

No Dharma Without Karma

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In the factors of the path, meditation comes last. First you develop right view, right resolve: preliminary wisdom, discernment. Then you work on your precepts. And even before that, the Buddha recommends that you practice generosity—because there are lots of things you can learn about the mind, lots of things you can learn about the Dharma, by practicing generosity and virtue, and by bringing the right attitude toward them.

You're not being forced to do these things. In fact, that's one of the main points about generosity: It's something you choose to do of your own free will. You have something in your possession – a material object, your time, your energy, or your knowledge – and it's yours to do with as you please, and yet you decide to share it with someone else. When you're forced to do this, that's not generosity. Generosity is when you're *not* forced. That's how it teaches you an important lesson: that you do have choices. You're not totally driven by your defilements, by greed, anger, or delusion. You have some moments of clarity and large-heartedness, you can act on them, and it makes a difference.

So generosity teaches you two important lessons about the Dharma – one is that you can't learn about the Dharma without giving. As the Buddha once said, there's no way you're going to attain any of the higher attainments, such as getting into good concentration, if you're stingy. So there's no Dharma without generosity. And, two, there's no Dharma without karma.

I keep running into this again and again – people who want to be told that the reason they're suffering has nothing to do with them. It's somebody else's fault. They're miserable because someone taught them to fear the world or fear their desires, whereas all you have to do is realize that the world is basically good as it is, your desires are perfectly fine, and you just relax into the goodness within and without, and you won't have to suffer any more.

But the Buddha never taught like that. If there's going to be goodness in the world, it has to start with your *giving* something – giving your time, giving your energy, giving the things that you have control over. And you learn about your mind that way. If you can create a good environment in which to practice through your generosity and virtue, you gain a sense of self-esteem. As Ajaan Suwat once noticed, if you come to the practice without practicing generosity and virtue, you tend to be pretty grim about the practice; you don't learn the counter-intuitive lessons from generosity and virtue: that happiness comes from giving away, that

happiness comes from restraining your actions. With generosity and virtue, you learn about your own mind: what's going on in the mind and what strategies you need to employ to overcome your own unskillful impulses.

This, the Buddha said, is one of the hallmarks of wisdom and discernment: that if you see something that may be unpleasant to do but you know is going to give good results, you know how to talk yourself into doing it. Conversely, if there's something you like doing but you know it's going to give bad results, you know how to talk yourself out of doing it. Generosity gives you practice in this area.

Virtue gives you practice here as well. Virtue is actually another kind of gift. You give the gift of safety to all living beings by holding to your precepts in all situations, without exception. That makes it a universal gift.

You also learn the rewards of restraint. There's a happiness that comes from not doing just whatever comes into your mind; not doing just what you would like to do. There are areas where you realize, "Okay, I like doing this or I would like doing this, but it's going to cause trouble," and you can stop yourself. And again, there's a sense of responsibility that comes with that. Dharma comes with responsibility – if you take responsibility for your actions, then you're going to be able to learn the Dharma.

Yesterday, I was in a conversation with a man who insisted that the only way he could live with other human beings who had different opinions from his, was to believe that they didn't have any choice. Of course, that meant that *he* didn't have any choice in his good opinions, either; he just felt grateful that some outer power that was giving him all the right opinions. There's *no way* you're going to be able to develop in the Dharma if you think that way. You have to take responsibility for your actions. If there's anything you've done in the past that was unskillful, okay, you have to admit that, yes, you did that and that it's going to have an effect. You take responsibility for that – you're *mature* enough to take responsibility. And then you take responsibility for making things better, both inside and outside.

These are some of the ways in which generosity and virtue are actually means for training the mind and getting it prepared for concentration. Specifically with virtue, you learn about mindfulness and alertness. You decide you're going to follow a certain precept, you realize that it's a good precept to follow, and you have to keep it in mind. Otherwise you slip back into your old ways. Ajaan Fuang had a student who saw that some of her friends were taking the eight precepts and so she decided that she would come to the monastery and practice the eight precepts, too. And one day, pretty well after noon, she was walking past one of the

guava trees behind one of the huts there in the monastery. And before she knew it, there was a guava in her mouth. Ajaan Fuang happened to walk by and said, “What about your eight precepts? What’s that guava doing in your mouth?” It was only then that she realized she had broken her precept – talk about lack of mindfulness and alertness! But then he said, “You really have to look after *one* precept, okay? And that’s the precept of looking after your mind.” He didn’t mean that you don’t observe the eight precepts. He meant that when you’re going to observe the eight precepts, you have to keep watch over your mind: What are you planning to do and *why* are you doing it? What *should* you be doing? The precepts, no matter how many you’re taking start getting broken in one place: the mind—the same mind that’s going to be doing the meditation. If you’re mindful in following the precepts, you’re getting basic lessons in mindfulness, alertness, and ardency – which are the qualities that meditation requires.

So the practice of virtue and generosity are an important part of the practice of meditation. They teach you the right values. In other words, they teach you some wisdom. As the Buddha said, wisdom begins with the question, “What when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The wisdom here lies in the fact that you realize that happiness comes as a result of your actions. Suffering will come as a result of your actions, too. So you have to learn how to act. Also, you’re looking at the long-term results, as opposed to them short-term. So wisdom and virtue grow out of that question and then create a good environment for the meditation, both inside and out. If you’re living a virtuous life, other people are not going to want to bother you. You’re creating a good environment around yourself in a lot of other ways as well. In addition, you’re creating a good environment inside, too: There’s a sense of self-esteem, of responsibility, and maturity that come from these practices.

This is something that we don’t get in the world of privatized Dharma, where they just teach you a meditation technique and send you home – and don’t ask you to change the way you’ve lived your life and don’t ask you any questions about *how* you’ve lived your life or require you to ask questions about how you’ve lived your life. But for the practice to genuinely grow, you’ve *got* to have this added dimension. You’ve got to address these questions. If you’ve behaved irresponsibly or thoughtlessly in the course of the day, you’re going to carry those attitudes into the meditation. If you believe in the basic principle of Dharma without karma – in other words, where everything is just a “oneness” and all you have to do is just relax into the oneness and everything’s going to be okay – you’re not going to look into your responsibility for the way things are or how you can make them better. And yet that’s actually what the meditation is all about – *the mind needs*

improving. It *needs* to develop its mindfulness, its alertness, its ardency, its concentration, its discernment. And these are things that *can* be developed.

So remember, as you leave the meditation, how you live the rest of the day is going to have a huge impact on the next time you meditate. We all look to the meditation to have a good impact on the rest of our lives, but it's not going to happen unless you actually try to carry these qualities into your daily life. We have to look to the way we live our lives to have a good impact on our meditation, too.

Like that retreat where Ajaan Suwat noticed that people who didn't have much background in the precepts were pretty grim about the meditation: At the end of the retreat, when he was asked, "How do we carry the meditation into daily life?" he talked about the precepts. A couple of the people got really upset, as if he were saying, "Well, you're lay people so can't really meditate in daily life, so content yourself with the precepts." But that's *not* what he was saying. He was saying that it's through observing the precepts that you bring mindfulness, ardency, alertness, concentration, and discernment into your life. You'll find there are challenges: You make up your mind not to kill anything and suddenly there are pests in your house – what are you going to do? You make up your mind you're not going to lie, and someone asks you a question where you know that if you told them the truth straight out or told them the whole truth, there'd be trouble – what are you going to do? You have to learn how to use your ingenuity in order to maintain your precepts.

So all the qualities that we want to develop in the meditation get their start with the act of generosity and with your decision to take the precepts and follow them through. The Dharma comes from *giving* of yourself; the Dharma comes from taking responsibility for your actions. There is no Dharma without karma.

These lessons apply to every aspect of the practice.