

# 2014-08-10 Generosity

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

generosity, people, buddhism, practice, monk, support, thinking, give, generous, kinds, cultivate, kindness, holding, incredulous, society, money, inspired, gift, liberation, goodness

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So this morning, I would like to talk about generosity. And I read somewhere recently that it's possible that historically, the theme of generosity is the most popular theme for Buddhist Dharma talks and commentary down through the ages, more than anything else. And if we look at that, look upon that in a favorable light, then it shows no sensuality and the great importance that generosity has for Buddhism for Buddhist practice. It's a great, it's a great topic, and I feel like I have been transformed or changed by my encounter with the teachings and practice of generosity in Buddhism. The and there's too many May be ideas that I would like to get across today simple ideas. And that is that the practice of generosity or general movements of generosity can be of two general types. One is that it's a practice of generosity. So a practice means you do it even if you don't want to. Because you see it as a practice, it's an exercise, it's a way you know, you might not want to go to the gym, but you go to the gym to train. It's a train at the generosity, practice. generosity is a way to train, train oneself in ways that are beneficial for yourself and for your society. So generosity as a practice. The other is a generosity as an expression of the innate goodness of your heart or your inner life, your your sense of yourself, and, and in Buddhism, our liberation of the heart is the point that liberation of the heart allows that goodness to be active. Bresson, so generosity, just a way of expressing that goodness. And then part of the task of Buddhism is certainly to awaken the goodness in our heart to liberate it, but also to recognize it. So if we recognize it, then that part of us we can then have more capacity to express. So two things, generosity as a practice generosity as a natural expression, so that'll come to that, but it's one of the things I hope to leave you I thought, if I say that is beginning, and then later, that then have some hope that maybe you'll remember something from the talk. I hear it's good pedagogical technique.

So but you know, this generosity is a great topic and when I was thinking about it, and thinking that if there's magic in Buddhism Or something that's the closest to Buddhism is magic how things work magically, magically meaning that it works kind of in an unseen world, the cause and effect relationships you don't there's I see directly how it affects things, but it has big effects. And wow, how did they do that? So there's two primary things that are involved in Buddhist magic if you like magic. One is the practice generosity. And the other is the practice of kindness or loving kindness. Those two things have a huge impact. And sometimes they it's kind of like magical how to work. How did that work, you know, and I, over the years that I've been a teacher, it's not it's pretty common for people come to me and talk about their challenges with difficult people in their lives. So sometimes it has to do with a common one has been a mother in law's So, and sometimes it has to do with someone's boss. Some difficult some difficult person at work. And so I'll listen and sometimes I'll offer some advice or support or for them, but sometimes what I've suggested to them is that they give a gift to this difficult person. And they sometimes their eyes go wide You gotta be kidding. Yeah, yeah, I'm not serious. You know, think it does that don't make it too dramatic. But when you come to your mother in law's house, be sure to come carrying something and give it to her. And, and, or if you're your boss or coworker,

make sure you do something that feels generous. And many times after, not always, but many times after I've given this advice. People come back to me and said, Wow, we I don't know if it was I don't know if that's the reason but things shifted after I started doing that. It was magic. They don't use the word But things shifted. I've had that experience with people that somehow is the movement of generosity and movement of sharing something to someone giving something they weren't expecting elicits a change of heart in them, you know, it's kind of hard to kind of see you in the, in a particular way they had before that opens the heart open to their kindness opens their friendliness opens their somehow their goodwill to you. So kindness is the same way. And I've seen many times where it happened this summer once, where I had a difficult relationship with someone I didn't really know what to do. And that was kind of perplexed. And I decided I would just take refuge in kindness. Just be kind. And when I decided to be kind, I didn't have a chance to even do it. Because when I saw that person I did, I did but before I had a chance to do it, The person that I was having challenged with was relaxed and open and friendly. What happened? Maybe that person had gone through the same soul searching as I did you decided that to go try this kindness thing? And as you know, it's like magic. How did that happen? So magic. So Buddhist magic. So here's a story of a folktale. There were farmers, a husband wife, who had a new baby daughter born. And so as was the custom and that time in place, they went to the local astrologer to hear about the future of this daughter. And astrologers able to she'll have a very happy life and be very successful in her youth and you'd be very wonderful daughter until she gets married and then on her The night of her marriage, she'll die. So the parents never told the daughter this. But But you know, they went through the life the parents knew this was the deal. So, sure enough on her marriage day, why would you marry her? Anyway, so she, so the folktale goes along, so she is getting married. And there was a marriage feast afterwards. And everyone was feasting and celebrating the parents too. I wonder about the story.

But you know, it's a folk tale. So you have to kind of go along with magic and strange things. And so and so as the story's goes, a very poor beggar came knocking on the door of the party. And either people are too busy to notice People kind of thought this is a kind of bad luck for the party and shoot the beggar away or were angry, you know, just then when nothing to do with a beggar, except, of course, the bride. And the bride took a plate of food from the feast and brought it out to the beggar and said here you can have this please. So the feast was over, the bride and groom went off to do what they do. And the next morning she was still alive. And so the farmers went back to the astrologer. What happened?

And the astrologer said, Well, certainly the stars and everything predicted there her fate was to be to die on the night of her wedding. But there was one thing that could change her fate. And that was an act of generosity and so one of the questions I first thought was, why didn't he say that upfront?

And the answer I have for that my own question is that it wouldn't have been generosity if they had been told. If we got to give, you know, because if it's just a matter of giving, they could have given a lot of gift. Giving is not necessarily generous. So even if even looks like a gift, it's you know, if it's done out of fear done for these ulterior motives, done for an exchange done for, you know, so you don't die like we're gonna do this, then. I don't know if it's really coming from a place of generosity, generosity, is to give what is not expected. generosity is to give in circumstances where it's not understood as an exchange. There's gift giving, which is exchange, but generosity does not come Good you have an exchange. And so and so they had to just for astrologer couldn't say anything. So, about that part I had to kind of take its course. Luckily it worked out well. Another little folk tale from the Buddhist tradition has to do with a monk. You know mendicant monk renunciant you know, had didn't have much monks have robes and basic his robes and a little bag of a few things like medicine and book maybe and then they have a begging bowl and alms bowl, they go around, that's how they get the food is they walk

through the villages with their bowl, and people put food in it. So it's important possession for the monastics and so this monk had one but it was an alms bowl that was given to him by the king. And it was made out of gold. You know, so, it was this renunciant medikit First young monks on supposed to have any wealth, but they're also not supposed to. You know, it's okay to have gold if I've met gold bowl if someone gives it to you use it. But he had a gold bowl. So one night he laid himself down in a grove of trees to sleep with his bowl next to him. And a thief came lurking, you know, through the woods and saw that gold ball. That was pretty exciting. And he thought he was wait for this monk to fall asleep. But before the monk fell asleep he saw this thief kind of lurking behind the trees and eyeing the bowl. And so the monk said, Hey, you come here, here, you if you want this, you can have it and gave it to him. And not a far fetched idea. That's a little detour and within a story Ajahn Amaro is a monk who lived here in California for some, I don't know, how many years 17 years. So he taught here, he's a wonderful English man. And in the early 2000s, I think, or some point, he had, I don't know if it was a smartphone yet, but it was like one of the early smartphones. He had this device that, you know, it was a telephone, of course, but he could do email on it and things. And it was kind of, you know, expensive back then it was quite special. And he showed up, you know, this, you know, and I just had a little flip up phone, you know, whatever. And so he pulled out this, you know, and he would use it into email and stuff, and I knew it was very expensive. And so I asked him, What are you American monk? What are you doing, you know, with this expensive phone? You're supposed to live a life of poverty, kind of. And he said, Oh, this was a gift, someone gave it to me. So I use it, but I use it. Always with in mind if anybody asks me for it, I'll give it to them. I thought of it mostly mostly to test him.

And so this much of this monk with a golden bowl said, Hey thief, come over here. If you want this, I'll give it to you here. So the thief couldn't believe his luck. He took the ball and he ran before they thought the monk would change his mind. And a monk went to sleep and had peaceful sleep through the night and in the morning, he woke up and there was a thief next stick sitting nearby with the bowl, said I want to return this and why the monk said, obviously, you seem to have all kinds of riches, Inner Wealth that I don't know about and I want to come back You're students so I can learn what, what that wealth is. Nice. So the idea of Inner Wealth, and this is in Buddhism, there's a lot of talk about Inner Wealth, and cultivating that Inner Wealth, that inner well being that inner joy and compassion and peace and wisdom and just a lot of beautiful qualities. That's where our real wealth is. In fact, sometimes in Buddhism, they say, that's the secure Well, that's what's good. We'll support you in all kinds of circumstances in a way that you external well, may or may not. So, the practice of generosity. One of the reasons to practice generosity is that the Buddha said it unites friends. It brings people together and creates unity and harmony between people. And that's a good thing to have harmony and unity in families, among our friends in our communities, and gift, giving us One of those ways it creates a connection. You know, it has to be done with wisdom and care and sensitivity. Because it's one of those channels through which our social relationships can be healthy and connected and involved. And American society, I think, many times have been very inspired by how much our American society is built on generosity. And I saw it quite dramatically in a very inspired way. As I was raising children. And my kids did all these things like sports. And there's a huge pool of people out there, a huge number of people who are volunteering their time to coach and, and support and these kids soccer teams and baseball teams and all these things. And I've seen people put a tremendous amount of time into it freely just giving themselves to it. And I think it's an important part of our society. These children grow up with this kind of ability to be in the community and be supported by community and have connections and do the sports that they do. Or the tremendous number of parents nowadays seem to be involved with the local schools. I think maybe because schools are more financially strapped than they used to be, when I went to school didn't seem like I didn't know of any parents who were involved in school, but now it seems to be pretty common. And I'm so inspired by all these parents who get involved in you know, some all kinds of things at school including the extra curricular things like theater and, and they just

give themselves this act of generosity and they're supporting and making this thing happen. I think that if we start analyzing how much our society depends on general, people being generous and giving things without any monetary return, that it's probably maybe the biggest piece of the economy. I would guess some of you maybe saw the video youtube video in May of Have this secretly videoed people being interviewed for a particular job offering. And so people would come and be, you know, come for the interview. And they didn't know much about the job. So part of the interview was eventually people will start asking you, you know, you know, like, how much vacation time is there? And the interviewee interviewer interviewer said, oh, there's no vacation in this job. No vacation. They feel if I look, oh, incredulous. Oh, yeah, no vacation, can't take any time off. And the job is seven days a week. And you and you can't sit down there's a lot of bending and standing up. And well, how many hours a day was 24 hours a day. And the interviewer is quite, you know, serious and professional and you know, sounds like a you know, real Real, you know, job and these people don't like you secretly being a comic eyes go wide, kind of incredulous. Some of them, some of them laugh some of them, you know, anyway, different things.

And it takes a while for me to realize that. Then at some point the interviewer says, This is incredulous This can't be right, isn't it? Yes, it is more than half of the human population on the globe does this job and, and then they understand its mothers. You know, so the idea being that you know, that motherhood is this act of generosity of giving, that giving and giving and this is stopping 24 hours a day. And so I so I don't know if you saw that, but I saw it that was kind of touched by it came out of mothers on Mother's Day. So this idea of generosity is you know, makes our society go and supporters. So when I'm out and about in the world now. I think I think in terms generosity much more often than I used to, excuse me. Here's some examples of it. I used to be very concerned about getting the cheapest possible price for whatever I was buying. And I used to be like I was my 20s. I used to be a really hard bargainer in countries where you would go bargain for things. And I remember being proud of myself then for being in some countries and some bazaars where you bargain for different things. And I would bargain so hard and so successfully that the person who is selling would certainly sell it to me but was angry. So I thought I really got a good low price. But now I feel terrible about that. You know, that that was the legacy that I left. Now, I feel that I just want people to be successful and thrive in their lives. I want people that it takes it's a big deal to get, get get along in this life and have money too. support your family and support yourself. And so now I'm not looking for the cheapest price so much anymore. I just good someone will benefit from this. Someone will benefit and I'm sure some of you are skeptics as well, yes, they're big corporations or something right. But, you know, it's just it gets, it gets spread out, you know, I kind of know that I think more that way. I'm more interested in thinking that way than thinking, How do I get the best out of this? And so, you know, giving tips at restaurants of a go eat out or, you know, all kinds of things. Now, I don't worry so much if someone is, is if I think someone is charging me too much because sometimes when people I feel like people are charging me so much I'm looking at their, who they are and likely lifestyles they have and that these people would be good for them to have more money. You know, maybe they're charging me more than what that person down the street is going to charge me but you know, this person has to get along in their life as well. And so I find that that kind of thinking It lifts me up inspires me kind of very different debit has a very different effect on me than the kind of calculation involves, well where can I get the cheapest possible thing another place where I do this kind of thinking is if I get a parking ticket I just like great I get to support the local town all these municipalities all these municipalities are struggling, they don't have money. And you know, I've been you know, I've been using I've been using the parking spaces and you know, situations here for a long time and it just, you know, it's it's great to be able to offer something back finally. So is that silly way of thinking? Yes, somebody says, You're not and Yes. Is that a silly way of thinking? Maybe it's maybe, but look at how you how you think about it. What what what what what way of thinking do you have about the kinds of situations. And do you see it as being? You know, are you you



know, miserly kind of all about me is it evoke distress for other people is involved you know what kind of thinking supports the way you think about these kinds of situations. And I found that I feel much happier thinking about supporting the world supporting others and it's not all about me and what I need and what I should get. So the practice of generosity supports other supports society supports our community brings people together creates harmony, overcomes animosity, difficulty, the Buddha said that the practice of generosity is a way of overcoming your own hostility. If you have if you have anger and hate to it's a way of overcoming it. So you might want to think about that. Next time you're angry with some somebody.

Many years ago I read a A study of culture those tribe in the Philippines that has been somewhat isolated for many years. I think I read this 1970s. And this was a little tribe that focused a lot on their dreams. They would dreams were very important for them and they've come up in the morning and breakfast the family would talk about their dreams they had. And one of the customs they had in this tribe was that if in a dream, there was something scary or angry or conflicted with someone else in the village, then they would always go and give a gift to that person. Nice. So this idea of a gift, you know, society, gets along works better with gifts. And it doesn't have to be you know, expensive gifts. Just asking somebody how they are. A smile makes a big difference. The practice of generosity is also useful in order to understand ourselves better. It's one of those reference points. Because they sometimes the exploration of generosity, the consideration of being generous, or how we're not generous, can help you reveal ways in which we're scared. There's a lack of generosity sometimes motivated by fear. The lack of generosity sometimes is motivated by miserliness. Sense of scarcity, sense of protectiveness. Sometimes it involves anger, sometimes it involves all kinds of things that go on inside clinging and attachment to things. So part of the part of the function of the practice of generosity is to flush out these kinds of attitudes that we have that might go unnoticed. So to choose to practice generosity, even when you don't want to, is a way of understanding yourself better not to feel bad about yourself, but to understand yourself so you can take in, take that into account and monitor it and if something is not wise then change it in a way that makes us wiser. And so, one of the practices you know to do in this regard, is to take us an amount of money. I don't know if it's \$10 or \$20 or \$50 bill and carry it around with you \$100 bill, whatever, whatever is meaningful for you, causes you to kind of like and, and look for someone in the next week to give it to and then see what happens as you can With you, you know what thoughts come up and what concerns with fears and we know what comes up around this idea you're going to give someone significant amount of money for you. Many years ago, I there was a homeless man I think was homeless on University Avenue in Palo Alto. And he asked me for money to buy some food. And I said to him, I looked at me kind of looked at him and said, Okay, I happen to be going over to, like, was McDonald's back then? So, come out, I'll buy you some food. And he looked at me looked at me up and down, like checking me out. And then he said, Okay, I trust you. What?

And, and that helped me understand myself. You know, I was, you know, Tim, can I trust him and I thought I was a good person. And I had all these, you know, probably unexamined attitudes about generosity in him. And when he said, Well, I trust you, I said, Wow, there's more going on here than meets the eye. There's something. There's a deeper connection, deeper relationship. There's something going with me that's important. I need to look at myself as well. Another time I gave, I did the same thing to someone here in Redwood City. And even invited him to come and eat with us. He said, No, no, I'll eat outside. And then when I left, he was waiting for me. And he said, I'm a poet. And thanks for what you did for that meal you gave us. I would like to read one of my poems to you. And he had these, you know, pieces of brown garbage, shopping bags, paper shopping bags, that he had written poems on. And it was an exclusive phone. I was moved by the phone. This guy was a really good poet. And that was, you know, he died by time. About the restaurant is forgotten about him. So, to practice

generosity to learn about yourself, and as you learned about yourself to start making choices, but how do you want to think about things? How, what are the motivations you want to act on? What do you want to change about yourself? As you learn about yourself, that's part of what Buddhist practice is about. The other reason to do it as a practice is to give to try to be generous and given a generous way is to cultivate good memories, to cultivate a reservoir of memories that you're capable of doing good in the world, good memories, things that bring you joy and happiness. to cultivate a stronger sense of connection to others, there's all these good qualities they cultivate and developed. Besides generosity when we act of generosity. Practicing generosity also develops Further generosity, you become generous by being generous. And this is considered a very good thing in Buddhism for people who do the practice of the Buddhist practice and liberation. The practice of generosity is very significant, because generosity involves giving something up. And giving something up is, I think, is a beautiful term. My understanding is originally that expression giving something up was meant to offering it up at the altar. So to give something up not to be diminished, but actually to do something almost sacred. It gives something up, but to let go, to not hold on tightly to things. And there's no liberation in Buddhism if we're holding on tightly. And so to begin exploring this interface between holding on and letting go to begin exercising the muscle of letting go so that we can learn more and more clearly Not Hold on. If you want to become liberated and try to hold on tight, cling to things, there's no possibility of liberation. So as we begin to process of letting go that Buddhism teaches generosity is one of those areas where we're up against the edge of what we feel safe our fear, our wisdom, understanding what's going on. Our consideration is this is it okay to let go. It's okay to give my iPhone away. Is it okay to give my golden bowl away? Is it okay to stop? Someone's asking for food and invite them to have lunch with me? Is these okay? You know, where's, you know, how is it? How does this work? And there's a lot a lot of deep conditioning we have that keeps us stuck, keeps us attached keeps us clinging. And so that practice generosity pushes us against that edge and ask keeps us questioning. Wondering and exploring what is this edge? How can I kind of go further is okay let go, how can I let go in a useful way? How can I give in a useful way. And this practice of generosity and letting go should never be an obligation. But rather it's meant to help cultivate a beautiful mind. Buddhism, the expression of beautiful mind in Buddhism has to do with a mind that's moving and developing itself in the direction of liberation. And so that's where the wealth is or the real adornment is is in the mind as the mind becomes freer as the mind becomes more peaceful, as the mind or the heart, if you prefer, becomes more generous, more compassionate, more open, less protected.

And so the practice generosity has meant To move us in that direction. So in this regard, a King once asked the Buddha, who should I, who should I be generous to? And the Buddha said, to whoever you're inspired, I like this idea or wherever you have confidence depending on translation. So if you have confidence and inspiration that's really part of the food and fuel for real generosity, the practice of generosity, the practice of giving, sometimes you do things you give as a practice, even when you're not inspired just because you want to explore that it's, you know what I'm going to fix Florida territory and do things. But real generosity, as I said earlier, is to give in situations where it's not expected to give beyond the expected amount to give beyond given to situate situations where that's, you know, Surprised to people or that people feel grateful. Someone recently told me that, that when they give their practice of generosity, they operate under the principle they give. So they have no regrets. They give, so they have no regrets. And the beauty the beauty that the person said about this guideline is that if you give too little, you can have regrets. But if you give too much, you could have regrets. You can have regrets about yourself. Yep, take care of yourself. You're not supposed to just kind of give everything away. You have to take care of yourself as well. So but to give no regrets, no regrets that he gave to a little no regrets who gave to too much that helps you find just the sweet spot. You know, where it's nice to give. So the last second part of giving is not giving that has to do with a practice. But the giving that involves the natural goodness of the heart, the mind, then expressing it. And that's really

where giving Buddhism you're talking about. That's when there's, there's no giver, no giving, and no receiver. Just kind of like this is what you want to do. There's an open feeling there's a there's nothing is held on to there's no fear. There's no miserliness, miserliness, there is just a feeling of interconnectedness with others feeling perhaps that what is yours is not yours. You don't have to even idea it's yours. It belongs to everyone, which is belongs to it like, you know, I think Ajahn Amaro who's willing to give his iPhone away your smartphone away. I don't think he was thinking about his his phone. Or says the famous story I like to save Suzuki Roshi, who, and one of the reasons so famous surfer notices that there's a photograph of him just as he saying this thing. He was holding a photograph of him holding out his glasses like this in front of him, but you know, foot away from his nose, holding it up, and he's leaning forward. And he said, he said at that time, these glasses are not my glasses. But you know about my tired old eyes. So you'd like me use them? a different attitude, right? Rather than mind, mind, my mind. So I think as we become more free, more liberated, I think the idea of clinging to the notion of my knee myself in mind lessons and lesson lessons. And when we don't have that kind of clinging, and when there's kindness, there's generosity, there's goodness, there's openness. I don't think that giving becomes something that's so much doing. It just kind of what happens here. You know, it's not, you know, this is this. We're all in it together. We're all sharing. I had a little taste of that when I was 17. When I spent the summer kind of like a hippie hippie Jerry Garcia once claimed that there were only 50 true hippies in United States this in like 1967 or something. He interviewed at least 50 or something hundred or something. So anyway, I was whatever I was what it was, but we were I was. We had a little commune on wheels in Volkswagen, then, and my four friends and I traveled around Europe sleeping in the van and we hardly had any money and I think I had \$50 for the summer.

And, and so it was great, this little commune on wheels and we shared everything, whatever little money we had we shared and there was no sense I was mine and yours was like we're all in it together and the sense of sharing and being connected and When she means sharing is not even Right. Right sharing means you have to share. It was just just we were we and it was all our stuff. We took care of each other that way. So that was very nice. And then I went back to high school, in Los Angeles, with my friends. And then we started hanging out with my friends again and we go around, do different things in LA. And I remember once when I, one of my friends and I don't have enough money to buy a hamburger at the hamburger joint where we're going to buy and he said, I said, Oh, I'll buy it. I have money. He said no. You know, it's in my back was to boo Do you know he made because he felt it was exchanged. He had to repay me later or something. And I'd come from the summer in Europe where there was no you and me and mine, just like this is what we do. And he there was it he had my friend said he's very strong boundaries. And it was painful to come back to LA and feel this very different culture. boundaries in me and myself.

So generosity is it's considered the foundation of Buddhist spiritual path. I think it supports the path in many ways, it points to the points and supports to a liberated heart, a heart that doesn't cling to anything that's open to the world. It's a wonderful thing. It requires a lot of wisdom. It's one of the ways to cultivate wisdom because you can't just give naively, you have to be considered and wise about it. And there's if there are different kind of economies in our society, there are gift economies, and there are non gift economies. And so, you know, there's, you know, commercial economies, and how these work together, how they support each other, how they both have wisdom and both have their place is one of the interface between them is a very interesting area. And it's been very exciting for me to see how in the last, I don't know, 20 years or so that the gift economy, the open source economy seems to have been enabled by our technological revolution in some ways. And there are lots of places in our society now on the web in different places like Wikipedia and other places where all this stuff is made available for free that before you had to pay for and i think it's a really great thing our society is doing

what's going on. I don't know if it's gonna peter out and be relegated to the corners of our economy. But to me, it's very exciting. And I think that for us to articulate, have a better understanding about the philosophy and the wisdom of the practice of generosity of being open and giving is one of the great tasks for our society right now. Because of you know, The potential we have of the mutual support and openness and, and, and how that helps us all thrive. So two forms of generosity, the generosity of as a practice, to worthwhile practice to take on to give and, and the generosity that comes out of the goodness of your hearts. And that requires that you recognize the goodness make space for it. And you all have it. You all have abundance of goodness in there. It might be a little bit overlooked. And, but if you learn to recognize it, and relax into it, I think you'll find that you'll become more generous and the way that supportive and meaningful nourishing for you as well. So thank you all