxygen you need through the skin. And then when you come out of that state, try to notice when does the mind pick up more stress? How does it do it? What are the issues that it tackles immediately? What does it run to? And try to be sensitive to the amount of stress that it causes. That way you begin to see how much stress you create inside, and it’s very unnecessary. You might say, “Well, I don’t care. I can live with that stress.” Well, remind yourself that the more stress you pile on yourself, the less energy you have for helping other people. The harder it is to be generous, the harder it is to be kind. When you harm yourself, it’s a lot easier to harm others. So this is not just a selfish activity we’re engaged in here, sitting with our eyes closed, trying to straighten out our minds. It’s an essential part of being kind, of being generous, of placing fewer and fewer limitations on our generosity. So this is a part of the Buddhist strategy. Learn to maximize your energy inside and get so you can tap into this energy, this sense of well-being, at any time. That’s why we work on the meditation as a skill. Then from that perspective, look at the areas where you can be generous. And you find that even with this increased level of energy, you can’t help everybody in the same way. You look at what ways of being helpful with your words, being helpful with your knowledge, being helpful with your time. Which ways are most productive? Which people make the best use of your help? In areas like this, you’ve got to be careful. You’ve got to strategize. In other words, what way of helping doesn’t come back and do harm to you? Because if you start harming yourself, even though it may seem like you’re being helpful to other people, the fact that you’re harming yourself makes it harder to be helpful further down the line. You want to find ways of helping that are not harmful to anybody. And focus your energies there. This ultimately leads to another gift that’s more universal and limitless. In addition to the gift of virtue, there’s also the gift of forgiveness. And then beyond that, there’s the gift of learning how to overcome your own greed, anger, and delusion. Because those are things that place huge limits on you. They place limits on the mind and cause suffering not only for yourself, but for all the people around you. So you work on using your meditation to see into how greed, anger, and delusion arise, and how you don’t have to follow them, how you don’t have to identify with them, how you don’t have to give in to the limits that they create. In this way, you protect other beings, other people, from being victims of your greed, anger, and delusion as well. So, ideally, you want to focus on the types of generosity that are limitless. Virtue, forgiveness, the wisdom that sees through the defilements in the mind. In all cases, you want to focus on the types of generosity that are limitless. Those are best served by having good, solid practice of concentration as food for your mind, as a sense of ease, well-being, and fullness that you can create inside, which also gives you the perspective that you can start seeing all the other more subtle ways that you place limitations on yourself. That should be your first priority. As for other forms of generosity, you build on the original ones, the more limitless ones, and help where you can in ways that are appropriate. So that’s the Buddha’s strategy. The Buddha, after all, was a member of the noble warrior class. He grew up thinking in terms of strategy. But then he turned that strategy into an even more noble end. Instead of military victory, as he said, the greatest victory is victory over yourself, victory over your ill will, victory over your inability to be forgiving, victory over your sloppiness in the way you treat other people, victory over the sloppiness in the way you treat your own mind and body. So the Buddha takes his ability to strategize and he applies it to a very different level of life, to a different set of ends that are normally used for strategy. So we want to make the most out of our human life. It’s wise to take his example, learn how to strategize with your generosity, your goodwill, so that there’s the greatest benefit all around. (crickets chirping)

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