

Strategies for Generosity

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The Buddha's teachings on generosity, goodwill, and harmlessness are the underlying motivations for the practice, as well as the Buddha's underlying motivations for teaching. So it may seem strange that there are so many military analogies, military similes in his teachings. The ideal monk is compared to a warrior. The ideal meditator is compared to an elephant in battle and to an archer. In those days, archers didn't just set up targets in the backyard. They actually fought in battles, too.

We don't usually think of military strategy as having anything to do with generosity, goodwill, and 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 even here. 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 we had away, still it would benefit only a certain number people. If we were to give all our time to the rest the world, we'd only have a limited amount of time left for ourselves. 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 foster the right attitude. But in terms of a gift of our things, a gift of our time, there have to be limitations, and we've got to work within those limitations.

There's one gift the Buddha said is limitless, and that's the gift of virtue. In other words, 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, and you're not going to take any intoxicants. At all. Under any circumstances. In this way, he says, you give limitless safety to other beings. You don't kill when it's convenient to kill, or make any exceptions to these promises. You make a promise to yourself, with no exceptions at all, and try to maintain those promises to yourself at all times.

In that way, you do give a limitless gift. People everywhere can rest assured that you're never going to kill them, you're never going to steal from them. And the

Buddha says, when you give this limitless security to other beings, you get a share of that limitless security as well.

But what about your 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 meditation comes in, because simply the way the mind relates to itself can use up a lot of excess energy, very unnecessarily. You give in to greed, anger, and delusion, and you're destroying your energy, because there's a battle going on in the mind all the time. Or when 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, and what way the breath energy can suffuse throughout the body and feed all the cells.

In the texts, they compare your practice of the teaching to living in a fortress on the frontier. Concentration is compared to the food stores. There's a sense of well-being that 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 and well-being inside the body and mind. That's your food. 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 or mentally. 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.

All too often, we're generous because we hope to get something else back from somebody else. In other words, we let them feed off us for a while and 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.

It's in this way that spending the time to work with the breath energy in the body, getting it comfortable enough so that the mind can settle down with a sense of well-being, is a gift not only to yourself, but also to other people.

Even more so when you can take this sensitivity that you develop inside and look deeper into the subtler ways you're causing unnecessary stress and suffering

for yourself through the way you manage the mind. One of the roles of concentration is to get things really, really quiet, really, really still, so that you become more and more sensitive. It's like listening to a piece of music. If you're humming to yourself, you don't hear a lot of the subtleties of the music. But if you make yourself very quiet inside, some of the subtler sounds begin to impinge on your awareness, and you notice them.

It's the same with the mind. We create so much stress for ourselves inside so unnecessarily, and yet it seems such a necessary part of the background of just having a mind that we hardly notice it at all. But if you can make the mind really quiet, really still, then you gain a refreshing sense of ease. It feels good breathing in. It feels good breathing out. Sometimes it feels so good that you don't have to breathe anymore. The breath 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.

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? Try to be sensitive to the amount of stress it causes. That way, you begin to see how much stress you create from inside—and how it's very unnecessary. You might say, "Well, I don't care. I can live with that stress." But remind yourself: 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 not just a selfish activity you're engaged in here, sitting with your eyes closed, trying to straighten out your mind. It's an essential part of being kind, being generous, of placing fewer and fewer limitations on your generosity.

This is part of the Buddha's strategy: Learn to maximize your energy inside and get so that 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. You'll find even with this increased level of energy that you can't help everybody in the same way. You look at ways of being helpful with your words, being helpful with your knowledge, being helpful with your time, and try to see which ways are most productive, which people will make the best use of your help.

In areas like this, you've got to strategize. In other words, what way of helping doesn't come back and do harm to you? If you start harming yourself, even though it may seem as if 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, which is the gift of forgiveness. Beyond that, there's the gift of learning how to overcome your own greed, anger, and delusion. Because those things place huge limits on the mind and cause suffering not only for you but also for all the people around you.

So you work on using your meditation to see how greed, anger, and delusion arise, and how you don't have to follow them, how you don't have to identify with them, why you don't have to give in to the limits they place on you. 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, those are best served by having a good solid practice of concentration as food for your mind, as a sense of ease and well-being and fullness that you can create inside, which also gives you the perspective that allows you to see all the other subtler ways that you place limitations on yourself. These things should be your top priority. As for other forms of generosity, you build on the original ones, the more limitless ones. 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 strategizing mind away from warfare and politics to an even more noble end. Instead of military victory, as he said, the greatest victory is the victory over yourself: victory over your ill will, victory over your inability to be forgiving, victory over the sloppiness in the way you treat other people, victory over the sloppiness with which you treat your own body and mind.

So the Buddha took his ability to strategize and he applied it to a very different set of ends that aren't normally used for strategy. If we want to make the most out of our human life, it's wise to follow his example, learning how to strategize with our generosity, our goodwill, so that there's the greatest benefit all around.