

Generosity: The Inward Dimension

as edited by

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Nina Van Gorkom has written in *Dana: The Practice of Giving: Selected Essays*, edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi, (Van Gorkem 1-5, 1990),

“The giving away of useful or pleasant things is an act of generosity. However, if we only pay attention to the outward deeds, we do not know whether or not we are being sincerely generous.

We should learn more about the mind which motivates our deeds. True generosity is difficult. While we are giving, our thoughts may not all be good and noble. Our motives for giving may not all be pure.

We may give with selfish motives -- expecting something in return, hoping to be liked by the receiver or wanting to be known as a generous person ... We may notice that there are different thoughts at different moments, some truly generous, and others having different motives.

The Buddha taught that there is no lasting mind ... which undergoes different experiences. Our experiences themselves are different moments of consciousness, which arise one at a time and then fall away immediately. Each moment of consciousness that arises and falls away is succeeded by the next moment of consciousness ...

Gradually, we can learn to distinguish different types of consciousness. There is consciousness which is unwholesome or unskillful, and there is consciousness which is wholesome or skillful, and, besides these, there are other types of consciousness which are neither wholesome

nor unwholesome. Only one type of consciousness occurs at a time, but each type is accompanied by several mental factors.

Unwholesome types of consciousness are accompanied by unwholesome mental factors, such as attachment, stinginess, jealousy or aversion. Wholesome types of consciousness are accompanied by beautiful mental factors, such as generosity, kindness or compassion.

Three of the unwholesome mental factors are "roots of evil." These are the strong foundation of unwholesome types of consciousness: (i) attachment or greed, (ii) aversion or anger, and (iii) ignorance.

Each of these unwholesome factors has many shades and degrees. We may know that there is attachment when we are greedy for food or desire to acquire someone else's property. However, we may not realize that there is also attachment when we enjoy natural scenery or beautiful music.

The unwholesome has a wider range than what we call in conventional language "immoral." It can include states that are weaker than the immoral.

We cannot force ourselves not to like beautiful things. There are conditions for the arising of attachment, but we can learn to know the difference between moments which are wholesome and moments which are unwholesome ...

A degree of selfishness persists even in moments of subtle attachment. These are different from selfless moments of consciousness accompanied by generosity, when we do not think of our own enjoyment.

There is attachment when we stand up, move around, reach for things, eat or go to sleep. We think of ourselves and want to acquire pleasant things for ourselves. We expect other people to be nice to us, and this

is also a form of attachment.

Attachment to relatives is not wholesome; it is different from pure loving-kindness, which is wholesome. When we cling to the pleasant feeling we derive from the company of relatives or dear friends, there is attachment. When we are genuinely concerned for someone else, we do not think of ourselves, and then there is wholesome consciousness.

We are so used to living with attachment that we may have never considered the difference between the moments of attachment and the moments of unselfish love. The different types of consciousness succeed one another so rapidly that so long as we have not developed understanding of them, we do not notice that they have changed.

The unwholesome root of aversion has many degrees. It can manifest as slight uneasiness or as coarse anger or hate. Aversion does not arise at the time as attachment. When there is attachment, consciousness likes the object that is experienced and when there is aversion consciousness dislikes the object ...

Ignorance is an unwholesome root that arises with all types of unwholesome consciousness. It is the root of all evil. Ignorance does not know what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, it does not know anything about what is real ...

The three beautiful roots are: (i) non-attachment or generosity, (ii) non-aversion or kindness, and (iii) understanding or wisdom. Each type of wholesome consciousness is rooted in non-attachment and non-aversion, and it may be rooted in understanding as well. Each of these beautiful roots has many degrees.

Without the assistance of non-attachment and non-aversion wholesome consciousness could not arise motivating acts of

generosity ... When one is truly generous one gives impartially and does not restrict one's generosity to people one likes or to the members of one's family.

The purpose of all kinds of wholesomeness should be to eliminate defilements, to get rid of selfishness. The Buddha taught the wisdom that can eradicate the clinging to the idea of self, but if one does not learn to get rid of stinginess and clings to one's possessions, one cannot give up the clinging to self.

When we see that true generosity is beneficial and that selfishness and stinginess are harmful, we would like to have more moments of generosity. However, in spite of our wishes, we notice that unwholesome types of consciousness often arise ...

We should acquire understanding of what conditions the arising of unwholesome consciousness. We must have been full of attachment, aversion and ignorance in the past, even in past lives. Such tendencies have become deeply rooted; they have been accumulated. What is past has gone already, but the unwholesome tendencies that have been accumulated can condition the arising of unwholesome consciousness at the present time.

We have accumulated not only tendencies to evil but also inclinations to the wholesome. That is why there can also be moments of generosity and kindness at the present time. When an unwholesome type of consciousness arises we accumulate more unwholesomeness; when a wholesome type arises we accumulate more wholesomeness.

The Buddha taught different ways of developing wholesomeness, and when we learn about these ways there are already conditions for more wholesomeness. We find opportunity for generosity not only while we are giving but also before the actual giving, when we try to obtain the things we intend to give, and afterwards when we recollect our giving.

When we are honest with ourselves we can notice that before, during and after the giving, opportunities for generosity are often spoiled by unwholesome consciousness. We may get tired when we have to buy or prepare the gift, and then aversion arises. While we are giving the gift the receiver may be ungrateful and fail to respond to our gift in the way we expected and then we may be disappointed.

However, when we have right understanding of what wholesomeness is, we should be concerned only with developing wholesome states of mind and not with the reactions of other people. Wholesomeness is wholesomeness and nobody else can change the wholesome consciousness that arises.”

Reference

Bhikkhu Bodhi (ed.) 1990. *Dana: The Practice of Giving : Selected Essays*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.