

## FWBO Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year Part 2: Exploring Buddhist Practice – The Five Precepts

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### *Week 3: The Second Precept – the Principle of Generosity*

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*Positive form: With deeds of loving kindness I purify my body.*

*Negative form: I undertake the training principle of not taking the not-given.*

*Pāli: Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

### **The fundamental Buddhist virtue**

Generosity – dāna in Pāli and Sanskrit – has been called the fundamental Buddhist virtue. Giving to others is a direct way of opening up our tight, painful focus on our own desires, and it can be practised by people whose lives leave them little time for more formal practices like retreats or meditation. For these reasons many traditional Buddhist schools see cultivating generosity as the essential first stage of the path. But at the same time generosity is also in a sense the culmination of the whole spiritual life – the Enlightened person is spontaneously generous, because they don't see the world in terms of self and other, but instead act from a deep sense of interconnectedness with other beings. As our spiritual life develops, our actions gradually come to express more and more of this self-transcending spirit of generosity.

The practice of generosity attacks our deluded world-view from two directions. On the one hand it undermines our neurotic attachment to possessions – and the anxious poverty mentality this gives rise to. At the same time it expresses and deepens our empathy for others.

Generosity is also the basis on which we build the spiritual community – it allows us to relate to each other on the basis of mettā rather than economics, from the 'love mode' rather than the 'power mode'. And generosity is highly contagious – when we are generous this releases generosity in others, which in turn releases generosity in an ever-widening circle. This is one of the most important ways we create the Sangha, the spiritual community.

### **What dāna is not**

The Buddhist practice of dāna is not about punishing or martyring ourselves. It is about developing and expressing expansive, warm, liberated states of mind which are highly pleasurable. To move in this direction we may sometimes need to push ourselves out of our present cramped, ungenerous habits, and this process may feel uncomfortable or even painful. A good analogy here might be the effort we need to make to do exercise, give up an addiction, or rise to a challenge – we push through the short term discomfort because we know this will make us happier in the longer term. But if we feel that we are punishing or martyring ourselves, or if we feel resentful about our giving, this tends to indicate that we are seeing our

ethical practice in terms of obeying an external authority – maybe 'God' or some human authority – rather than seeking to express our own deep values. If so we need to take an honest look at our motivations, scale down or even drop our practice, and then perhaps re-engage with it in the future on a different basis.

### **Not taking the not-given**

In the 'negative' sense this precept advises us to avoid actions that express the opposite of generosity – our tendency to grab what we can for ourselves. This implies much more than simply not stealing. The Pāli words clearly mean not taking that which has not been freely given to us. So if an action involves any element of manipulating someone else to get something we want – but which they would rather keep – then this is taking the not-given. So driving a hard bargain or extracting the maximum profit for ourselves from a situation is likely to be taking the not-given. So also is getting what we want by playing on others' greed or fear, manipulating their emotions, wielding our power or authority, exploiting their weaknesses, or just by outwitting them.

In fact many ways of seeking our own advantage that might be seen as normal behaviour – for example in the business world – actually constitute taking the not given. Much of our economic and social behaviour is governed by the 'power mode', and getting what we want at others' expense within the limits set by custom and the law is seen as an acceptable approach in many of our activities. This is not surprising. As long as we see the purpose of life as satisfying our own desires this inevitably brings us into competition with others – who would like to satisfy their own desires instead – and we are likely to find ourselves tempted over and over again to take the not-given. For this reason making a conscious effort to practice this precept is a difficult and transformative practice. It constantly confronts us with our fundamentally egocentric approach to life, and challenges us to step out into new territory, where we give priority to expressing our connectedness with others rather than to grabbing what we can for ourselves.

### **Down-to-earth**

At a more down-to-earth level, we can start to make an everyday practice of not taking the not-given by becoming conscious of the many small ways we express our grabbiness and attachment, not just for money and material things, but also for pleasures, leisure and attention. Some obvious examples of ways we can practice the precept might be:

- Making sure we scrupulously pay everything we owe, for example for the goods and services we use, or to the tax man – even when we could easily get away without paying.
- Making sure we are completely honest in things like claiming expenses or benefits.

- Making sure we return anything we borrow promptly, especially things that we would really like to keep – books might be an example.
- Making sure we do our share of the chores – at home, at work, and wherever else we are involved – rather than expecting other people to do our part of the work.

## **Ways of giving**

As a positive spiritual principle generosity gets a lot of attention in traditional Buddhist texts. As usual this involves lists – including lists of the various things we can give. For example it is said that we can express our generosity by giving:

1. Material things (including money),
2. Time and energy,
3. Knowledge,
4. Fearlessness,
5. Life and limb, and
6. The gift of the Dharma.

## **Material things**

Usually when we think of generosity we think just of the first of these – giving money and material things. This is an excellent place to start, and for many of us this will be the main working ground for some time. However some people don't have much material wealth to spare, and for them the second sort of generosity – giving time and energy – may be a more appropriate practice.

## **Knowledge**

Knowledge is perhaps singled out because making a profit from our knowledge is such a common tendency – but not one we always notice. We think it is quite normal for an 'expert' to charge a high price for advice, consultancy, or training, but this is another manifestation of the power mode. In contrast the teacher or adviser who takes delight in sharing their knowledge – and in the benefit it brings to others – is practising a powerful form of generosity.

## **Fearlessness**

The idea of giving fearlessness may seem strange. But we could see fearlessness as standing for any positive mental state. Our mental states have a powerful effect on those around us, and to make the effort to be in a good mental and emotional state is a valuable gift. Many people find that this can be a more powerful motivation for staying in a good state than focussing on their own well-being, and it has the advantage that – because it is an inherently unselfish motivation – it has a natural tendency to expand our small-minded focus on ourselves.

## **Life and limb**

The fourth of these forms of giving – life and limb – might seem impossibly challenging when we first hear about it. But we can probably all imagine a situation where – if we were really pushed to it – we would risk ourselves to save the life of someone we loved. This sort of giving can only spring from a deep sense of relatedness, which at our present level of development we perhaps only feel for a very few ‘special’ people. But one goal of the spiritual life is to increase our awareness to the point that we feel this sort of relatedness to all beings, and there are many stories of advanced spiritual practitioners giving to others in a way that seems almost incredible – until we remember that we would do the same for someone we really loved. In fact love underlies all generosity, to the point that when our sense of relatedness is strong enough we do not think of ourselves as being generous, however much we give.

## **The gift of the Dharma**

It might seem odd that ‘Giving the Gift of the Dharma’ is the last in this list of ways of practising generosity, implying that it is the highest form of giving. This expresses the fact that Buddhists generally see spiritual ignorance as underlying all our suffering. Ultimately the only way to help someone towards real lasting happiness is to help them to discover their spiritual potential, so that they start to look for happiness in the right place. This is what ‘giving the gift of the Dharma’ does, and for this reason it is seen as the highest expression of generosity. To give the gift of the Dharma we don't necessarily need to give Dharma talks – we can do it by befriending people, by setting a positive example, and by staying in a good mental state.

This does not mean we should ignore formal teaching of the Dharma. For many people contact with the Dharma is a lifesaver, and helping to provide the classes that bring people to Buddhism is a very effective form of generosity. But it isn't just those who actually teach or write who are giving the gift of the Dharma. Their efforts depend on the efforts of many other people who support the Dharma and Sangha financially, or give their time, energy and expertise in many ways to all sorts of activities related to Buddhism. All these people are an integral part of the making the Dharma available to people, and all are giving the gift of the Dharma.

## **Practical ways of developing generosity**

Buddhist ethics are about intention – about expressing and developing positive states of mind, not about keeping to the letter of a set of rules. But does this mean that if we don't feel like giving, there is no point in giving? Generosity is not real when we give out of a sense of obligation, or because we ‘ought to’. But this does not mean we cannot work to develop our generosity when it is still not fully spontaneous. We all have generous impulses. There are many strands in our being – generous strands as well as stingy strands – and we have a choice about which parts of ourselves we put our energy behind. If we put our energy behind our stingy impulses these will become stronger – we will become narrower, more

constricted beings, and we will become less happy. If we put our energy behind our generous impulses these will grow and develop, they will become stronger in the future, and we will feel more open and expansive.

The traditional Buddhist literature is full of suggestions about practical ways to develop our generosity by putting energy behind the generous parts of our being. One suggestion is simply to notice when we have a generous impulse, and then always to follow it through. Because we have both generous and ungenerous strands in our beings, a generous impulse is usually followed by second thoughts. But if we go along with these we put our energy behind the meaner parts of ourselves – we identify with them and strengthen them. On the other hand if we simply act on the generous impulse we strengthen the generous part of ourselves by putting our will and energy behind it. So if we get the impulse to give someone some money, or to offer help in some way, then we just do it, with no second thoughts, and no regrets after the event.

One of the things that stops us giving is simply that we aren't used to doing it. We are just not in the habit, and we are creatures of habit. We can start to develop the habit by making a point of regularly giving away small, inexpensive things as often as possible. If you spend time around Buddhists you will almost certainly notice that many people have taken this advice to heart – giving cards and small gifts is usually very much part of the general culture around an FWBO centre.

This idea of making a point of regularly giving small gifts can be taken a stage further. Traditionally many Buddhists make a point of giving something away every day. Others – at a slightly more challenging level – make a point of giving away any small personal article that someone says they like. So if someone says, 'that's a nice poster, where did you get it', you simply give it to them then and there. Practices such as this give us a conscious framework for putting energy into generous acts in a way we probably would not do if we simply decided that generosity is a good idea, and left it at that.

### **The importance of generosity**

As with all the Precepts, generosity is not just an elementary practice we need to get out of the way so we can get on with the more advanced parts of the Dharma. Generosity runs right through the Buddhist path, and we can practice it at many levels. Developing as a spiritual being is about transcending our narrow ego. As we do this we gradually move from seeing life as being about what we can get for ourselves, to seeing it as about what we can contribute to others and the universe. Spiritual progress and generosity go hand-in-hand. At the moment we may only be able to be generous and transcend our ego in small ways, but ultimately generosity is an expression of the highest wisdom, and the sense of connectedness with all beings which this brings. An Enlightened being is totally and spontaneously generous, because they see beyond the duality of self and other.

The centrality of generosity in the Buddhist path is brought out very strongly in the spiritual ideal of the Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva is a being who is following

the spiritual path in order to be of use to others. A Bodhisattva sees their whole life as an act of generosity – a way to contribute to the universe – but without any sense of regret or acting against their own best interests. To quote Sangharakshita:

‘Love is, in the last resort, incompatible with the sense of ownership and, therefore with property, and thinks not so much in terms of Generosity as in terms of common ownership or sharing...’

Ultimately, as in the case of the Bodhisattva, Generosity reaches the point where the giver, the gift, and the recipient of the gift, cease to be distinguishable. It is this kind of Generosity which constitutes the positive form of the Second Precept.

### **Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. Do you agree that it is “better to give than to receive”? Why, or why not?
2. Are there any circumstances in daily life when you tend to take the not-given? (There are for almost everybody!) Is there one area where you could focus on practising the 'negative' form of the precept in the week ahead?
3. What tends to stop you from being generous? (A traditional list cites not seeing the benefits, attachment, a poverty mentality, and not being in the habit of giving, as among the hindrances to generosity – you might think in terms of these.)
4. Are there any particular things you find it difficult to be open-handed with, or particular circumstances that block your generosity? What attitudes, fears, or objective circumstances underlie these limitations? How do they affect your mental states?
5. Could you take on a personal precept about generosity for the week ahead – for example to give away something small every day or to do one generous act next week you would not otherwise have done?