

Lessons from Generosity & Virtue

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When you make up your mind to stay with the breath, one of the first things you learn is that your mind probably isn't as made up as you thought it was. There are many minds in there, many ideas of what you could be doing with this next hour.

So when you have that original intention to stay there, you've got to find as many allies as you can. After all, when the mind is training itself, there's one part of the mind training other parts of the mind, or one faction training the other factions. You've got to identify who are the helpful ones and get as many of the different parts of your mind on your side.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha talks so much about the purpose of this practice being to put an end to suffering, to put an end to stress. Everybody in the mind wants to put an end to suffering, it's just that they have different ideas about what that would be and how to go about it. The differences are things you have to reason through, but the common goal is what gives you a handle on everybody.

But simply reasoning with the different parts of the mind is not always going to work. This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath, to make sure it's on the right side: It feels comfortable coming in, feels good going out. This sense of comfort makes it an attractive place to stay, a good place to stay.

That way, when parts of the mind start demanding immediate pleasure, you say, "Well, here it is." It may not be quite the sort of pleasure they were thinking about, but there is a sense of ease, and learning to appreciate that ease gives you an extra handle on how to maximize your general sense of well-being. It brings more of the members of the mind to your side.

The Buddha recommends two recollections as well, to remind yourself—when things are looking discouraging—that you do have some good parts to the mind.

They're recollection of virtue and recollection of generosity. At the very least they remind you that you have done good, that there are good members to your mind. You're not totally hopeless. You're not totally incapable of doing good in the world. They also remind you also that you're capable of overcoming some of the mind's more blatant forms of greed, aversion, and delusion.

As the Buddha pointed out, the way we define ourselves as beings is around the act of feeding. To maintain your identity, you have to eat physical food, but there's also mental and emotional food that you take in.

Ajaan Lee talks about the skill of communicating with animals. He doesn't come out and say that he did this himself, but he talks about it as if he's had direct experience with it. One of the big questions you ask are, "What have you been eating? Have you been eating well?" The animals will be happy to talk about that because that's the big concern about their lives.

When the Buddha talks about recollecting past lives, that's one of the topics: "What was your food?" Such a large part of our lives is taken up with feeding. And it's good to see that there are parts of the mind that are not totally absorbed in the feeding. There's something that wants to go beyond the identity of a being who simply feeds.

Generosity and virtue are two things that really bring that point into the mind and make it clear. One of the lessons you learn from generosity is that you do have freedom of choice: You're not just constantly just feeding, feeding, feeding and hoarding. You can also give things away, which is the opposite of feeding on them.

Now, there are times when you're giving something to someone in the hopes of getting something from them, but there are other times when it's purely out of generosity. You see that you've got something that someone else needs. You may have a sense that you need it, but you're going to give it up because it feels better to give it up, whatever the reason. It might be good to reflect on that.

Think about when you have given things in the past purely out of generosity: It wasn't Christmas, it's wasn't a birthday or anything like that when you're customarily supposed to give. You felt simply "I want to give this." And you did. Reflect back on that. The Buddha said that looking into the workings of the mind when you're being generous helps teach you a lot of things, a lot of lessons that can then be applied to the meditation.

The same with virtue: You hold to certain principles, partly because you know that if you harm other people, they're going to turn around and harm you. But it goes beyond that. There's a sense of honor, a sense of dignity that comes with having a principle that you don't betray even in difficult circumstances.

And you learn some skills that will be helpful when you sit down to meditate. Qualities of mindfulness are required to remember your principles so that you don't slip out of forgetfulness. Alertness is required to actually watch what you're doing. These are skills that can be applied to your meditation.

As with generosity, the basic lesson is that you're going to be happier by giving things up.

There's a passage where the Buddha's talking with the monks. They're staying at Jetavana, and he says "If someone came and started burning all the trees and branches and twigs in the monastery here, would you complain that they're

burning you or cutting you down?” And the monks say, “No, the trees and the twigs are not us, they’re not ours.” And the Buddha said, “In the same way, what isn’t yours: Let go of it. Letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness.”

That’s very different from the usual message we hear around us: What isn’t yours, try to grab hold of it so that you can make it yours. As the Buddha pointed out if the you lay claim to things, you’re opening yourself to all kinds of problems: Other people will want to take or destroy those things, or the things will just wear out on their own. If your happiness depends on those things, if your self-identity depends on those things, you’re putting yourself in a bad position.

So the act of generosity teaches you one very important lesson: Developing the qualities of the mind even at the price of giving up things—and often these qualities do require that you do give things up—you end up better off. You’ve got something of greater value.

As you’re sitting here, all kinds of thoughts could entertain the mind. But you’re willing to give them up because you realize that they don’t lead to anything of any substance. They’re largely a waste of time. You’ve got the time now to meditate. Make the most of it. Try to develop the qualities of mind that are worth a lot more than the casual pleasure of entertaining yourself with your thoughts.

Above all, in the case both of generosity and of virtue, one of the important lessons you learn, that you’ve been gaining practice in, is a lesson in heedfulness: the realization that you can’t simply eat, eat, eat as you like or take, take, take as you like, or do whatever you want to do with other people. Your actions are going to have consequences, so be careful, not just for your own safety but also for maximizing your well-being.

It’s good to give things up and it’s good to be principled: to have certain boundaries in your behavior. After all, what is concentration? You’re placing boundaries around the mind. You’re trying to develop an expansive mind, but it requires that you give up a lot of the topics you normally think about.

Certain things are off-limits: thoughts about sensual desire, thoughts about ill-will, topics that make you restless and anxious, your doubts about whether you want to be here meditating. You’ve got to just drop all those. Sleepiness comes up and you can’t say, “Whoops, that’s a sign I’ve got to rest.” You’ve got to fight it.

So think of the ways in the past you’ve fought the temptation to break some of your precepts or do something that was immoral. Think also of how you’ve been able to talk yourself into giving something away, letting it go, even if it was something that you really liked. The lessons you learned from talking to yourself in those ways will be really useful as you meditate.

Recollection of generosity and recollection of virtue are usually taught as a practices for giving yourself energy, reminding yourself of your value as a human being. But these reflections also give you some important lessons on how to meditate: how to recognize the skillful members of the mind and how to take advantage of them—to reflect on how they work, how they're able to take over, how they're able to be dominant, even when there are so many members of the mind who want to eat, eat, eat, take, take, take, who want to be free to roam around as they like.

So when you find that you need some encouragement and some ideas on how to do better at your meditation, these two recollections can be very useful.