

Preconceived Notions

As a young man I had a desire to follow a countercultural path. I grew up in the 60s, watching, mostly on television, the sweep of countercultural events that marked that period. Unfortunately, I wasn't old enough to participate. By the time I'd reached an age at which I might've been a participant, the 60s had ended, the era had faded, the landscape was deserted. I was thoroughly disappointed. However, I was still disposed to live in a way that was different from the way most people lived. I wasn't inclined to go along with the crowd, follow the herd. Eventually I found the Buddha's path. It was, I learned, a decidedly countercultural path.

In developing the skillful quality of generosity we're following a markedly countercultural course. What could be more countercultural in today's world dedicated to making money, acquiring possessions, receiving as much stimulation as possible from the instruments of technology, TV, internet, etc.?

The way of the world, clearly, is geared toward getting. The getting mind drives the culture. All of us are driven by it to some extent. If you examine your thinking, you shouldn't have difficulty detecting patterns of desire, the urge to get, whether it's sense pleasure, money, material things, status, praise.

The getting mind is embedded; it burns incessantly, like a basement furnace, firing our days and nights. It affects most of our actions. In fact, as you practice the dharma you may

notice that you're influenced by the getting mind. You may notice that you're prone to think:
"What can I get from the practice?"

Right now, as you're reading, you may be motivated by a desire to "get something" from this book.

Is this the way your mind is?

Can you see this?

The prevailing belief in the culture is that happiness comes from getting, from getting a better job, getting material things, getting married, getting a new place to live. All the forms of getting.

It's the message we've been receiving all our lives. It's what the world is telling us. It's the message we hear every day, everywhere we go. It's a loud message. Deafening. Happiness is in getting.

Can you see the tendency you have to listen to this message?

Can you see the tendency you have to believe that happiness is found in getting?

It may not be something you'd like to see in your mind, but the first movement in bringing about change involves seeing, clearly, truthfully, where you are. If you're able to acknowledge where you are, you can shift your course and head somewhere else. The Buddha's teachings rest on the premise that we can change. There wouldn't be much reason for following the path if it weren't leading to change. There wouldn't be any point in reading this book.

We change, the Buddha says, by changing our actions. We bring about affirmative change, we move toward happiness, by taking skillful actions.

So right now you might want to try shifting your course of action, the action you're taking in reading these words. You might want to shift from "what can I get from reading this?" to "what can I give to reading this?"

Try it.

Center yourself in your breath.

Ask yourself:

"What can I give to what I'm doing right now?"

You don't have to think about it. Inside, in your heart, you know what giving is all about.

Simply ask: "What can I give?"

As you make this shift, you may begin to realize that there's a lot you can give to the simple act of reading these sentences. You can give your full attention. Your care. Your heart. Your love.

You may notice that your experience changes as you move to "what can I give?" You may experience a diminishing of stress, anxiousness. You may feel a sense of ease. The act of reading may become more concentrated, more engaged.

As you move to "what can I give," you may begin to get a sense of the benefits in practicing generosity.

There are, in fact, many benefits.

Practicing generosity is life-changing. It's joyful. It's liberating. It leads us to a greater happiness.

The Buddha said:

"If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving & sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would the stain of miserliness overcome their minds. Even if it were their last bite, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared, if there were someone to receive their gift. But because beings do not know, as I know, the results of giving & sharing, they eat without having given. The stain of miserliness overcomes their minds." (Iti 26)

The first words of the passage are especially telling. "If beings knew." The truth, the Buddha realized, is that we don't know. We just don't know. We hear the Buddha talking about it. We hear dharma teachers extolling the benefits of practicing generosity. There's great joy in it, they declare. It's a path to happiness. We hear it, but we don't quite believe it. It can't be right, we think. It can't be true. Generosity, we may think, isn't that important. Practicing generosity isn't going to make a difference in my life. It isn't going to bring me happiness.

Do you harbor these kinds of preconceived notions?

Can you see the preconceived notions that you have about generosity?

It's important to recognize your preconceived notions and it's important to question them. You don't have to try to get rid of your preconceived notions. You don't have to try to alter them. Just begin to question them. Leave room for some other truth to emerge. Leave a bit of room, a crack wide enough for some new light to shine through.

Maybe it is true. Maybe the Buddha knew what he was talking about. Maybe there is an opportunity for transformation if I practice generosity. Maybe it will lead to a greater happiness.

As you shifted from “what can I get” to “what can I give,” you may have started to get an inkling of your innate capacity to practice generosity. You may have begun to see that you’ve already got the ability.

As we’ve explained, the skillful qualities are qualities you have. Generosity is a quality you have. You can find it inside, within yourself. In fact, it’s the only place you can find it.

It isn’t something you can acquire. You can’t get it from somebody. You can’t get it by reading this book. You can’t buy it at the mall. You can’t purchase it online.

You already have it.

Of course, you may not believe it. You may not believe that you have the ability to practice generosity. There may be a voice in your mind that keeps insisting that you don’t possess the quality of generosity. It’s often our habit to listen to these negative voices. Certain voices become audible, loud, and we listen. “You don’t have the ability to practice generosity.” “You’re not generous.” As you develop the skillful qualities you have to be mindful, you have to watch out for these voices. You have to question them. You have to ask: Is this a voice I should listen to? Is this voice worthy of my attention? Is it useful to listen to this voice?

In any given day, many patterns of thinking invade the mind, all kinds of voices chatter and babble and cry and plead and groan. You’re under no obligation, however, to listen to any of these voices.

Some voices may be insistent, but just because they’re insistent doesn’t mean you have to listen. As Thanissaro Bhikkhu suggests, you might want to think of the negative chatter in the mind as the voices of “crazy people.” You wouldn’t listen to a crazy person if he came up to you on the street and started talking to you. You wouldn’t do what he told you to do. You wouldn’t

go where he told you to go. Basically, that's what we do, when we listen to certain voices in the mind.

When you hear voices that insist you don't have the capacity to develop generosity (or any of the skillful qualities), a good question to ask is: Is it true?

Is it true?

Is it true that I won't be able to develop generosity?

Is it true that I'm not a generous person?

It's important to put aside patterns of thinking that aren't serving us. It's important to make room for other understandings to present themselves.

As we go through life we tend to narrow our vision. We think that because we look at things a certain way, it's the only way to look at them. We're like somebody who never leaves the house and becomes convinced the view through the front window is the only available view of the world.

But it's not true.

"The universe," Thoreau said, "is wider than our view of it."

As dharma students, we're asked to take a wider view. As we develop skillful qualities, we open to the possibility that things may be different than we think. As you make an effort to develop generosity, you may very well find that you can do it. You may find, in fact, that you have a great capacity for generosity.

You may find that practicing generosity brings immeasurable joy. You may find that it's life-changing.

It's important that we question our preconceived notions about ourselves, about generosity, about all the skillful qualities. Our preconceived notions prevent us from moving ahead. They

prevent us from changing. As long as they're lying there, in the road, we won't get very far. It's not enough to have the intention to develop generosity and the other skillful qualities; we have to be mindful of these roadblocks.

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