

## Generosity Practice

Traditionally, the Buddha's teachings are classified into three different *yanas*, or vehicles – the Sravakayana, Pratyekabuddhayana, and Bodhisattvayana. These days, most people say that the three vehicles are Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. Actually, Vajrayana and Mahayana are both included in the Bodhisattvayana. In any case, all these teachings of the Buddha are based on compassion. In the Sravaka- and Pratyekabuddhayanas, practitioners are taught not to harm others by any means. The Bodhisattvayana builds on that understanding and teaches that one should benefit others; but if one cannot benefit others, then at least one should not harm others. This is the basic difference. If the practice of not harming others is not understood, then one can't study the methods of benefitting others. So first we must train well on the subject of not harming others, then we can train the mind to be greater, bigger. But the base is always on compassion.

Since the study and practice of generosity is based on compassion and wisdom, it is important to first understand something about them. Compassion and loving-kindness - they are related to each other. Compassionate mind is a mental attitude, a wish for all sentient beings to be free from samsara, to be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. Wisdom is the mind to establish all these beings in the state of buddhahood.

Of course, we know all beings are working for peace and happiness. It is good for us to work to achieve buddhahood because if your mind is focused on buddhahood, you cultivate the ultimate state of peace and happiness. Then whatever you do, it will be toward that state, toward that point. If your mind is not focused on buddhahood, then whatever meditation or study you do becomes a method to solve only temporary problems. That is the basic reason why we need to cultivate the mind to achieve buddhahood. When that long view is in place, whatever we do can channelize into the path now. Through proper understanding of the great compassion and wisdom, we can cultivate the mind of bodhicitta, the attitude or mind of enlightenment.

We can find two kinds of bodhicitta - aspiration and action (or engaged) bodhicitta. With aspiration bodhicitta, you aspire or wish to achieve buddhahood for all the sentient beings. In order to actualize that mind, we practice action bodhicitta. On the basis of aspiration, one will perform virtuous action constantly because of the action itself and the attitude you have at the time. Whatever we do, when the attitude is there, virtuous qualities will progress constantly, without stop. The six paramitas are the practices to develop and perfect action bodhicitta.

In the study of generosity presented in *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, the advantages of exercising generosity and the disadvantages of not exercising it are described. First, the disadvantages. If one has not practiced generosity, in the next life one may be born in the hungry ghost realm; or even if born a human, one will suffer lack of facilities comforts, things like that. As a bodhisattva said, if one has cultivated bodhicitta and then has not practiced generosity, one will suffer lack of necessities. When one doesn't have necessities, then one doesn't have an opportunity to give things to others. When that happens, a bodhisattva may not be able to benefit sentient beings.

On the other hand, we have the advantages of giving things. Giving cuts grasping, self cherishing and stinginess. We cut these negative thoughts with the practice of generosity. The bodhisattva who practices giving will cut the link to be born as a hungry ghost. In the same way, if born in a human life, one will be free from the suffering of lack. Nagarjuna said that if one exercises giving properly, then there is no better friend in the next life. Also, the *Madhyamakavata* says that in the human realm people wish to have peace and happiness, but without the necessary things, then there is no peace or happiness. In order to have these necessities, we have to practice generosity. It is the root cause for one to acquire all necessities. Because of that, the Buddha described how to practice generosity first.

Generosity is not only dispensing wealth; there are so many different ways of giving – like wealth, fearlessness, and wisdom. Giving wealth will help to maintain others’ physical comfort, giving fearlessness will help support their life, giving teachings or wisdom will give support to maintain the mind in the proper position or to dispel ignorance or give the clear vision of wisdom. So wealth and fearlessness give support for this life, and giving wisdom will support to maintain the mind in this as well as the next life.

One should understand clearly how to exercise giving. There are many proper and improper ways, and one should try to avoid the improper way. In that, there are different classes – the wealth itself can be pure or impure, as can the attitude of giving.

Impure wealth includes things like poison or fire that can harm another’s life. When giving these things, one should analyze whether it is useful. For example, if you give fire, and that person is going to burn a forest, then it’s not good. Due to that forest fire, many lives would be destroyed and much negative karma would be created. But if the fire is to cook food, then for purpose we can give fire. Similarly with poison. Some sicknesses can be helped with poison, and sometimes a poison can be a great harm. Without the attitude to benefit, one should not give.

Impure attitude includes harmful thoughts like jealousy or wanting to harm another’s life. Like giving a weapon and saying, “Now you should harm such and such person.” Maybe if I give this thing, I will become famous - don’t think that way. If I give this, I will be better than that person - this is an attitude to avoid. Thinking that if I give this thing, I will be born in a good family or in a god realm next time is also said to be an impure attitude. One should avoid giving with anger or looking down on the person to whom the thing is given.

The essence of giving means to be free from attachment and clinging. If you actually practice giving or not, it is important that your mind is free from those factors. Milarepa said that there is no particular giving exercise if one’s mind is free from clinging. So Milarepa didn’t have to actually give anything yet he attained Buddhahood. His mind was free from clinging and attachment, and that is the whole point.

Great bodhisattvas give everything. Those who have attained above the eighth level, than can give anything - even their eyes or head. Those great bodhisattvas should act like that when appropriate. But for a beginner bodhisattva, we cannot do that, we need to first cultivate the mind so we can understand the different stages. A bodhisattva who has attained the first level cannot act like one who attained the tenth. Each must act according to his/her own level. It is very important to cultivate bodhicitta and build strength on that. When your mental strength is fully developed with the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion, then putting it into action is not difficult.

*Teaching by Khenchen Konchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche given  
at the Tibetan Meditation Center in the 1980's.  
Transcription and editing by Khenmo Trinlay.*

*Generosity is one of the six paramitas or perfections to be accomplished. A detailed explanation  
can be found in The Jewel Ornament of Liberation by Lord Gampopa.*