

THE FIRST LAY PRACTICE: GENEROSITY

Face-To-Face, Hand-To-Hand, Embodied

The Historical Buddha considered generosity the first foundational practice for community practitioners. Not an occasional gesture, but something woven into the fabric of everyday life. The ground from which choices and decisions are made.

He made its importance clear: “You should develop this recollection of generosity while you are walking, standing, sitting, lying down, busy at work and while living in a home crowded with children.” Retuning to generosity again and again, dwelling in it, inclines the mind and heart toward opening, being in relationship and letting go.

In the Buddha’s time, there were no checks, credit cards or remote giving. One gave or shared what one grew, raised, cooked, made, or offered time, effort, presence or support. The two most common opportunities for generosity were offering food to monks and nuns on their alms rounds; and giving or sharing with family, friends, employees, sangha members and merchants. The practice was face-and-face, hand-to-hand, embodied. It was part of the web of relationships that sustained family, community and sangha.

This kind of generosity involves giving and sharing without reservation, without strings, without expecting or desiring a reward or a particular outcome. Giving or sharing released freely into the world with an open hand, letting go of possessiveness and stinginess.

As a result, the meaning of generosity is discovered in the living moment of relationship with another being. The cause and effect of giving, sharing and receiving is tangible, immediate, personal. It can be seen in the receiver’s face and body, and heard in their voice. The giver can feel, directly, the tightening of stinginess, possessiveness, control, distancing and conditionality. And the reverse: openness, letting go, the urge to share and help, a quiet happiness and satisfaction. In other words, the falling away of craving, attachment and selfishness.

The Natural Emergence of Empathy and Wholesome Pleasure

The natural outcome of this face-to-face generosity is empathy. We can see and feel the sometimes complex experience of generosity. We begin to touch the common thread of suffering and happiness directly, and experience a sense of relationship and connection. We begin to see what lies behind appearance and personality. We begin to glimpse others in ourselves, and ourselves in others.

Satisfaction, joy and mental lightness arise from these experiences. A buoyancy appears. We feel sympathetic joy as we witness the happiness and comfort our giving brings to others. We feel a subtle delight, a gladness and well-being whenever we act from a generous heart.

This wholesome pleasure is essential to long-term progress in the dharma, and to a deeply satisfying life. It actively supports goodwill, warmth and confidence of in our relationships. In the words of the Suttas, it enables the community practitioner to say: "It [a generous heart] is a gain for me, a great gain for me, that I live at home with a heart free from stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in relinquishment (letting go), giving and sharing."

Growing This Type of Generosity

This type of generosity grows best through daily, small, face-to-face gestures of giving and sharing. We don't have to look very hard for opportunities: family members, friends, neighbors and their children and pets, co-workers, those who serve us, sangha members, strangers who could use a little support. "How could I be a little more generous? Helpful? Available? Friendly? Kind? Understanding? Patient? What small action might make another feel seen, heard, valued? Or simply brighten their day a little?" We can be stingy or generous with any positive quality of mind or heart.

And the gift that flows back to each of us from such generosity is the subtle satisfaction, joy and happiness we can experience through recollection. Recall a moment of giving or sharing. Re-experience it. Feel the wholesome thoughts, emotions, sensations and warmth the memory holds. Incorporate this into meditation sessions. Try this, as the Buddha recommended, in all four postures, while busy at work, or while home with your family. Purposefully recollecting in this way re-enforces the value, and encourages future gestures of, generosity as the first, foundational lay practice.