

The Perfection of Giving

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By practising giving, we are overcoming the mind of miserliness that makes us hold onto our possessions so tightly that we do not want to use them for ourselves, let alone give them so that they may benefit. Miserliness is a cause of suffering that prevents us from taking advantage of our possessions.

Think of the problems miserliness brings...When two people break up after having been in a relationship for a long time, some have many problems when they divide up their wealth. This is all caused by miserliness in their minds. On the other hand, others in the same situation have no problem in dividing up their wealth, as neither party is attached to their wealth, so they ensure that each gets their fair share. In this practice of giving, what we are trying to do is to develop the thought of giving to others, and the real obstacle is the mind of miserliness.

The Three Types of Giving

1. Giving Material Objects

Giving has to entail more than just giving material objects: it has to come from the genuine thought of giving. The initial emphasis of our practice should therefore be on trying to increase this thought of giving, and on allowing this thought to arise without any hindrances such as miserliness or attachment.

We should also contemplate the benefits of having the mind of giving. One benefit is that by becoming very familiar with giving now, we shall lose our attachment to our body, life and possessions. Then, at the time of our death, we shall experience less fear and mental suffering. Why should we bother about what we shall undergo at the time of death? Death is something we all have to undergo. If we think about it now, we can do some preparation, like this practice of giving, which will be of benefit at the time of death.

Our practice of giving will become a practice of the Perfection of Giving if we include the right motivation, understanding and dedication. Overcoming any attachment to the object we are giving can also be a cause to make our practice a Perfection. Then, having given, it is important not to feel regret about having given an object. Not having attachment and so on can add some quality of perfection to our practice. We should also not have great pride in performing this great practice of giving.

What we really have to understand is that we have the opportunity to practise giving at all times. To practise giving material objects we do not have to be rich, nor do we need to find someone begging for such material objects. Rather, what is most important is that our thought to give is pure: we have to have this intention of giving in order to benefit others.

You should also understand that our actions of giving – even offering someone a cup of tea – can be a true practice of giving if, when offering the tea, we do so from the depth of our heart, seeing it as an opportunity to serve and benefit others. Even if there is no obvious being to whom we can give, it is also said that whenever we eat or drink, we can transform that into an act of giving, by thinking that we offer the food and drink to the countless living beings (such as bacteria) in our body.

As said before, what counts is our mental intention of giving to benefit others. As we give to the living beings in our body we can think: 'Right now I can at least fulfil the material needs of these beings in my body by this act of giving, and I pray that in the future I may fulfil their spiritual needs by giving them Dharma.'

2. Giving Dharma

Anyone can give Dharma, because it involves the thought of benefiting others. With this motivation we can give Dharma to others, and it might just be giving a few words or lines. There are no formal rules about performing this practice of giving Dharma – you can do it even in a casual conversation.

Everyone has the opportunity to give Dharma, as it is not necessary to be a Dharma teacher to give Dharma to others. It is also possible to give Dharma by transforming your daily practice, such as your daily recitation of prayers and mantras, or walking around the stupa, or reading Dharma texts. You do this by imagining that while you do your daily practice, the ground surrounding you is filled with sentient beings who have come to listen to the recitation. If it is convenient, recite the words loud enough for others to hear. Including these visualisations makes your practice of recitation the practice of giving Dharma.

In your visualisation, also imagine that, as the sentient beings hear the words of Dharma from you, they become free of the suffering of mental delusions, and they experience the nectar of Dharma. Think of all the other sentient beings above and around you, and imagine that your recitation has the effect of removing their suffering, and that they experience bliss.

3. Giving Fearlessness (or Protection)

This generally means protecting others from various types of fears, such as the fear of threats to their life. For example if you could help a thief facing execution to be free of that fear of execution, then that is giving fearlessness. This form of giving also includes protecting all other beings from threats to their life, such as saving an insect from drowning, or protecting a living creature from scorching heat by moving them to a cooler place.

Giving fearlessness also includes saving people from fire, flood or other natural disaster. We hear stories of very brave, courageous people who do not have spiritual knowledge of the benefit of giving, but because of their compassion, they put their own life at risk in order to save other beings. These are people who are worthy of great admiration. We can only say that they have performed these acts of bravery because they have become accustomed to giving sometime in the past.

As part of that practice we must not cause harm to any other living being: we have to refrain from any actions that cause harm, or even death to other beings, for example, by not slapping and killing an insect that is biting our body. So the practice of preventing harm to other beings is also the practice of giving fearlessness.

Now we can clearly see the benefits that this practice of giving can give both to our own life, and also to the world. It is a great cause of securing peace and harmony in the world. So we should try to do whatever we can to practise it.