

2011-10-02 Generosity Overview

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SPEAKERS

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Okay, so so in a way, I couldn't believe my good fortune that I was asked to give a series of talks on generosity. And as I was thinking about this today for this tricycle online community, and it's a beautiful topic and makes me happy to talk about it, it's an important part of Buddhist practice. It's actually not important. It's kind of foundational. And but it's also pretty foundational in most human societies, probably all. And I think that human culture couldn't get along very well without a tremendous amount of generosity that's given within families with within neighborhoods, you know, and all kinds of ways. And so thinking about the English word generosity, and some of you might know the origins of the word comes from Latin, and just like the word Gentry or generation, I think genus comes from the same root, and it has his original meaning of being a noble person general general general versus someone who's in nobility. And until about the 1700s in the West and English, that's what it referred to refer to someone noble birth. A generous person who is someone who was born into nobility, whether they were generous in our terms, understanding or not, they were, because they were Noble. And then slowly over the from the 1700s, on the meaning of the word morphed in English, and it's started to refer to, eventually to the qualities of a person who had noble qualities and noble qualities a gentle a generous person meant someone who had all the qualities of nobility, courage and fairness the ideal noble person courage and fairness and, and variety of things, including being magnificent. And then into the 1900s and 20th century the word morphed and became refer to someone who gave generously. And that's primarily the what we how we understand the word in English these days, you're generous, it means that you give freely of yourself in some way or other. I think the quality to generosity often means that you give in situations where it's not expected and that there's no requirement to give and you give out of the goodness of your heart. And so, with this idea that it's you know, it originally kind of stems kind of a noble qualities, and that has been democratized. Now. So, everybody can have it is a similar movement that the Buddha did in ancient India, where the there was a noble class in ancient India, the Brahmins and the Buddha retranslated what it means to be a noble person, a Brahmin to be not someone who was born and no person would rather someone who exhibited and lived qualities of nobility, qualities of noble person which he defined by the virtues such things like loving kindness, compassion, generosity, ethics being ethical. And so the it's the qualities that we have and we act on them make a person Noble. So, whereas it took us, you know, several centuries in English to get that transition, the Buddha did it in one generation with him kind of redefined it. And, and there are many people who champion generosity in our culture. The and one of the stories I like is the story of Mr. Rogers. Those of you who don't know Mr. Rogers, he's one of my American heroes probably should be canonized as an American saint. And he had it for many, many Yours had a daily television show, I think half an hour show for little children that was filled with some of the best values and virtues that you could ever imagine for your children and even for yourself. I think adults should watch Mr. Rogers. And, and after, I guess, many years of having this television show, he was offered some kind of Oscar. And so he had to go to I guess LA for the Oscars. And he got on stage to receive whatever his award was.

And now Oscars, I, you know, my understanding is on television, you have all these people who are used to this whole world and I've never seen an Oscar but I imagine it's kind of a little bit fast pace. And it's not the kind of place where in front of television audiences you stop and do a 45 minute meditation session because,

you know, good for people to get together. So, Mr. Rogers got on stage and, and he gave a little talk and he said, you know, all of you probably have someone in your life who was responsible for where you are today are not responsible for their generosity, their goodwill, their support, or responsible or helpful for where you came to your life at this point in your life. And let's take a few minutes here to be in silence. And for us to think, for us to think about that person or those people. So you can probably imagine that the TV producers are looking at themselves and saying, Oh, no. And, and so he saw he did it and, and I guess they tend the audience with what they do in silence, right. And all these movie stars, TV stars were there and you could see them starting to cry. You know, as they each of them were kind of reflecting and thinking about who is it in their life that I'm supporting you with offered to us support generosity, and, you know, made you what you are today in some way. And that that was a really touching thing. And so question for you is you what acts of generosity Have you been the recipient of that's been really important for you and your life has changed you change your life for the better, maybe changed the whole direction you've gone in your life. One of the significant acts of generosity that I witnessed, which was very small, but maybe sometimes the small acts that get your most attention because of, I don't know, because it's not nothing's expected. At least for me. This was very important on early my Buddhist practice. I was meditating in a monastery in Thailand. And I was given a small cookie, a small hut at the edge of the monastery, and it was kind of like on top of, I think was dried out at that point, but in Tama kind of a swampy area. And so there was a long Gangplank from the porch going down the steps then down the steps across the kind of swampy area to the dry land where it was. It was like a long series of planks that would laid out. And so I would get up in meditates and my little one room hut in the morning. Whereas the I was not a monk there so but the monks would go out in the morning for their alms round at dawn. And then they come back to the monastery with a food that they had gathered, and that food would be distributed at lunchtime, and that would be the meal for the day. So but I wasn't amongst I wouldn't go out for the alms round. So I was sitting there meditating. And at the end of my morning meditation, I got up and opened my door and looked out at the porch. And there I could see walking away on those Gangplanks maybe 50 feet away. I saw a monk walking away the gangplank only came to my cabin, and the monk was walking away. And I thought that's kind of odd. And then I looked down at top of the steps There were was an apple and some cookies. And I think the reason why that act of generosity has such a big impact on me was not that he had offered me, Apple and cookie, but that he had it as far as he knew, far as I would never have known that he was the one who gave the cookies and that he wasn't getting any kind of recognition from me for what he did. It was just a generous, open ended act, without anything asked in return for me. And that, that way of being a recipient of that kind of act of generosity kind of woke up something in me about the beauty, and the ease the freedom and the kind of selflessness that's possible with generosity. So maybe each of you have some kind of experience like that, that you've had that was meaningful, and you can remember, and perhaps it's nice to think of it maybe not in a Buddhist context, though, that my story was Buddhist, because I think it's a universal human virtue or Beautiful quality of heart that we all have. And so just like other religions, Buddhism also champions the importance of generosity, and it does so in with two words. One is the word for generosity. And the other word is the word forgiving. And sometimes the Pali words for these are a little bit confused. The word for generosity is chogha, ca ga and it also has the meaning of

relinquishment to give something up. And because the idea of this generosity is that you are offering something of yourself where you're giving something up, you're relinquishing something you're going

here, take this. The word expression giving up in English apparently has its origins to making an offering to the altar, you give it up. And so they said giving, giving over handing over to something This relinquishment and so it points to the importance the ability to not hold on tight, do not cling to things, but actually move in the opposite direction of clinging, but releasing, what we hold on to relinquishing. So in Buddhist language, the word for relinquishment and generosity are closely connected. The other word that's sometimes translated as generosity, but which literally means either giving the act of giving, or the gift that's given is the word dāna, d a n a. And most people in the western Buddhist circles I've often heard of dāna and because giving is a big part of Buddhism to give, to give in with chogha. To give freely to give with relinquishment, here is a very important part. In fact, it's considered as kind of foundational and some to be evoked and encouraged when the Buddha was going Teach specially late people, the highest teachings he had to teach. He would prepare them, he wouldn't just sit down and say, here it is. He'll prepare them prepare their mind prepare their hearts for it. So they're kind of ready and receptive to hear, the more challenging teaching has to teach. And so he would give what was called a gradual discourse. And that gradual discourse would begin by talking about generosity. And I, I imagine that the way you started with generosity was it as a good entry point for people to get inspired, touching them in places where they maybe they already recognize some goodness in themselves some possibility in our society, of people acting in beautiful ways. And, and then he would talk about ethics. And I've been maybe inspire people around ethics, living by the precepts, perhaps also because it's something people can maybe relate to and inspire them that's meaningful and valuable and beautiful. And then eventually he would teach the highest teachings he had, which maybe will stay for another day. But maybe generosity itself is also the highest teachings. I like to think of it as, as a Buddhist practice as a circle. That, in a sense begins with generosity. And it ends with generosity. It ends with begins with generosity as a good training place to develop mindfulness, to understand self understanding, to develop our capacity to let go to develop healthy relationships with people around us. And it ends because as we become spiritually mature, I think there's a natural tendency not to claims natural tendency to feel empathy and care for others, and natural tendency to want to offer give to others. And so as people become more mature in the practice, there's a tendency to want to give to be generous. As they're generous, that supports for the practice and it's a wonderful circulars are spiral that goes around and around.

So there's many things to give that in Buddhism, the Buddha talked about different things you can give. And one of the things that I think is really beautiful, is not the giving of things, but the giving of safety. So many people in our society don't feel safe. And their neighborhoods, they can't go into it and live in neighborhoods where they don't feel safe, they feel reluctant to even leave their front doors. I remember I was very touched. Many years ago when a woman wrote a letter to spirit rock thanking them for their their time, her time at the spirit rock Retreat Center, which is up in the red headlines in the UK in the in the hills there and she said that for her. It was a First time she'd been in a location where she could walk out of her house, walk out and walk around on land in nature, where she'd ever felt safe. And that was quite something to grow up and never feel safe, is quite powerful thing. So there she received the gift of safety. There were probably 80 people on retreat there with her. She didn't lock her door at night, and she felt safe in this community. It's a very nourishing thing. And so to be around someone who you feel safe, that you can trust is a beautiful thing. So are they giving up safety is a time honored gift that Buddhism emphasizes. The other gift is the Buddha emphasized related to that is the gift of the precepts. So the gift of not killing, the gift of not stealing the gift of not lying, the gift of not engaging in sexual misconduct and the gift of not abusing intoxicants. If you reflect on how much damage is done in our society, by people Who transgress these precepts? Perhaps you can appreciate what a great gift it is just just people live by the precepts. Why would that be good, good Christmas. The so and then there's the giving of ourselves, giving of our time to someone. Many people find it more valuable to get a little bit of our time than it is to get or, or things. I remember a few times where

homeless people who stopped me on the streets, and I got a sense that even though they're asking for money, I had a sense that there was suffering in there in that person, and it was much more meaningful was that I would stop and talk to the person. And I remember once I stopped and talked for a while when I was with my little son and partly I did it to kind of teach him I guess. I don't know if that was Good idea but get teach by example. So I stopped for this homeless man over in Sequoia state station over here. And we talked a little bit and he asked me if I would buy him lunch, and I was going into burritos place to get to breeder with my son. And so I said, Sure, come along. And I offered to have him come meet with me, but he said, but so he ordered a burrito and I said, Don't you want more? Just a burrito me Don't He wants me drink or something else? I mean, you know, I figured he was hungry. And he said, No, this is enough. First I was touched that he said that was enough. And, and then will you come and join us? He said, No, I'm going to take it outside. So he went outside and that is burrito. I ate with my son. And then as when we left the restaurant, he was waiting for us. And he said I'm a poet and I would like to thank you by offering read you a couple of my poems. And he pulled out of somewhere pocket or something, these Turin, brown shopping bag, paper shopping bags, he had pieces of paper. That's what he had. And on there, he had these poems that he'd written. And he read these beautiful poems. They were really beautiful. So there was much more that happened there than just giving him money. I stopped, we talked, there was an exchange, and I benefited from that. So who was being generous him or I? He was being generous to me with his pomp beautiful poems that he gave me.

So sometimes we give ourselves of our time we give of ourselves sometimes giving someone a smile, is a beautiful thing to do. Offer a kindness say How are you? People want to know that they count off for people. I think one of the great needs that people have is a sense of self worth and dignity. And we can share that can offer that to people by how we relate to them, saying thank you, or appreciating people. It's a beautiful act of generosity. And then we give up our things, of our possessions of our money, which can also be a beautiful thing, extremely beautiful thing to do. Because it goes out and it can create so much good in the world. One of the time honored forms of generosity in Buddhism is to support people who are practicing. And so maybe that's what inspired that monk I was meditating on retreat. And when he left the apple in the cookie, perhaps I don't know what was on his mind. But I can imagine that one possibility was he wanted to give me some sustenance and encouragement for the fact that I was doing Buddhist practice and doing my meditation practice. And so I was supported. And I know that I've been many times supported by people so that I could Do my Buddhist practice, go on retreats. And it was really changed me and moved me the fact that there were other people who cared enough to want to support me to go on retreat. I once got a scholarship from man to do the three month retreat at IMS. And he wanted it to be anonymous, that I wouldn't know who it was that gave it to him. And so when I went there and sat on the retreat, I sat with this tremendous feeling of gratitude and appreciation for him, but also with the idea that I wasn't doing the practice just for myself, me and myself in mind, you know, I'm gonna sit there and I'm gonna get enlightened. Thank you. You know, I'm gonna be the best, most enlightened person on the block. And it's my enlightenment. Which I've seen when I was in Burma, I remember there was competitive enlightenment. There was this woman who had this you know, very different In a very beautiful kind of realization experience. And there was a American in California and, and there was another California in there man who knew her from California. And he got really bitter when he heard about her. Oh, I know her It can't be. You know, I kind of said, but so there I said, you know, you know, on this retreat, having received this generous support to be there. And so I was practicing to be worthy of that to be to be Barkley too. And I was also practicing so that I for other benefit of other people. And this idea of being supported by others, so that we want to practice for others was very motivating for me. And I don't know if I could have practiced as much as I did. It was only about for my own benefit. But it was really palpable for me that the fact that I was supported by others, that that that was really practicing for others as well and they wanted me to Do well, same thing when I went to Burma Burma is a beautiful culture and country that does a lot of

generosity in there. And I felt so palpably there that there were all these people who would, were there to support and cheer me on and support me and all of us who are practicing there, please practice, do the best you can. And so this idea that, you know, you're practicing for others as well. So that's one way of practicing practicing generosity. There's a whole slew of ways. And you know, Why be generous? is an interesting topic. The Buddha gave a number of reasons why people could be generous. One of the he was kind of he gave it to kind of a hierarchical way in terms of, kind of maybe from the lowest reason the most, to the highest or most valuable reasons for giving and one of the lowest one Reasons to give first in the list was out of fear. Some people give out of fear. Some people do it out of obligation. Some people do it because it's traditional. So just because traditional will do it. Some people do it because they want to get a gift in return. Some people do it because it makes them happy. It gladdens them and delights them. And some people give that this was for the Buddha, he listed this as the highest reason to adorn the mind. It's kind of interesting expression, video of adorning the mind or the heart adorning the heart,

making the heart beautiful and making the mind beautiful. And one of and one of the surprises for me, in doing meditation practice was how beautiful the human heart can become. As there's a purification as it's less becomes less attracted and caught up in itself concerns caught up in desire and fear and aversion, all the things it's caught up in. And as the heart settles and opens up, there's a tremendous beauty. The beauty of an open, free heart is often likened in Buddhism to the beauty of a full moon, radiant and shining. And so there's something about giving that generosity, generous giving, that can also help awaken that form within us, that can somehow awaken that clarity. So you might think that the motivation to give in order to adorn the mind or the heart is a selfish reason forgiving. Many people feel that generosity should be selfless, completely selfless. And if it's not selfless, then maybe it's not really truly generous. The equation of selflessness the idea of selflessness doesn't, that sometimes you pay appears in currency here in western Culture doesn't seem to be present in Buddhism. Though often Westerners were there, the teachings or the ideas of altruism and selfless giving, are sometimes read into the Buddhist tradition where it's not really there. It seems that in Buddhism and traditional in ancient India, there wasn't this sharp dichotomy between self and other, as you have sometimes here in the West. And so it was very clearly understanding that if you benefit yourself, then you're benefiting others. If you're benefiting others, you're benefiting yourself. And so it was really good. If you if you'd cultivated yourself spiritually. That was beneficial for the society around you. If you supported others, that was beneficial for yourself. And so there's a mutuality going on. And so there wasn't this idea that you were being selfish. If you want to adorn Mind, then you become a kind of person who can be safe for other people who could be inspiring, that can, you know, can be act and live in the world in a very different way than if you live constantly by fear and anger and hate, and greed and the variety things that some people might live by. And so it benefits society for us to do this work. And if there is a conceit or arrogance, or kind of kind of attachment around selfishness, the full moon is not going to shine. So if we want to do this work of adorning purifying the mind, we have to also let go even though it kind of seems like you're doing it here for yourself. The contractions of selfishness have to be let go of in the process. But it doesn't mean that as you get low, let go of selfishness that you still don't tend to yourself, to your heart in your mind. And one of the beautiful things you can do is to Discover this kind of adorn beautiful mind. I think of the adorn mind or the beautiful mind and heart as being one which is light at ease. And so that when the heart and mind is at ease, then generosity is an easy thing. It's not a heavy thing. It's not an in Buddhism, the Buddha stressed that generosity in the Buddhist religion is not an obligation. So when he was asked by, I think, a king, where should I give? He's, he said, Give where you have confidence as opposed to how you should give here because you know, give you have confidence. He also when he was asked, How should I give, he said, You should give where there's where there's joy. So if he said, you know, it's kind of a high standard, maybe with give there should be joy in Thinking about giving joy in the giving, enjoy after the giving. So the standard for generosity? Is

it? does it bring some joy or well being or lightness or ease? Does it do something nice? When I heard that teaching, I translated in my little bit for myself, I

say, Can I avail myself of the joy that comes from being generous? Because I have a tendency to want to dismiss the value of things I do in the world, you know, it doesn't really count. not that important. And, and so, when I heard that, the city of that can be joy from giving, I thought, well, maybe maybe if I stopped a little bit and reflect, maybe I can avail myself and inspire myself or relax myself by remembering and thinking, Oh, this was a nice thing to do to the beautiful thing to do. It's not so Fish to appreciate your generosity, it can actually be a beautiful relaxing and opening thing thing to do to appreciate oneself. And I, as I said before, it was kind of hard for me to do this self appreciation for a while, because I think I was so deeply acculturated somehow that you shouldn't think about yourself. And to appreciate yourself as a kind of selfishness and self centeredness, which is not good. It can be but it doesn't have to be. So, to allow oneself to feel the joy of one's acts, I think is a beautiful thing to do. I think that this form of freely given generosity where it comes out of a sense of ease, is a revolutionary thing to do. It's revolutionary for our own psychology, if our own psychology is based on greed. Then to give generously is no revolts, the creed, you know, turns it around dramatically. And it can change the very foundation of a person's psychology. In a society where greed is often the currency, getting and acquiring and acquisition, I think that having people who offer themselves freely and generously creates a very different foundation for our culture. And I think it here in the West in American culture, there are a variety of foundations maybe call them cornerstones for the culture. And certainly, being greedy and acquisitive and materialistic is one Cornerstone, but there are other cornerstones as well. And I think there's a lot of generosity in our society, between family members, between neighbors. As I said the other day in Little League was a tremendous amount of volunteerism in here in this country. So it's one of the one of the things one of the really strong foundation of American society is volunteerism. There's a tremendous amount of Philanthropy In our culture, we support people, other people talk more here in America, I think, than almost any other country in the world. And so that's to be celebrated and appreciated that this exists here. And, and perhaps if we get a good enough, Cornerstone, big enough cornerstone of generosity, maybe we won't need the cornerstone of greed and ambition and things that kind of, kind of sometimes have benefits but sometimes give the wrong message to how we want to raise children and other people.

One of the reasons I appreciate generosity as being the foundation or the beginning point for Buddhist practice, is that generosity is practiced in relationship to other people. You can be generous to yourself, but generally it's relational. to other people or to the world. And what it means is that Buddhist practice at its foundation involves creating healthy relationships around you. And this was not the message I received, or I kind of made up when I was a brand new practice practitioner when I was 20. What I thought that what Buddhism was about was closing your eyes and meditating, and kind of pulling away from the world in a way. And so sometimes when you start with meditation as a door into Buddhism, you don't, it takes a while sometimes to get the message that having healthy relationships living for the benefit of our society, and for others is an important part of Buddhism. And so by doing at the beginning, we begin to explore developing healthy relatedness and healthy relationships. The world around us is not an easy thing to do, but it's important thing to do. And so our practice or Buddhist practice, is not just for ourselves, but we have a sense that we also do it for other people as well. And the last thing I'll say today is that one of the approaches to generosity in Buddhism is to develop it, or take it on as a practice. So rather than relying only on your natural inclinations, to be generous, you would take on generosity as a place to train yourself to practice and develop yourself. And, and so you maybe you feel it's valuable to become generous, it's valuable to let go of our clinging, it's valuable for our society. Or it's valuable that in our attempt to kind of create these generous relationships with other people. It's a valuable place to learn about ourselves. And so we take on the practice of it, which means

you practice This means you give sometimes when you don't want to. And you experiment and explore what's going on for you, you'll learn from it, you stretch yourself. And so that'll be the topic for next week is that they'll talk about Buddhist practice, generosity as a practice you can do, I suppose to do four talks. So the third one I thought I would talk about generosity as service or service as generosity. And the fourth talk would be about generosity as its as its intimately connected to the path of freedom. Freedom that's possible that Buddhism as the highest teachings of Buddhism, the freedom so, since it is a four week kind of program here that give these talks for I would like to end with a suggestion for practice, you could do an exploration you can do for this week. And that is Maybe like Mr. Rogers instructions, is spend some time reflecting, thinking about the values and importance and role about generosity, the generosity he's had in your life. And what are the messages? What are the teachings of generosity you received growing up? And spend a little bit of time if you have easy access to people who are willing to do this, talk to other people about their experience with generosity? What's their relationship? generosity, what's been their history around it? What do they learn growing up about generosity? What have been the important milestones around generosity they'd experienced growing up. So this the instruction so the instructions are to, to contemplate, reflect and discuss this world generosity, and see if it can become richer for you, as you explore it in this way. So thank you all very much.