

Skillful Giving

Life, as Joseph Campbell says, is inherently meaningless. We give life meaning. We give life meaning through the actions we take.

Generosity is the first skillful action the Buddha teaches. In many ways, it sets the tone for the whole path.

As dharma students, we have to learn to give.

We have to learn the skill.

In cultivating generosity, we learn to practice skillful giving.

As we've explained, the quality of our intention determines whether our actions are unskillful or skillful.

As we cultivate generosity, we have to pay close attention to our intention; we have to recognize when our intention is corrupted by unskillful factors, by desire or aversion or delusion.

Sometimes giving is infected with desire, wanting. For example, you give, but your giving is influenced by a desire to get something in return from the person you're giving to. Maybe you want something the other person has, something they might be inclined to give you, a material object, a job. Or maybe you want to gain the other person's approval. Or maybe you want the other person to like you. When I was a sales rep, I gave gifts to clients, promotional items, etc., but that wasn't generosity. I wanted their business.

Sometimes giving is influenced by aversion. You give, but you really don't want to give. You give begrudgingly. You don't want to part with whatever you're giving, whether it's material resources or your time. Maybe your daughter needs help with her homework. You offer your assistance, but you feel a certain amount of anger; you don't want to spend time with her, you want to watch the ballgame. As you interact with your daughter, your action, the way you're speaking, is afflicted with anger. A subtle anger perhaps, but anger nonetheless.

Giving is frequently imbued with delusion. You give, but your giving is motivationless. You're just going through the motions. Your friend is in the hospital and you figure you should visit her. You go to the hospital, but you're not propelled by any sort of skillful intention. You give your time, but you go about it in an affectless manner. Your heart isn't in it.

The Buddha's path is a path of abandoning and cultivating. When we recognize an unskillful intention, we leave it to the side, abandon it, and we cultivate skillful intention.

Skillful giving is driven by skillful intention, by love, compassion. When we give in a skillful manner, we put our heart in it. Recognizing that the other is suffering in some manner, blatant or subtle, we give from the place of compassion. Skillful giving is motivated by the wish that we have for the other, that they be free from suffering.

It's important to understand that everybody can learn to develop skillful intention and, accordingly, skillful action. It's a skill. It's a skill everybody can learn. It doesn't require special talent. In order to master certain skills, like playing a musical instrument, it's necessary to possess exceptional talent. When I learned to play the guitar, I was able to get only so far. I took lessons, practiced diligently, but never became more than a fair-to-middling player. My brother, on the other hand, has musical ability, talent. Without much instruction, he became a

rather expert guitarist. There are certain abilities that some people have and some people don't have. Everybody, however, has the ability to develop skillful intention/action. Everybody.

In order to develop the skill, you have to: (1) learn the method, and (2) make the effort.

The Buddha teaches skills. He gives specific instructions for developing skillful intention/action. He doesn't put forth philosophies and leave it up to the student to figure out what to do. He doesn't say, "Practice generosity," and leave it at that. He shows us how to do it. The Buddha knew that he couldn't expect students to develop skillful qualities on their own without being taught a well laid-out method for doing so. It's interesting to note that in delineating attributes a teacher must have, the Buddha indicated that a good teacher should be able to provide "step-by-step" instructions.

In the pivotal sutta, "Instructions to Rahula at Mango Stone," the Buddha lays out a design for developing skillful intention/action. Rahula was the Buddha's son and it's said the Buddha gave this teaching to Rahula when the boy was seven years old. This fact should come as good news to contemporary dharma students. If a seven year old could learn these skills, we can probably learn them as well.

Studying the "Rahula" sutta, we can break down the Buddha's instructions for developing skillful intention/action into five key steps:

- 1-Seeing what the mind is like.
- 2-Developing skillful intention.
- 3-Acting.
- 4-Seeing the benefits in skillful action.
- 5-Taking joy.

Let's look at each of the steps.

The first step is:

1-Seeing what the mind is like.

Before taking an action, the Buddha tells Rahula, you should see what your mind is like.

What's your state of mind? What's the quality of your intention? Is it unskillful? Skillful?

In practicing generosity, before we act, we look at the mind. What's it like? What's the quality of the intention? Is the intention unskillful? Is it infused with desire? With aversion? With delusion?

If, before we act, we notice that our intention is unskillful, imbued with desire/aversion/delusion, we make an effort to abandon the unskillful intention. We try to put it to the side. In putting unskillful intention to the side, we don't attempt to eliminate it. That's not something we'll usually be able to do. Instead, we simply don't engage with the unskillful quality, the desire/aversion/delusion. We don't indulge in it.

If there's a big chocolate cake sitting on the table and you don't want to eat it, you don't have to throw it out; you can simply choose not to partake of it, not to feed on it. It's the same with unskillful intention; when you put an unskillful intention to the side, the desire/aversion/delusion is still there, but you don't feed on it.

In some cases, we might not be able to abandon an unskillful intention. We might not be able to prevent ourselves from feeding on it. If we're not able to put aside an unskillful intention, we should refrain from acting, from giving. We should back off. As the Buddha explains to Rahula:

“If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then any bodily action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do.” (MN 61)

If we're able to put the unskillful intention to the side, or if there isn't any discernible unskillful intention in the mind, then we move to the next step:

2-Developing skillful intention.

There are two components to developing skillful intention: (1) asserting directed thought, and (2) connecting to a felt sense.

In asserting directed thought, we formulate a skillful intention. We fabricate thought, in a purposeful, constructive manner. For example, as you make your way to the supermarket to buy groceries for an elderly neighbor, you'd assert directed thought, you'd think: I'm going to go shopping for Mr. Smith out of compassion.

There are, you'll note, two aspects to this part of the process. In asserting directed thought, the practitioner fabricates an intention that includes (a) content and (b) the quality of the intention. In this example, the content comprises the gift of your time, the act of going to the store for your neighbor. The intention, however, must include more than “what” you're going to do; it must also include “how” you're going to do it, how you're going to give, the attitude with which you're going to give. Here, you're going shopping for Mr. Smith “out of compassion.”

In asserting directed thought it's critically important to remind yourself of the quality of your intention.

As we've said, intention is skillful if it's motivated by the heart qualities of love and compassion. In setting intention, the practitioner asserts that he's going to take an action that's driven by love, compassion.

When I teach a dharma class, I always make sure to develop skillful intention. Before the class starts, I'll see what my mind is like. Then, asserting directed thought, I'll think something along the lines of: I'm going to teach this class out of compassion, in order to help the students find a way out of their suffering.

It's that simple.

It almost seems too simple, doesn't it? It doesn't seem possible that we might enact skillful action, skillful giving, by merely stating an intention, engendering a specific line of thinking.

The fact is, if we develop intention in this manner, if we assert directed thought, it will bring about extraordinary results. It will have a powerful effect. There have been many times when students have expressed astonishment in describing how implementing this step has affected the quality of their actions. A while back, a student in our group was struggling in her role as a parent. After we discussed this step in class, she made a concerted effort to assert directed thought when she interacted with her kids. After a week, she reported that taking this simple step had transformed her relationship with them. She was amazed. Many other students have related similar experiences.

When we fabricate skillful intention, we witness the power of our thoughts. The Buddha knew full well that our thoughts have tremendous power. Our thoughts, he realized, determine our happiness.

As the Buddha explains:

Phenomena are preceded by the heart (mind),

ruled by the heart,

made of the heart.

If you speak or act

with a corrupted heart,

then suffering follows you —

as the wheel of the cart,

the track of the ox

that pulls it.

Phenomena are preceded by the heart,

ruled by the heart,

made of the heart.

If you speak or act

with a calm, bright heart,

then happiness follows you,

like a shadow

that never leaves. (Dhp I)

(The reader should note that “heart” and “mind” are used interchangeably in translations of the Buddha’s teachings.)

In asserting directed thought, there are a couple of things you can do to refine your skill.

When you fabricate an intention, don't just say the words; say the words with a degree of earnestness, sincerity. Say it like you mean it.

Be careful of the tendency to establish intention in a rote, mechanical fashion. State your intention wholeheartedly.

Also, when you assert directed thought, have a grasp of the meaning of what you're saying. What does it mean when you say, "Let me give out of compassion"? What is "compassion"? It helps if you have a working understanding of what the words signify. It helps if you understand the subtext.

The second component of developing skillful intention is "connecting to a felt sense." Upon asserting directed thought, we connect to a felt sense of the heart, a felt sense of love, compassion. This, we might say, is a more advanced step. Everybody, from the beginning, can assert directed thought, but for many practitioners the ability to connect to a felt sense will take time to develop. It will require cultivating a sensitivity to the heart; it's a skill that will evolve as we continue forward in dharma practice.

In connecting to a felt sense, we apprehend the actual feeling of love, compassion. We feel love and compassion. We place our attention in the area of the heart (not the physical heart, but what we might call the heart center, the place, usually somewhere in the middle of the chest, where we feel the heart qualities) and we touch into the feeling of love, compassion. Love and compassion are things we can feel. They're real things.

In the above example, as you head to the supermarket to shop for your neighbor, you'd assert directed thought and you'd connect to your heart, you'd feel the compassion that you have for your neighbor.

After developing skillful intention we move to the next step:

3-Acting.

Now, having set our intention, we act. From the place of love, compassion, we act.

While you're acting, the Buddha tells Rahula, you should be mindful, you should make sure you're acting skillfully.

While practicing generosity, we pay attention. We're mindful of our intention/action. Are we staying to our intention? Are we acting skillfully? Has our intention/action turned unskillful? Is our giving in any way leading to affliction?

There will be times when, after developing a skillful intention, we'll "lose" the intention. We'll put ourselves on a skillful path, a path of compassion, but at some point we'll veer off, we'll take a detour down a familiar, habitual path into desire or aversion or delusion. As Thanissaro Bhikkhu says, the road to hell is paved with unskillful intentions. The old adage is "the road to hell is paved with good intentions," but if we look we'll see that's not correct. What often happens is, we begin with a skillful intention, but at some point the intention fades, and, perhaps unwittingly, we adopt an unskillful intention. And, thusly, we end up on the road to hell.

We may also notice as we're taking action that the intention we originally thought skillful is, in fact, unskillful. We might have been unclear in establishing our intention. Our intention, which we thought was informed by the heart, may have been infected with delusion. As we act, we may realize that our intention isn't skillful and that, unbeknownst to us, we've put ourselves on the proverbial road to hell.

Skillful intentions will never lead us to hell. To the contrary. As Thanissaro Bhikkhu says, "The road to nirvana is paved with skillful intentions."

So, we have to keep paying attention.

As we're practicing generosity, we have to be vigilant. We have to watch our intention, we have to make sure that it's skillful, we have to notice if it's veered off, if it's turned unskillful. If our intention is on an unskillful track, we make an adjustment. We put aside the unskillful intention and set a skillful intention.

As you're shopping for your neighbor, walking down the aisle in the supermarket, you may notice that your intention has veered. It's turned aversive. You don't want to be doing what you're doing. Noticing the aversion, you'd put it to the side and you'd remind yourself of your skillful intention, to go shopping for Mr. Smith out of compassion.

The next step is:

4-Seeing the benefits in skillful action.

The practice of developing skillful action isn't finished after we've acted. As the Buddha explains, it's important after we've acted to look at the actions we've taken. After acting, we take time to reflect. If we've acted skillfully, we acknowledge our skillful actions. We recognize the benefits in our skillful actions.

After practicing generosity, we reflect on the benefits that derive from skillful giving. Reflecting, after bringing Mr. Smith his groceries, you might ask: What are the benefits in doing what I've done? What are the benefits that come from practicing generosity?

(We also learn, of course, to recognize when we've acted in an unskillful fashion. When we've acted unskillfully, we see the drawbacks.)

The next step is:

5-Taking joy.

After we've acted, recognizing the blessing of our skillful qualities, we take joy. We let ourselves experience the joy that emerges when we express our goodness.

To review, the five steps are:

- 1-Seeing what the mind is like.
- 2-Developing skillful intention.
- 3-Acting.
- 4-Seeing the benefits in skillful action.
- 5-Taking joy.

As we cultivate these steps over a period of time, they'll become integrated into our practice. We may not be able to proceed methodically through each step every time we take an action. Life moves too fast for that. But if we implement the steps whenever we can, we'll gradually turn toward them, include them, when we take action. We'll develop the skill.

In this book we'll refer quite often to the "Rahula" sutta. It's a teaching with which all serious dharma students will want to become familiar. It's included here in its entirety.

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Rajagaha, at the Bamboo Grove, the Squirrels' Feeding Ground.

At that time Ven. Rahula was staying at the Mango Stone. Then the Blessed One, arising from his seclusion in the late afternoon, went to where Ven. Rahula was staying at the Mango Stone. Ven. Rahula saw him coming from afar and, on seeing him, set out a seat & water for washing the feet. The Blessed One sat down on the seat set out and, having sat down, washed his feet. Ven. Rahula, bowing down to the Blessed One, sat to one side.

Then the Blessed One, having left a little bit of water in the water dipper, said to Ven. Rahula, "Rahula, do you see this little bit of left-over water remaining in the water dipper?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's how little of a contemplative there is in anyone who feels no shame at telling a deliberate lie."

Having tossed away the little bit of left-over water, the Blessed One said to Ven. Rahula, "Rahula, do you see how this little bit of left-over water is tossed away?"

"Yes, sir."

"Rahula, whatever there is of a contemplative in anyone who feels no shame at telling a deliberate lie is tossed away just like that."

Having turned the water dipper upside down, the Blessed One said to Ven. Rahula, "Rahula, do you see how this water dipper is turned upside down?"

"Yes, sir."

"Rahula, whatever there is of a contemplative in anyone who feels no shame at telling a deliberate lie is turned upside down just like that."

Having turned the water dipper right-side up, the Blessed One said to Ven. Rahula, "Rahula, do you see how empty & hollow this water dipper is?"

"Yes, sir."

"Rahula, whatever there is of a contemplative in anyone who feels no shame at telling a deliberate lie is empty & hollow just like that."

"Rahula, it's like a royal elephant: immense, pedigreed, accustomed to battles, its tusks like chariot poles. Having gone into battle, it uses its forefeet & hindfeet, its

forequarters & hindquarters, its head & ears & tusks & tail, but keeps protecting its trunk. The elephant trainer notices that and thinks, 'This royal elephant has not given up its life to the king.' But when the royal elephant... having gone into battle, uses its forefeet & hindfeet, its forequarters & hindquarters, its head & ears & tusks & tail & his trunk, the trainer notices that and thinks, 'This royal elephant has given up its life to the king. There is nothing it will not do.'

"In the same way, Rahula, when anyone feels no shame in telling a deliberate lie, there is no evil, I tell you, he will not do. Thus, Rahula, you should train yourself, 'I will not tell a deliberate lie even in jest.'

"What do you think, Rahula: What is a mirror for?"

"For reflection, sir."

"In the same way, Rahula, bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions are to be done with repeated reflection.

"Whenever you want to do a bodily action, you should reflect on it: 'This bodily action I want to do — would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then any bodily action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful bodily action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then any bodily action of that sort is fit for you to do.

"While you are doing a bodily action, you should reflect on it: 'This bodily action I am doing — is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both... you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not... you may continue with it.

"Having done a bodily action, you should reflect on it: 'This bodily action I have done — did it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should confess it, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to a knowledgeable companion in the holy life. Having confessed it... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful bodily action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful mental qualities.

"Whenever you want to do a verbal action, you should reflect on it: 'This verbal action I want to do — would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful verbal action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful verbal action with painful consequences, painful results, then any verbal action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would

be a skillful verbal action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then any verbal action of that sort is fit for you to do.

"While you are doing a verbal action, you should reflect on it: 'This verbal action I am doing — is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful verbal action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both... you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not... you may continue with it.

"Having done a verbal action, you should reflect on it: 'This verbal action I have done — did it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful verbal action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful verbal action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should confess it, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to a knowledgeable companion in the holy life. Having confessed it... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful verbal action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful mental qualities.

"Whenever you want to do a mental action, you should reflect on it: 'This mental action I want to do — would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful mental action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful mental action

with painful consequences, painful results, then any mental action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful mental action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then any mental action of that sort is fit for you to do.

"While you are doing a mental action, you should reflect on it: 'This mental action I am doing — is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful mental action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both... you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not... you may continue with it.

"Having done a mental action, you should reflect on it: 'This mental action I have done — did it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful mental action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful mental action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should feel distressed, ashamed, & disgusted with it. Feeling distressed, ashamed, & disgusted with it, you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful mental action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful mental qualities.

"Rahula, all those brahmans & contemplatives in the course of the past who purified their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions, did it through repeated reflection on their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions in just this way.

"All those brahmans & contemplatives in the course of the future who will purify their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions, will do it through repeated reflection on their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions in just this way.

"All those brahmans & contemplatives at present who purify their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions, do it through repeated reflection on their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions in just this way.

"Thus, Rahula, you should train yourself: 'I will purify my bodily actions through repeated reflection. I will purify my verbal actions through repeated reflection. I will purify my mental actions through repeated reflection.' That's how you should train yourself."

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Ven. Rahula delighted in the Blessed One's words. (MN 61)

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