

How Generosity Blossoms Into Meditation

~Sharon Salzberg, in *Generosity's Perfection*

The cultivation of generosity is the beginning of the path. [...] The path begins there because of the joy that arises from a generous heart. Pure, unhindered delight flows freely when we practice generosity. We experience joy in forming the intention to give, in the act of giving, and in recollecting the fact that we've given.

If we practice joyful giving, we grow in self-esteem, self-respect and well-being, because we continually test our limits. Our attachments say, "I will give this much and no more," or "I will give this article or object if I am appreciated enough for doing so." In the practice of generosity, we learn to see through our attachments. We see they are transparent, that they have no solidity. They don't need to hold us back, so we can go beyond them.

Therefore, the practice of generosity is about creating space. We see our limits and we extend them continuously, which creates a deep expansiveness and spaciousness of mind. This happiness, self-respect, and spaciousness is the appropriate ground for meditation practice to flourish. It is the ideal place from which to undertake deep investigation, because with this kind of inner happiness and spaciousness, we have the strength and flexibility to look at everything that arises in our experience.

The aim of giving is twofold. The first is to free our minds from the conditioned forces that bind and limit us. Craving, clinging, and attachment bring confinement and lack of self-esteem. If we're always looking for some person or thing to complete us, we miss the degree to which we are complete in every moment. It's a bit like leaning on a mirage only to find that it can't hold us; there's nothing there. The second purpose is to free others, to extend welfare and happiness to all beings, to lessen the suffering in this world. When our practice of generosity is genuine, we realize inner spaciousness and peace, and we also extend boundless caring to all living beings.

The movement of the heart in practicing generosity mirrors the movement of the heart that inwardly lets go. So the external training of giving deeply influences the internal feeling-tone of the meditation practice, and vice versa. If we cultivate a generous heart, then we can more easily allow things to be the way they are.

From Beyond Happiness: The Zen Way to True Contentment

~Ezra Bayda

"I once got to know a young woman who worked at Starbuck's; she always greeted me with a warm smile and a friendly word. When I asked her if she was ever in a bad mood, she replied, 'Of course, but my calling is to bring good cheer to my customers, which I can't do if I obsess about myself.'

"Each of us has to reflect on what we have to offer, as well as on what is needed. It may take a while to find our own calling, but this is a very different path from our usual self-centered pursuits in the workplace. When we do our work primarily for money, or to achieve higher status, we're unlikely to find genuine fulfillment. What's missing is the sense of valuing the possibilities available through our work. We often forget that meaning is not inherent in any job. For example, being a doctor is no more inherently meaningful than being a janitor. In fact, many doctors burn out because their expectations of what they'll get for themselves — money, status, appreciation — don't deliver their promise, even when conventional success is achieved.

"On the contrary, a study of janitors at a large hospital showed that those who saw themselves as part of the hospital team experienced genuine fulfillment, because they thought more about the welfare of others than about meeting their own self-centered demands. Even though their time was spent emptying bedpans and mopping floors, they went out of their way to contribute, sometimes doing extra tasks to help ease the burdens of the doctors and nurses. . . . They found value in their work by making their best effort to serve others. They also experienced the satisfaction of seeing themselves as contributing to the overall healing environment of the hospital.

"Finding happiness through our work requires two basic things. First, we have to recognize our own patterns, such as trying ever harder to be appreciated or doing whatever it takes to get approval. These patterns block any chance of experiencing genuine happiness. And second, once we recognize those patterns, we have to undertake the basic, blue-collar work of practice — the mundane everyday efforts of bringing awareness to the underlying fears that dictate how we feel and act. There is nothing romantic or magical about our blue-collar efforts; they are bound to take time and perseverance, and we may become frustrated at times along the way. But we can remind ourselves regularly that awareness is what ultimately heals.

"In addition to staying present with our experience, we can also turn our whole approach toward our work right-side up. We do this by turning away from our normal orientation of 'What's in it for me?' and instead ask the question 'What do I have to offer?' When we learn to give from our own unique gifts, we can experience the deep fulfillment of living a life in which we prioritize giving over getting. We will also discover that giving from the generosity of the heart is one of the essential roots of true contentment."