

## *The Path of Giving*

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When we 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 we're standing, what the foundation of our practice is.

The Buddha started his graduated discourse with giving, and from there he worked up to the four noble truths. What's the connection? Well, think about what you're doing when you give a gift. You're breaking down a barrier. The gift goes across the barrier around 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, that reinforces the barrier. When you give, it helps bring the barrier down.

That's an analogy for the whole practice. When you practice the Dhamma, you try to break down the barriers between you and the Dhamma. On the one hand, you want to make the Dhamma your own. You read about the results of the practice—states of peace, states of calm, states of total freedom from suffering—and you want them. That's a good desire. Don't ever let anybody tell you that it's bad or wrong, that you're supposed to get rid of that desire. After all, without that desire, what would 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. Your idea of who you are: What is it made up of? Body, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness. We tend to take these raw materials and use them to fashion our sense of who we are. That "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 live with yourself as your goal, yourself as your end, it'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 found 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.

Some people say, well, you should make other people the end, the purpose of your life. But that's just like taking zero and multiplying it by 3 billion, 4 billion. You still come out with zero. But if you're looking for a way out, the Buddha said,

you can take those raw materials from which you normally fashion yourself, and turn them 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 it follows the precepts. Feelings: There are feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain, so learn how to use them. Learn to use whatever pleasure you can muster to 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 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 the label you place on. When you place a label on it, that changes the sensation. You can see that really clearly when there’s pain.

You use your perceptions to help you focus on the breath throughout the day. Or when things get more refined, focus on space throughout the day: space all around you, in between the atoms of your body. You can make that your perception. And on up through the levels of concentration.

Thought constructs: You have feelings and perceptions, you have directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to the breath and evaluate the breath.

Then there’s the consciousness of all these things.

So you’re taking those raw materials that you use to make into a self and now you turn them into the path. That’s how you give yourself to the Dhamma. You disassemble your own 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 themselves, 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, turning 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. It’s an act of giving that erases the barrier between you and the Dhamma.

This is why generosity is emphasized over and over again. The Buddha once said that a person who isn’t generous can’t attain right concentration, can’t attain the noble attainments. If you’re stingy, you can’t go there because you keep hoarding. You keep putting up 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, or doing extra work, anything that 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, 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. Where there’s no generosity, there’s no practice. Without giving, there is no attainment.

So recognize the things that go into your sense of who you are—these selves that you keep creating again and again and again, that like to treat themselves as ends in and of themselves—and learn how to break down the barrier around them by giving.

This is one of the special features of the Buddha’s teaching. The states of concentration that he had learned from his earlier teachers are actually part of the path. The problem was that his teachers treated them as ends in and of themselves. They got to the road and then 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 we tend to latch on to, saying, “This is me. This is mine”: When 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 and 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 a very different thing from the sense of you that sets out. But that’s the whole point. That gets given away, but something of infinite worth replaces it.