Give Before You Get

September 29, 2024

We meditate to find happiness, but we have to bring some happiness to the meditation first. This is why the Buddhist training doesn’t start with meditating. It starts with generosity. We learn how to be happy in giving. A king once came to see the Buddha and asked him, “Where should a gift be given?” He didn’t expect the Buddha to say, “We’ll give to the Buddhists,” because the Brahmins would say, “Give to the Brahmins.” Other sectarians would say, “Give to their sects.” But the Buddha said something different. He said, “Give where you feel inspired, where you feel the gift would be well used.” That gives you freedom. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha would start mundane right view with the statement, “There is giving.” It sounds obvious, but there are people at that time who said that giving had no meaning at all, either because the people who gave things to would be annihilated to death, so nothing in terms of long-term consequences could be expected, or because you had no free will. If you gave something, it was because either the stars forced you or some outside force made you do it. But the Buddha is saying something else. No, it’s your free choice. And we make the free choice to give. That’s a good choice. When you were a child, this is probably how you first realized that you had that power of choice. You could use it in a good way. You had something that you could use, and there was no compulsion to give it away, but you felt that it would be good to give it to somebody else. That’s your first taste of freedom and the benefits of freedom. But then the King asked, “Where, when a gift is given, does it give the best results?” And that, the Buddha said, was something else. Then he talked about how to approach the act of giving as a skill. There’s a certain pleasure that comes with having freedom to choose where you’re going to give something and freedom to choose what to give. But there’s a higher level of happiness that comes when you realize that you can put some thought into what you want to give and how you want to give it, and that increases the benefits. He would talk about things that would make a difference in the results. Some of it has to do with the recipient. You want to choose someone who’s free of greed, aversion, and delusion, or someone who’s on the path to trying to achieve freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion. You think of the gift. It’s interesting, he never talks about the material value of the gift as being important. It’s more, is this a gift that’s in season, and is it actually going to harm either you or the person who’s going to receive it? Then there’s the attitude you have while you’re giving it. You have to have an attitude that something important will come with this. You’re not just throwing it away. And finally, your motivation. What do you want to gain from giving a gift? For the Buddha, the best motivations are the ones for training the mind. The lowest motivation, he says, is indolence, with the teaching on karma, is that you basically get back what you’ve given. This is very common back in India, and it’s common throughout the Buddhist world. You give X and you hope that in the next lifetime you’ll get it back. It’s not a bad motivation. It’s better than not giving at all. But it’s not the best. The higher motivations have to do with how it’s a good thing to give, or it’s not right when you have more than enough and there are other people who don’t have enough that you’re not giving. If you belong to a family that’s had a long tradition of being generous, you want to maintain that family tradition, and if you find that it makes the mind serene, it’s a source of happiness simply to give. And finally, it’s an ornament for the mind. You’re doing it simply because it’s a natural expression of your inner goodness. These are higher motivations, and the higher motivations get better results. So you can see that the practice of making the act of generosity a skill is aimed mainly at the mind. Your attitude when you give to others, you want to give attentively, you want to give with respect, and you want to give out of compassion. And the motivation, of course, is that you want to benefit your mind. You see this clearly when you sit down and meditate. There are times when you meditate and you’re trying to stay with the breath. And the mind just won’t stay. It’s got all sorts of other issues coming up. And there’s a thought that can come to the mind, “Maybe I’m not cut out to be a meditator. Maybe I don’t have the merit.” Well, you have to think back on the times you’ve been generous, the times you’ve been virtuous. Generous when you didn’t have to be, or generous when you really put some thought into it. You weren’t just going through the motions. In New Zealand they have ready-made packages for sankhatan. When you want to give to the Sangha, you can go down to a store and it’s all ready-wrapped for you. And that doesn’t go into the heart nearly as much as when you stop to think, “What do the monks need? What would be something special for them that would really be straight in line with their needs?” And you get that. The more thought you put into it, the more happiness comes when you reflect. When you reflect on that act of giving, and when you reflect that it was given out of the goodness of your heart, for the sake of making your heart serene, it gives even more happiness. You have a strong sense of your own worth, that you’ve been born into this world and you’re not a dead weight on the earth. You’ve actually given something. You’ve contributed something to the goodness of the world. And the world needs a lot of goodness. The fires of greed, aversion, delusion always threaten to burn it up. And with your act of generosity, it’s like putting water on the fires. So when you have that background, when you’ve learned the lesson from giving, that there’s a greater happiness that comes from giving than it comes from consuming. It gets you in the right frame of mind to meditate. Not only when you meet with obstacles, but when you approach meditation as a whole. All too often people say, “Well, what can I get out of this?” And if you’ve come to it from the act of giving, your first thought should be, “Well, what can I give here?” You can give your time, you can give your energy. Of the three qualities that the Buddha talks about when he talks about getting the mind into concentration, mindfulness, alertness, ardency. The ardency is the one that requires that you give energy. That you’re going to give before you get. And it’s through your ardency that you develop more mindfulness. In other words, the ability to keep in mind the fact that you’re going to try to stay here with the breath. And more alertness. Because it takes energy to be alert. That’s the part of the mind that’s aware without any effort. But that’s not what the Buddha’s talking about when he talks about alertness. Know what you’re doing and what results you’re getting. And you have to pay attention. Because all too often we do things and we’re not paying full attention to what we’re doing. We’ve got our mind on something else. And as a result, we can’t really connect our actions with the results of those actions. Because we weren’t paying attention. So you have to be ardent in being mindful, ardent in being alert. You give before you get. You start giving with the breath. That’s the practice of mindfulness, the practice of right effort. It gets into the concentration. The concentration is the reward. But then the concentration itself requires effort to maintain. There’s a sense of well-being that comes with getting the mind to settle down. And letting go of all of its other preoccupations. Because that’s the other aspect of mindfulness. You’re mindful to stay with your one object, but you’re also mindful to put aside all thoughts about the world. That are not related to what you’re doing right now. Again, giving. Giving up. And you find that the mind is wealthier as a result. We tend to think that the more opinions we have, the more ideas we have, the better the mind. But the Buddha’s showing that the mind shows its luminous nature. Shows what goodness can come when you let go. Through the act of being generous. Through the act of giving things up. Through the good qualities, the good qualities of alertness, of mindfulness, awareness, that come as a result. When the mind is not weighed down with a lot of opinions, not weighed down with a lot of possessions. So you come to the meditation with the right attitude. You give before you get. And whatever you get, you’re going to give that away too. But it’s like a trade. Trading up, trading up. And to finally get to the point where there’s no further up. In other words, you’ve reached the ultimate happiness. Which the Buddha said is also the ultimate emptiness. It’s empty of disturbance, empty of defilement. But it’s full of well-being. There is that potential in the mind. And we’re not going to know it until we learn how to give up the things that hold us back. Nibodhana, one of the masters of the forest, was visiting in Jonsawat one time. And when he left, he made a comment. He said, “The world has things that come in pairs, but the Dhamma is one thing clear through.” He didn’t say what that one thing was. But the attitude of generosity is a good candidate. you

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