

Pāramīs (1 of 10) Generosity

August 3, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

perfections, compassion, liberation, strength, voluntary, obligation, non-obligatory, gift, generous

Gil Fronsdal

In introducing generosity as part of the meditation today, I'm beginning a series of morning talks on the Ten *Pāramīs*. The Pali word is *pāramī*, in Sanskrit *pāramitās*. These are rich, beautiful, and important qualities of the heart that develop as we practice.

We've been using the *pāramīs* for the last 15 years or so as the reference point for offering spiritual care in a training on Buddhist chaplaincy. We train people to be hospital, hospice, and prison chaplains. We use the *pāramīs* as part of the framework for looking at the compassion and liberation that goes into Buddhist spiritual care.

The 10 qualities that are the *pāramīs* are often called in English the perfections – or that which is ultimate. What makes them *pāramīs* is that they're intimately connected to the human capacity for compassion and liberation – liberating the heart.

Generosity is the first *pāramī*. Many people in the world are generous. It's wonderful to be generous. When generosity supports or comes out of or is part of the path of greater compassion and liberation – then it is a *parami*. So there's ordinary generosity, and there's generosity that is infused or informed by compassion and liberation.

The Ten *Pāramīs* are generosity, ethical behavior, renunciation, wisdom, energy or engagement, patience, truth or truthfulness, resolve, loving-kindness, and equanimity. Each morning over the next two weeks, I'll cover one of those 10.

Now, what's also nice about the Ten *Pāramīs* is that these 10 are a different description of the path of practice. They are a way of understanding how practice can evolve (but doesn't *have* to evolve this way). It evolves sequentially: as one *pāramī* gets stronger, then the next gets stronger, and the next gets stronger. So by the time we get to the last one, equanimity, there's no possibility of thinking about equanimity as being some kind of cold indifference because equanimity is built on a foundation of all the other nine *pāramīs*, which are strengths we develop. Then you feel that equanimity is a strength built on wisdom, determination, truthfulness, loving-kindness, and the others.

So, it begins with generosity. In many ways, the Buddha taught that the path of practice begins with generosity. Generosity is a wonderfully rich and valuable foundational practice for Buddhism. When that is the beginning of the path of practice, it puts our practice in the context of our interpersonal lives – our lives with other people and other living beings. But if we start with meditation, then it's very easy to get the message that the beginning of the path of practice is ourselves. It is not wrong to begin there, but it can lead to sometimes being a little askew with emphasizing excessive individualism or conceit about ourselves and our own experience.

Starting with generosity, our practice clearly begins with the formation of healthy interpersonal relationships. To have our practice built on that foundation is a wonderful lesson and reference point for doing the more individualistic work of meditation itself.

Another nice thing about emphasizing generosity at the beginning is that generosity is really connected to compassion and liberation. Some people tend to relate compassion with a sense of obligation. It's considered a duty to be compassionate – we're supposed to be compassionate. Living up to that obligation to be compassionate is central to their understanding of how to be a good human being. It can be almost frightening, disturbing, or upsetting to remove that sense of obligation from how they live their lives. So, maybe this has a little bit to do with how we understand the words "obligation," "duty," or "responsibility."

But when we start with generosity, generosity is always voluntary. You can't be generous if it's not a voluntary act. You can give with attachment. You can give reluctantly. But to be generous, it's a voluntary act of openness, of abundance, of letting go, of granting. It cannot be obligatory.

Generosity comes out of some wellspring inside of health, goodness, openness, and connectedness, which is sometimes discovered as we sit and meditate, stay in the present moment, and let go of all the attachments, resistance, defensiveness, greed, and fear that we have. It just begins to shed and relax. This natural feeling of wanting to be generous to someone begins to become stronger in an ordinary, simple way. To emphasize generosity in the beginning is to really point back to that possibility and that place of goodness we have.

It's very important to appreciate that generosity is not an obligation, so we have to feel our way with it or make space for generosity or take the time for it. It's almost like we have an obligation – that is if you like obligation – to find how to be generous without obligation. So then spiritual care – caring with compassion for others in all kinds of different ways – comes from a feeling of abundance (which may not be the right word), from freedom. It's our freedom that is expressed in generosity, and not our contractedness, our heaviness, or the weight of responsibility.

So part of the practice of generosity is to stretch ourselves to be generous but not as a duty. Stretching ourselves, can we find the freedom and liberation of the heart that allows generosity to flow as a natural quality, something we're inspired to do? Generosity flows almost like out of ease and goodness. It's simple and obvious: "Of course, I want to be generous."

We explore that edge – looking at the places where we don't want to be generous, where we hold back, where we're afraid or too preoccupied with our own concerns to be generous. We can see what it means to start living with greater generosity, what it's like to open more and more. Surprisingly, it can feel like we sometimes receive more than we give – that the more we're generous, the more life can be experienced as a gift. We're actually more available for the gifts that life has to give.

Holding something tightly in your fist is one way of living. But in order to give what you have in your hand to someone else, you have to open your hand so they can have it. Once your hand is open, it is available for other things to happen. It's available for the gifts of life. If your fist stays closed, you're not available for what life has to give. And life is always supporting us here in a way.

So generosity is the foundation of this journey of the *pāramīs*. As we go through this ten-part series, I hope that you participate by spending each day focusing a little on these qualities. Make generosity the theme for the next 24 hours. You might write it down, carry it with you, or have it somewhere as a reminder. Explore and stretch and talk to your friends about generosity. Maybe do some simple reading about it in books or on the Web. Live with it and feel your way into it. Review and reflect on your own relationship to generosity.

Doing that each day with these different qualities, maybe you will start getting a sense of the momentum of how the *pāramīs* build one on top of the other – this building of something that is non-obligatory and arises from some feeling of liberation, freedom; of being non-attached, non-clinging; and our compassionate, caring connectivity to the world around us.

The gift that we receive from our world is, in fact, the love and care that we can also give to the world. Generosity and receiving mix together in a rich way.

I look forward to these days on the *pāramīs*. As we go along, I will fill you in more about what they are about. Thank you.