

GIVING AND RECEIVING

Why Dharma Teachers Don't Charge Fees

The gift, to be true, must be the flowing of the giver unto me, correspondent to my flowing unto him. -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

The act of giving strengthens the giver and supports the receiver. To provide practitioners with opportunities to practice generosity is part of the responsibility of Dharma teachers, and Dharma centres.

Traditionally, liberation teachings are offered freely because they are so precious that no value can be assigned to them . . . to receive them is a privilege. This is a view that doesn't span cultures very easily. Here in the heart of materialist culture, many believe that if something is free, it must not be worth much. We must test these views with our own direct experience, through study and practice and dialogue with our teachers before we can begin to conceive how rare a gift the opportunity to transform our lives truly is.

Generosity as a practice appears in all spiritual traditions, but in Buddhadharma it is a fundamental principle of the path and the first and ultimate of the trainings of an aspiring Bodhisattva. It is how we initiate change: by letting go, giving up, surrendering and practicing; by supporting those influences in our community that are doorways for others to encounter liberation teachings. We give time, commitment, service, money and other such *symbolic* things until we are able to relax completely into the vast space of transcendent awareness that is called enlightenment, or awakening. Without a generous, and hence open, heart, the teachings cannot be received where they will do the most good.

Since spiritual healing affects every aspect of our lives, and since clinging of one sort or another is the greatest

impediment to such healing, the dialogue between a student and a teacher's alms bowl can be fraught with worry, resentment and neediness. While we willingly part with big dollars for some shiny thing or experience that feeds our desire, we can be stricken with stinginess when faced with the rare situation where we are not being told what something is supposed to be worth. How much is enough? How much can I get away with? What is everyone else giving, what's the going rate? All of these questions have nothing to do with practicing generosity.

Everyone who comes to the Dharma with some hope that it will make their life better, richer, happier has to work with this spiky question and come to some uneasy peace with it. This is part of the training. So we begin by wrestling with the question through the conditioning of our materialist society. Start where you are.

How much is the teacher's time worth? Given that this being has taken a vow to live for the benefit of all sentient beings, what are the implications of asking him or her to spend an hour focussing on your problems? Consider the years of study, practice and teaching experience this person has . . . likely more than a psychiatrist or lawyer. Is a dharma class worth more, less or the same as a group yoga class or an evening out for dinner and a movie?

How are meditation centres funded? Ideally, through generous endowments, supported by on-going fund-raising and bequest planning. Income from course fees and annual memberships likely play a role. Are members expected to tithe¹ or make some other regular contribution?

What are your circumstances? A \$10 gift from one person can be a much greater act of generosity than a \$50 gift from

¹ Tithing is practiced in many religions as a means of supporting church or temple. Members contribute 10 per cent of their annual income, usually in monthly or weekly installments.

another, depending on their relative financial well-being. In one Zen community, fund-raising for a new meditation hall was successful and harmonious when someone came up with the idea of each member giving the equivalent of one hour of their own time each week. If you made \$100 an hour, you gave \$100, if you made \$7.50 an hour you gave \$7.50. When the same idea was suggested in another wealthier community, there was outrage and people voted with their feet.

Giving isn't only about money, although in this culture money provides a practical method, and not much happens if there isn't enough of it. However, those with limited financial resources can use their ingenuity to find other ways to keep the scales balanced and express their thanks. Service is an important aspect of spiritual training, a very personal way to practice generosity. When gratitude is felt for the precious opportunity to study and practice, innumerable ways to give back can be found.

Internal circumstances are part of the puzzle too. A multi-millionaire can have a hard time *giving* \$20, believe it or not, while the same person – by his own admission – would have no problem *paying* \$100. An American woman wrote to ask about our “culture of generosity” here at Sunshine Coast Retreat House. She complained that living in the San Francisco area, there was no such thing as an affordable Zen centre. Another student reported that as soon as he began tithing, his income increased exponentially, thus encouraging him to give more.²

As the relationship between teacher and student changes over time, so too does the student's understanding of generosity as a practice. In the beginning, a student wants information and guidance, and often understands the *dana*

² Sharing Merit; Spreading Cash -- A Case for Tithing by John Munroe <http://www.serve.com/cyberkaya/dana.htm>

bowl as the way one “pays for” that. As our practice deepens and confidence grows, profound gratitude for the teaching arises. The bowl then becomes one of many ways to express that appreciation. As maturity through realization dawns and we recognize the power and compassion and universality of the transformation process, the privilege of supporting the teaching and teachers in any way we can becomes our first priority.

“The Dharma should be free,” say some. The Dharma *is* free. That’s the point, after all; why “liberation” is another word for enlightenment. The Teachings are offered freely because there is no other way to present authentic liberation teaching. They *have* to be freely given, or they aren’t genuine. But practice centres cost money, teachers’ residences cost money; teachers have dental bills, car payments and need new shoes from time to time. Whose responsibility is all of that?

In Asia, monastics are generously supported for two reasons: they offer visible, tangible benefits to the society in the form of education, social work and religious services, and there is a cultural understanding that it is beneficial to the giver to practice generosity. Wealthy patrons support monasteries because they feel it is a joyous blessing to be able to do so, part of the pleasure and privilege that comes from wealth.

In the west at present, however, the majority of Dharma teachers are lay persons. Some started out as monastics, but were unable to maintain the profound commitment of their vows without the support of an informed lay community. Other teachers prefer a lifestyle that is less visible and more integrated into the mainstream of the communities they have chosen or been chosen to serve, because their values and choices may be easier to relate to without the barriers of robes and rules.

It is part of the discipline of lay teachers in this and many other western traditions of Buddhadharma to “live by the bowl,” in the same spirit as monastics in Asia do. This is an expression of absolute trust that if one is engaged in worthwhile spiritual activity, one’s need for the requisites of life³ will be met. The measure of what is worthwhile, however, has nothing to do with the value-making of contemporary society. “The task of the Bodhisattva is not to perform good deeds;” said our founding teacher, Venerable Namgyal Rinpoche, “the task of the Bodhisattva is to practice non-clinging awareness.”

We are all temporary formations of aliveness manifesting in human form in a vast universe that is an infinite expression of giving and receiving. Energy, so our physicists and mystics tell us, is neither created nor destroyed, but continuously recycled in an endless play of coming-into-being-and-passing-away. Forming is emptying is forming.

Sun shines, rain falls, minerals in the soil and water interact with the coding of seeds to produce an abundant array of plant forms, which in turn support animal life, including our own. In a balanced ecology, everything supports and sustains everything else, effortlessly and naturally.

Cultivating this vast view of how things *really* are, is what Dharma practitioners and teachers are for, if they can be said to have any purpose at all. Maintaining this view while shopping within budget for this week’s groceries for the Dharma Centre kitchen is a victorious act of liberation-in-action. Can you intuit the famous beat of a different drum, the “unstruck-drum of eternity” that is said to sound in the ears and hearts of the awakened ones?

Confusion can be a very positive experience if it means that the old, tired, unquestioned concepts about what’s what are

³ Traditionally the requisites are food, clothing, shelter and medicine.

breaking up. Kindness for its own sake; compassion for its own sake; generosity for its own sake . . . this is what our awakened nature is, in truth. We are kind, compassionate and generous because we joyously can be, not because "acting" in a particular way will label us "good" and get us points with whoever keeps track.

As we begin, through practice, to notice where and how we are fixed and tight – in our bodies, our emotional states and our conceptual frameworks– we feel the suffering of our situation and the desire to be free of suffering automatically arises. We compare these contracted feelings with an increasing awareness of how light and spacious and fluid our experience is when we are easeful, relaxed in the gentle give and take of breath, of friendship, of aware moments where the blissful congruence of opportunity and willingness takes place.

We are not stupid, we humans. Not really. It may take a while, but eventually we discover the process for ourselves, through the same repeatable experiment that has been going on quietly for millennia . . . if we behave like awakened ones, we will feel like awakened ones. Check out www.charityfocus.org, the amazing result of one Silicon Valley computer programmer's insight into the relationship between giving and satisfaction.

Giving freely in any way that we can, receiving the gifts of life graciously and responsibly, *are* the way of blessing. Practicing the teachings transforms our habitual self-centered rut of existence into abundance and freedom, into happiness. Thanks to this, we are able to engage as wisely and compassionately as our experience and energy permit, with whatever situation presents itself, with no concern whatsoever about what we might "get out of it."

Could this world, with all its uncertainty and beauty and suffering and nobility of heart, use a few more people like

that? If you *know* that the answer is “yes,” then you begin to understand why Dharma teachers don’t charge fees.