



## Giving & Receiving

### Developing Generosity

-Marcia Rose  
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The Buddha taught: “If you knew as I know the benefit of generosity, you would not let an opportunity go by without sharing.” The Buddha taught and lived what is really a “way of life”: giving and receiving—the practice of *dana*. The cultivation of generosity offers the possibility of purifying and transforming greed, clinging, and self-centeredness, as well as the fear that is linked to these energies of attachment. A practice of giving is the foundation of Buddhist spiritual development. Generosity is the ground of compassion; it is a prerequisite to the realization of liberation.

The Tibetans have a practice to cultivate generosity. They take an ordinary everyday object such as a potato or a turnip, and hold it in one hand and pass it to the other hand, back and forth, until it becomes easy. They then move on to objects of seemingly greater value, such as a mound of precious jewels or rice. This “giving” from hand to hand ultimately becomes a symbolic relinquishment of everything—our outer material attachments and our inner attachments of habits, preferences, ideas, beliefs—a symbolic “letting go” of all the ways that we create a “self” over and over again. In our Vipassana practice, this is really what we are doing, but without the props. We learn to give and to receive, letting go of control, receiving what is given—receiving each moment of our lives just as it is, with the trust that it is just right, just enough for our spiritual growth to unfold from.

As our *dana* practice deepens, we begin to know more directly the ephemeral nature of all things. What can we really possess, after all? Our realization that there is actually nothing that can be held on to can become a powerful factor in cultivating our inner wealth of generosity, which is a wealth that can never be depleted, a gift that can forever be given, a seamless circle that feeds itself. As the Buddha tells us, “The greatest gift is the act of giving itself.”

The Buddha taught “kingly or queenly giving,” which means giving the best of what we have,

instinctively and graciously, even if none remains for ourselves. We are only temporary caretakers of all that is provided; essentially, we own nothing. As this understanding takes root in us, there is no getting, possessing, and giving; there is just the spaciousness that allows all things to remain in the natural flow of life.

Someone once asked Gandhi, “Why do you give so much? Why do you serve all these people?” Surprisingly, Gandhi answered, “I don’t give to anyone. I do it all for myself.” The aim and the fruit of our *dana* practice is twofold: we give to help and free others, and we give to help and free ourselves.

Here are some questions we can ask ourselves to help determine if we are giving and receiving with mindfulness:

- What is happening in my body when I give?
- What is happening in my mind?
- Is there a sense of ease, openness, and nonsentimental lovingkindness and compassion in my heart, body, and mind?
- Is there a feeling of depletion, weakness, fear, anger, or confusion—a contraction of my heart, body, and mind?
- Can I go beneath my stories, ideals, and beliefs about how I want the exchange to be or not to be, or how I believe it is “supposed to be” or “not supposed to be”?
- Can I mindfully recognize when I am caught in stories, beliefs, or wishful or aversive thoughts in relation to generosity?

Mindful attention can also help us to know more clearly how much to give in particular situations—or whether or not it’s appropriate to give at all. Here are some questions to consider:

- Am I giving beyond what is appropriate, or giving beyond what may be healthy for myself emotionally and/or physically?
- Are my heart, body, and mind relaxed, open,

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and joyful when I feel I've given "just enough," or do I experience anguish and contraction of the heart, body, and mind in giving "too much"?

- Am I aware of when the most generous act might be to step back and simply let people take care of themselves, to let go and allow a particular situation to "just be" and work itself out?

Using these questions as guidelines, we can begin to understand the "middle way" of the Buddha's teaching of dana. Mindfulness is what allows insight to arise in a perfectly natural way and what allows us, in turn, to let go—to recognize ourselves as aspects of the natural flow of life, and in this recognition to give and receive effortlessly in healthy and wise ways.

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### **Giving with Integrity**

Buddha: Pali Canon

"These five are a person of integrity's gifts. Which five?

- A person of integrity gives a gift with a sense of conviction.
- A person of integrity gives a gift attentively.
- A person of integrity gives a gift in season.
- A person of integrity gives a gift with an empathetic heart.
- A person of integrity gives a gift without adversely affecting himself or others.

— AN 5.148

"The donor, before giving, is glad; while giving, his/her mind is inspired; and after giving, is gratified. These are the three factors of the donor...

— AN 6.37

Train in three acts of merit  
that bring long-lasting bliss:

develop giving,

live a life in tune,

develop a mind of good-will

Developing these three things  
that bring about bliss, resulting in the wise  
reappearing in a world of pure bliss.

— Iti 3.11; Iti 51

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