

## Does Your Generosity Include You?

by Lisa Hoffman

“Patricia” was stunned. We were discussing generosity at the monthly meditation group I lead. We had just looked at this topic as the flow of life, which we step into through giving and receiving. Over time the flow becomes so seamless that there is no giver, no gift, no receiver, as Robert Aiken writes in The Practice of Perfection.

This month we were exploring self-care as generosity. And that was why Patricia was so surprised. Her understanding and expression of generosity consisted solely of giving to others, and she rarely included herself in the equation. As the mother of a young child, she had ample opportunity to give, and found it difficult to receive and even harder to ask for help or what she needed. Her flow was almost exclusively outward, and Patricia was pretty tired.

Generosity was one of the Buddha's first lessons, and it became known as Dana Paramita. Both words are Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language. Paramita means perfection, and a group of these teachings reveal how to cultivate freedom from suffering. They are specific practices for how we see the world, treat ourselves and others, and whether we are helpful or cause pain. Dana is the first Paramita, and the other five are: Shila or our actions; Kshanti or patience and inclusiveness; Virya or energy; Dhyana or how and what we focus on; and Prajna or wisdom -- do we create separation or connection?

Have you ever been swept away by the flow of generosity in your life? By such abundance of emotion, art, food, or appreciation that you can't help but pay it forward? You *become* the wheel of Dana, turning the receiving and offering until it is simply an ongoing experience of how you live. Self-care simply means including yourself in the flow of Dana, the experience of giver-gift-receiver becoming one. You are always replenished, and always replenishing.

If the flow is always outwards, generosity becomes self-sacrifice. And a life of self-sacrifice usually creates a parched internal terrain of exhaustion, resentment, even despair. Giving can have a dry, grudging quality that is sometimes obvious, and sometimes so subtle it can easily be overlooked. It is simply costing you too much. Receiving can become difficult because whatever is offered is not enough -- you are too depleted, too bottomless in your own need. The wheel of Dana turns ever more slowly, and even stops.

How can we reengage the wheel of Dana? Another core Buddhist teaching provides a clue: not taking what isn't given. It's easy to simply interpret this precept as an admonition not to steal, but this lesson has many applications and one relates directly to generosity and self-care. When you give and aren't nourished, you are actually stealing from yourself. The reality is that you have little or nothing to offer when you aren't renewed on a moment to moment basis. Nourishment can mean appreciation from a colleague, doing something you enjoy with a friend, or simply taking in the beauty of a spring morning. Who knows what you will extend to the next person you encounter when you notice the dew glistening on a spiders web, or you *do* stop to inhale the perfume of a red rose?

Learning to include ourselves in the flow of generosity can feel unnatural. For many of us, that's because how our families modeled generosity. A powerful Buddhist term for this kind of teaching is

Ancient Twisted Karma, which reminds me of one of my earliest lessons about self-care, from my beloved Jewish grandmother Gussie. She lived a little apartment attached to our house, in a cozy space with frilly curtains and doilies she had crocheted before becoming legally blind and crippled from arthritis in her late 70s. Although she had a nurse's aide during the day, she often relied on us for a grocery run.

One day I bounced into her apartment with 16-year-old energy and asked her if she needed anything from the store. "Well," she said in her thick Russian accent, "are you going shopping for the family?"

"I thought I'd go just for you," I said.

"Oh no," she replied, "I don't want you to go just for me."

"But I'd like to!" I said. "Today is a school holiday and I have some time."

"No, no" she said firmly. "No special trips."

"Okay," I said. "But, how about if you give me your list now and I'll pick things up for you when I go for the family?"

"Very well," she said. "I need eggs, bread, cheese, milk, coffee, vegetables and fruit."

"So you're telling me that you are basically out of food, Grandma..."

"I'm fine, I have some soup," she said.

Great, I thought to myself, if I go just for her she'll be upset, and if I don't go I'll feel guilty. Of course I went. And Grandma Gussie wasn't upset, which told me that she really had been out of food.

What is your karma around the generosity and self-care? In my family our karma was to never directly ask for what you need or want, and to refuse what was offered hoping that it would be forced on you. Which, of course, set the stage for a variety of characters waiting in the wings, like frustration, anger, and on and on. The cause and effect of karma exacts a high price.

Over the past few years, I've had the pleasure of watching my family transform its karma. Last year, when my mother was dealing with lymphoma cancer, she decided to request and accept help. Her choice made the experience so much easier for my siblings and me -- and mom. Today she is cancer free, and I firmly believe that part of her recovery is because we all turned the wheel of generosity and her self-care together. Many friends and neighbors joined us. What I realize in hindsight that we were also taking care of ourselves and each other. Funny how that can work.

I've noticed in all my work, from teaching Buddhism to coaching and nonprofit consulting, that for many people self-care seems to be an issue of value -- I am only valuable when I'm giving. For those of us in the helping professions and nonprofit community there is often an unspoken commandment to help without limits because there are so many hurting, desperate people, especially in this economy. How can I possibly stop for even a moment? I see our charge as the opposite. It is possible to have bottomless reserves of generosity if I am part of the flow, if I am giver, gift and receiver until there are no distinctions -- just a divine network of ceaseless replenishment.

Imagine your giving spilling over from a well of generosity that is so naturally inclusive of yourself that there is overflow. You move through this world with gift giving and receiving hands and heart. May it be so for all of us.

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