

The Far-reaching Attitude of Generosity – Part 1 of 2 (lightly edited transcript) *by Ven. Thubten Chodron* © at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 1 Nov 93

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We were talking about the six far-reaching attitudes in general, how we need to practice all of them to accomplish the welfare of others, in order to fulfill our own purpose and to fulfill their purpose.

Worldly generosity vs. far-reaching attitude of generosity

Tonight we are going to start on the first of the six far-reaching attitudes. The first one is the far-reaching attitude of generosity, sometimes called giving. It's not just generosity as we normally think of it. Generosity is giving things, which is great; but the far-reaching attitude of generosity is combined with both compassion and wisdom. It's different from ordinary generosity, because it is motivated by the wish to become a Buddha in order to benefit others. It's very different from ordinary generosity that happens at Christmas time or at Halloween, Thanksgiving, or Valentine's. That kind of generosity is very much based on the happiness of this life.

The far-reaching attitude of generosity is based on the wish to become a Buddha to benefit others. Also, the far-reaching attitude of generosity is combined with the wisdom aspect that recognizes that this whole act of generosity is a dependent arising: it is dependent on the giver, the giving, the gift, and the recipient. In other words, this whole act of generosity is not inherently existent nor are any of its particular parts. This kind of attitude recognizing the emptiness of the action, and at the same time the fullness of it (in other words, that it is a dependent arising), is conjoined with giving to make up the far-reaching attitude of generosity. You can see, then, that it is very different from ordinary generosity, because when ordinary people give, even amongst Dharma practitioners, we very seldom think of the emptiness of the whole process. Instead of that, we would think of the emptiness of our pockets after we give. This is the wrong kind of emptiness to think of.

Generosity is the wish to give. It's the wish to share. If we can actually give it's even better. Sometimes, however, we don't have the actual materials to give. Therefore, to avoid people thinking, "I can't do the far-reaching attitude of generosity unless I am rich," the Buddha said we can perfect this far-reaching attitude by developing the wish to give, because it is the wish that is the most important thing. If the wish is there, then when we have the material or whatever it is we might wish to give, then the giving comes quite naturally. But even if we have lots of things, if there is no wish to give then the giving doesn't happen.

Also, practicing generosity doesn't mean that we are necessarily able to satisfy sentient beings' wishes and needs. To fulfill this far-reaching attitude doesn't mean that we are capable of removing everybody's needs and wants, and giving them everything that they need, because that is clearly impossible. It is impossible to satisfy sentient beings, totally impossible. We give them one thing and they want another. Just look at us. We get one thing and we want another. We want more; we want better. It's not about fulfilling all of sentient beings' needs and wants in order to perfect giving. It's developing this wish and this graciousness, wanting to share with others.

The Buddha really stresses this practice a lot. There was a king who came to him and said, "Buddha, how do I practice Dharma? I am stuck with this whole kingdom I have to govern." Maybe this was Bill Clinton in a former life. [laughter] The Buddha said, "You don't have to leave the kingdom. You can still govern, but there are three principal practices that you should do. One is generosity; a second is rejoicing at other people's merit; and the third is dedicating the merit of yourself and others." These became the main practices for the king, so he had a very rich practice.

Generosity is really a very basic thing. It's the first of the far-reaching attitudes, therefore it is the easiest one. We think generosity is the hardest one [laughter] but actually it is the easiest one. If you think about it, one way, our whole life, we have been giving, simply by the fact that we are so interrelated to each other. We are constantly sharing things and giving them to other people. There is definitely that potential, that tendency, that seed of generosity in us. What we have to do is to enrich it, bring it out and give it the right kind of motivation.

The three kinds of giving

There are three kinds of giving: One is the giving of material aid; the second is the giving of protection from fear; the third is the giving of Dharma. (Sometimes a fourth type is listed – the giving of love; but another way is to combine that with the giving of protection from fear.) There are different ways of listing the far-reaching attitudes, but I'll discuss the three kinds of giving here.

1) Giving material aid

First, giving material things. This is actually one of the easiest things to give, but it's really hard. I remember my teacher telling this story, which was somehow very comforting to me. At the time of the Buddha there was an old woman who was extremely miserly. It was very difficult for her to give, yet it was this basic practice she had to master. So the Buddha gave her a very simple practice. He gave her a carrot and he had her practice giving the carrot from one hand to the other hand. [laughter] If you think about this, it is actually quite profound. Try it some time. Sit there and give it from one hand to the other hand; then at one point imagine that the hand you give it to is attached to somebody else's body. Why is there a difference? Why is it that passing the carrot from one of my own hands to the other is okay, but if it's attached to somebody else's body I feel lost? A hand is still a hand. Really do it sometime, and look at your hands and think about this.

In the practice of giving material, as with other practices, the motivation is the most important thing. We want to give with a kind motivation toward the receivers. We also want to develop the specific thought beforehand that we are giving in order to become a Buddha so that we can eventually benefit all sentient beings, and that we are giving in order to directly benefit the person whom we are giving to. Giving in this way, then, isn't just feeling warm-hearted and giving somebody something. The far-reaching attitude of giving is definitely conjoined with this bodhicitta motivation. It's important to remember that.

Being wise and realistic in our giving

We have to give what is quite realistic for us to give. In other words, if we all went home and gave everything away, then it would be very difficult to survive and we would probably become burdens on other people. We have to give what is realistic, what is practical in terms of our own financial material status.

They say that it's very important to imagine giving even when you can't. That's why when we do the offerings to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, we may put a few things on our altar but we imagine them expanding and the whole sky being full of things. This is done to develop the wish to give. However, we shouldn't think that imagining giving is as good as actually giving, and use it to rationalize not actually giving. [laughter]

One time an old woman went to an initiation by a Lama in Tibet. There was a big crowd there, so at the point in the initiation where the Lama sometimes touches the top of a vase to each person's head, he said, "Please imagine that I am touching the vase to your head and you are receiving the initiation." At the end of the initiation came the time for everybody to make offerings to this Lama. This woman had brought a big cake of tea as an offering. She came before the Lama and said, "Please imagine that I am giving you this cake of tea." Then she kept the cake of tea for herself. [laughter] The idea isn't just to use the visualization as an excuse for not actually giving, but rather to use it as something that increases our wish to give.

We have to combine our generosity with wisdom. Trungpa Rinpoche had this expression, "Idiot compassion" and I think it's something to think quite deeply about, because again the far-reaching attitude of giving or generosity isn't just the act of giving. It's definitely conjoined with some wisdom and some thoughtfulness. For example, you don't give things that are going to be harmful to other people. You don't give weapons and poison. You don't give money if you fear that it's going to be misused, if you feel that that the person is going to use it for a harmful purpose. In this case, maybe it doesn't help the other person, maybe it can be misused to harm people.

Don't offer things that people aren't supposed to have. If a person is diabetic, don't offer them ice cream. If somebody's taken the eight Mahayana precepts, don't offer them dinner. We have to use wisdom combined with our generosity. Don't give to the wrong people. If we don't trust somebody, if we think something is not going to work out right, we don't want to give in a way that we might regret it later. If we give and later feel regret, then we destroy a lot of merit that was created from the giving, and sometimes we also become disillusioned and disappointed and more suspicious. Really think well, then, about giving so that later we don't regret it.

When we don't have enough material to give, we can pray to be able to give more later. Even though we can't give everything that we would like to or we don't have it, at least have that wish, "Gee, I wish I had the ability to actually give more and to have things to be able to give in the future."

Giving without pride

When you give things, don't get proud about it. This is something we see very often. How many times have you seen in our culture that people give things with the idea that their name is going to be put on the board? If you give so much money to the hospital, then you get a gold plaque with your name on it. If you give so much money you get a silver plaque. Sometimes I have even seen it done by temples or at initiations: if you give so much money, you get to sit in the front row. If you give so much money, you get a gift of a Buddha statue. I personally feel that we should never give with the wish to obtain these kinds of things. I'm not saying not to give to temples or support Dharma activities. It is good to give. But try to avoid giving with the motivation of, "Oh, I am going to get this special Buddha statue if I give a whole lot of money," or "I'm going to sit in the front row if I give a whole lot of money," or "I'm going to get a private audience," or whatever it is. I think it really damages the giving; it becomes basically buying an illegal ticket, because what the mind is doing is buying an illegal ticket. The mind is not really giving.

Giving isn't just the transfer of material things from here to there. It's the mind that really wishes to give. So when we make gifts, we don't do it with the expectation of everybody recognizing how wonderful we are or with the motivation of feeling, "Oh, look at me. I'm so good. I did this and this." I say this because sometimes in other places where I have been, people will make offerings and they will get quite puffed up about it. "Oh, I offered all this money to the temple. I built this hall in the temple." I don't think it's very nice. People do this and the temple may get a lot of money, but personally speaking, I think that the mind isn't very pure about the motivation. There is a lot of conceit and arrogance, as well as glorifying the rich above the people who don't have as much to give.

Actually, this reminds me of another story that proves this point. During the time of the Buddha, there was a custom of inviting the Buddha and the Sangha community for meals. One day a layman invited the Buddha and the whole Sangha community to a big feast. While this was going on, there was one very poor man who was standing outside the gate. It was customary that after the meal the Buddha would give a small teaching, then he would dedicate the merit (the positive potential) of the offering of the food. When it came time to dedicate this positive potential, the Buddha dedicated it in honor of this beggar who was standing outside the wall. The wealthy patron said, "Ahem, what happened here?" The Buddha explained (he said it politely, I am sure), "Your mind wasn't really giving. It was very concerned

with your reputation and your status in the community for having made the offering. This beggar who was standing outside, even though he didn't have anything to give, he rejoiced at the fact that there was this giving and generosity going on. So his mind was much more pure in terms of giving and sharing than yours was."

I think this is something to really remember. Again, don't use what I am saying to say, "Well, therefore I won't give, because if I give, I might get arrogant. Therefore, I'd better keep the money for myself." Our ego thinks in many spectacular ways; it can develop so many different rationalizations. Don't go to one extreme or the other about this. I am emphasizing this thing about pride because I have seen it in some places, too, where people compete with each other to give. You will get a few wealthy people in the community and it's like they're saying, "Well, who can give the most? Who gets the most status? Who will the lama look on with the kindest eyes for giving the most money?" I think, again, that kind of motivation - of competing with other people, trying to make ourselves look really good - just totally destroys the giving. There is no real gift in that. So really watch that. Even though we might think, "That's how people with millions of dollars would behave. I just have five dollars." Still, these things enter the mind. If we watch carefully, they definitely do.

Giving without expectation of return

Also, when we give things, don't expect things in return. Don't expect the person to come up and say, "Oh, thank you so much, you are so wonderful!" We don't expect them to come and give us a gift back.

I think it is fair, if we send something to somebody, to ask them to acknowledge that they received it. I think that is fair enough. I think it's even wise, with different charities, to ask them for a written receipt to make sure that the money is actually going to where it's supposed to go and not into somebody's pocket. I think that is perfectly all right to do.

Sometimes, however, the mind is fishing for compliments. "Tell me how great I am. Tell me how wonderful I am." Watch that mind, because it comes up so much. We give somebody a birthday present and they open it when we are there. If the person opens it and goes, "Ah," and puts it down, we feel crushed. "Oh, no, they didn't like what I gave them. That means they don't like me. That means I am a failure. That means I am a horrible person. That means nobody is ever going to love me!" It's very 'logical', isn't it? [laughter]

When we give, we need to feel, "Now it belongs to the other person." If they like it, that's fine. If they don't like it, that's also fine. The real purpose was my kind heart in giving. We do not expect them to make a fuss, hold it up and say, "See, they gave this to me. This is my favorite present." Watch what happens at Christmas time as everybody opens their present, how we're so attentive when people open our present. [laughter] Really develop this motivation of giving and feeling that it belongs to the other person so that after you give it, if they want to return it to the store, that's okay. If they want to give it to somebody else, that's okay. If they want to use the china vase that you gave them to put paper clips in, that's okay. It belongs to them. Sometimes when we give something, part of our ego attaches to it. Especially if we give people clothes then afterwards we are always looking to see, "Are they wearing what I gave them?" Don't we? Look what happens when people give us clothes. We try to wear it when they are going to be around so that they feel good. If we do that, then we definitely look to see if they are wearing what we gave them.

I like to tell a story from my own life that illustrates the idea of being willing to completely let go when we give something away. One time in India I had been doing some work with another monk for Lama Zopa. When we finished this work, we felt like we really wanted to offer Lama Zopa something nice. I went down to a cloth shop in McCleod Ganj and got brocade, the really pretty brocade that they have. I hand sewed a couple of book covers with the red brocade and the gold brocade. Hand sewing brocade with Indian needles is not easy. I did all of this and I gave them to Rinpoche feeling very happy about it. Right after I was there, Geshe Jampa Wangdu went in, and when Geshe Jampa Wangdu left, he was carrying the things that I gave to Rinpoche. [laughter] So I had to really think, "I did give them to Rinpoche. They didn't belong to me anymore. He can do with them what he wants. If he wants to give them away, that's okay." [laughter] So when we give, we need to think, "It belongs to the other person. I don't have any authority over it."

An exception might be that sometimes you might give to a temple or a monastic community and you might specify a particular purpose for it. You might give some money and you say, "This is to build toilets

with.” I say this because this is what you have to do to get them to build toilets in India. Otherwise they might build another prayer hall or something, when they need toilets. When you give them the money, you have to say, “This is to build toilets,” or you might say, “This is to buy Dharma books.” In that case, if you specify the purpose, then you can ask them about it later and check up. That’s okay.

Not giving things obtained by wrong livelihood

Then it says in the teachings not to give things obtained by wrong livelihood. If you have obtained money or items through cheating people, through stealing, through flattering people or bribing or dropping hints or coercing, or hypocrisy, any of these ways, then don’t use them as gifts. Now, I find this quite curious and I thought about it. What happens sometimes is you hear a teaching about the five wrong livelihoods and you think, “Wow, I have this incredible thing that I got because I dropped a hint, or because I gave them a present so that they would give me something back.” In reviewing our actions we feel a sense of regret. “It isn’t right for me to have this. I did obtain it by wrong livelihood.” We feel we want to give it away as an act of purification. To me – I am giving my personal opinion here – I think it would be quite good if we gave that away. If we realize we got it because of wrong livelihood and feel it’s not right for us to have it, that it’s better for somebody else to have it. I feel that with that kind of motivation, it’s okay to give it to somebody else. In fact, it’s probably good to give it to somebody else.

What they are talking about here is, I feel – my interpretation – to not deliberately do the five wrong livelihoods, or any wrong livelihood, so that you can be generous. So don’t have the idea of, “Well, I want to give such- and-such amount of money because then I am going to look good. But I don’t have this much money; so how about if I cheat somebody, get the money and give it?” Like that. That is how I interpret what this means. Again, that’s my personal opinion.

Giving good quality items

Also, when we give, it’s good to give good quality things. Don’t give the things that are rotting and ready to fall apart. “I am so generous at Christmas time. I am going to give away all my old clothes so that I can buy new clothes.” We are not really giving in this case. Basically, we are recycling things, which is better than throwing them in the garbage; but there is not really the generous motivation. We are thinking, “Now my closets are empty and I can justify going to the mall and buying a whole bunch of stuff. I am going to buy the new stuff for me and other people are going to get the old stuff.” Why shouldn’t other people get the new stuff, and we keep the old stuff? Like when we make offerings on the shrine, “I am going to keep the best things. I am going to keep the prettiest bananas and apples and things for myself and I am going to give the old ones to the Buddha. Buddha has equanimity. He won’t mind.” [laughter] The apples are moldy or something. Instead of thinking like that, we want to look for the good quality items, and develop a sense of joy and happiness in giving nice things, because that is where the giving comes, where there is the wish to give, where there is the happiness in giving. It’s a very essential practice. If we can get in touch with how much we like to receive nice things and if we can develop the feeling of how nice it is to give those same things because other people get to receive them, then a much different kind of feeling comes in. It’s really nice.

When we are novices we have to practice giving old things. We give the remnants of the vegetables to the worms. Maybe something like that. But we also need to try and practice giving things that we like, not just giving things to clear out space; giving the things that we like, giving the things that mean a lot to us because we want other people to enjoy those things, too. Giving nice quality things because it makes other people happy.

Giving frees us from fear and miserliness

We can recognize that when we can train our mind in this way, it’s something that benefits others; but it’s also something that benefits ourselves, because it frees us from the prison of miserliness. That prison of miserliness is something that has tortured us from beginningless time. Miserliness and attachment are things that really impede generosity, because the mind is always saying, “Well, if I give, then I won’t have!” That mind is so full of fear, isn’t it? “If I give, I won’t have.” Of course, if I keep it I am still going to be afraid of losing it. That miserly mind, then, is quite fearful. We might stockpile lots and lots of stuff but we never feel secure enough because the mind is always saying, “Oh, but I won’t have. I may not have.” We are worried about these things, so even if we have a lot, the mind isn’t happy. It becomes very difficult to fulfill the miserly mind. It becomes, in fact, completely impossible, because the miserly mind says, “Oh, I’ve got to save this for myself because what will happen if I don’t have it? And I also need this and I also need that, and I can’t give these things away because I won’t have them.” We

get bound up in these fears, and sometimes we are so miserly that we can't even use the things ourselves.

[In response to audience:] Exactly. We get something very beautiful, "But if I use it I might get it dirty or I might break it", or whatever. We have this incredible beautiful thing and it sits in the closet because we are so afraid of using it, that it's going to get ruined or spoiled or lost. I mean, it's just incredible how the mind thinks sometimes. We hoard away all these things in our closet that we never look at, we never see, but we can't use them ourselves, let alone give them away. That's what the miserly mind does. It's just completely squeezing us, like one of those corsets [laughter], making us more and more uncomfortable. The point of giving is to free ourselves from that miserly mind, to learn to take delight in sharing and giving and realizing. Like I was saying before, what is the difference between giving it to this hand that is attached to my body and giving it to that hand that is attached to somebody else's body? It really doesn't matter. So, just have that joy.

Antidotes to miserliness

Reflecting on the advantages of generosity and the disadvantages of not being generous

If we are having a lot of difficulty with miserliness, then we need to apply some antidotes. One antidote is just to reflect on the advantages of generosity and the disadvantages of not being generous. This is a very simple antidote. Sit on the cushion and say, "What are the results of not giving and what are the results of giving? Well if I don't give, I am miserable. I am bound up. I am tight. I am fearful. What happens to me in future lives? Well, I won't have resources in future lives because I haven't created the cause for it. Other people are not going to want to be near me because I am always thinking of myself, making the universe revolve around me, around my needs and my wants. It's going to be impossible for me to attain enlightenment, because I have never heard of a stingy Buddha before. And I am all bound up in being stingy." Just to sit down and reflect, "What are the results of this miserly attitude? Where do they take me?"

Then sit and reflect, "Well what are the results of being generous? If I can really be generous, my heart is going to be free. If I am generous, the other person is going to be happy and I am also going to create a lot of positive potential that will bring about wealth in future lives. This will make me comfortable. It will also make it possible for me to be more generous in future lives. I am also going to create positive potential that I can dedicate to becoming enlightened for others' benefit." I am going through these points quickly, but we can sit and think about them slowly. Think about what are the results of not giving and what are the results of giving. In that way, through understanding, it becomes very clear what is the best course of action to take, not only for ourselves but also for others.

That's very different from the mind that says, "I should give. I should give. I should give." If we sit there and 'should' ourselves a lot, sometimes we might give but our heart isn't in it. We are giving because we feel obliged, because we feel guilty, in some way like that. The giving is tainted. However, if we seriously think about the advantages and disadvantages, then the giving becomes much more natural. It's not something that we *should* do, but it's something that we understand, and so we want to do. Again, as with all the practices, understanding is very important.

Contemplating impermanence

Another thing to do if we are having a lot of problems with miserliness is to contemplate impermanence. We can think, "Okay, I am holding on so tightly to this thing. This is *my* thing." But look at it. It's totally impermanent. Moment by moment it's changing. Moment by moment it's in the process of decaying and getting old. Even if I hold on to it with attachment I am still not going to be able to make it last forever. Someday or another it's going to end, so why not give it away now while it's in good shape and somebody else can benefit, and I can enrich my mind through the positive potential created? Why not do that instead of just sitting there holding on to this thing that one day in and of itself is going to end?

It is very helpful to consider all the things around our house that we are so attached to – "I can't give this. I can't give that." – and to think of the impermanence of the object or the impermanence of our relationship with it. "Some day I am going to die and I'm not going to have this anymore. My relationship with this thing is impermanent. I am going to die someday, and I am moving out of this house for good. When I die, I am not going to have the time to give everything away then. Since I don't know when I am going to die, why not give some of it away right now? It makes other people happy. Some time or another I am going to have to separate from it anyway, so why not give it now?"

We can recognize that anything that our mind seems so stuck to, we are not going to have forever. It's totally impossible. I personally find this kind of reflection very beneficial, very helpful, because then you think, "Well, someday I am going to have to separate from this thing anyway. Why am I getting so wrapped around it right now? What's the use? What's the purpose? This just doesn't make any sense." If it's so nice, it's better to give it away. Giving creates so much good energy, so much positive potential, and makes the other person happy, so why not?

We can train the mind in this way. Again, it's very different than giving ourselves this super-ego, parental lecture about how stingy we are. That is not what applying the antidote is. Applying the antidote is having the understanding in our heart and wanting to give.

Considering the recipients of our giving

Also, it's said in the teachings that there are certain groups of people with whom it is especially good to practice giving. One group is the poor and the needy. They become special objects of giving because of their need. "Special objects of giving" refers to the fact that we create a lot more positive potential when we give to that person than when we give to somebody else. If we give to aryas, people on the path of seeing who have realized emptiness directly (what you might call Buddhist saints), then it becomes very powerful because of that person's level of realization. Or if you give to a bodhisattva it becomes very powerful because that person, due to their loving-kindness, will use the thing for the benefit of sentient beings. If you give to your Dharma teachers, it's also very good because of that special relationship and their kindness. If you give to your parents, because of the kindness of our parents in giving us this body and bringing us up, they become a particularly potent object of our gifts. So to pay attention to that kind of thing is important.

Now, I feel that in Asia this sometimes gets abused in some way. They talk about special people to give to and special times to give. For instance, it's really good to give on the four special days in the Buddhist year – the enlightenment day, the turning of the Dharma Wheel day, etc. It's also very good to give on full and new moons. Sometimes, then, what you see happening in Asia is that people won't give on a regular basis. Then when it's Buddha's birthday they go and give all the beggars something. It's kind of the business person's mind. "This is a special day and I am going to get more merit, so I am going to give." But the day after the Buddha's birthday they won't give to the beggars anymore.

I have had some people come and say to me, "This seems rather materialistic, doesn't it? You give one day but not the next; or you give to one person because you are going to collect more merit, but you are not going to give to another person because you don't get as much merit. Isn't that wrong motivation?" I think my teachers might say something different, but my personal feeling is that I feel there are many different levels of motivation. Compared with the bodhicitta motivation, that motivation is definitely rather self-centered and limited because it is basically looking at positive potential or merit as a business commodity and how you can get the most of it. Compared with the generous mind of bodhicitta, that motivation loses out; it pales in comparison.

But then there are people who normally won't give anything. But if you tell them that if they give on this one special day they get special merit, then at least on that one day, out of the three hundred and sixty-five days, they will give. Or if you tell them they get special merit by giving to a particular person then at least they make an effort to be generous to that person. Whereas if they didn't get that motivation, then they probably wouldn't give to anybody at all. I think in that kind of context these kinds of things make sense. But from a broader perspective, we shouldn't start thinking, "Well, I'll give on Buddha's birthday but I'm not going to give on the other days." Or, "I'll give money to these people because I get special merit, but I am not going to give to those people because I won't get as much merit."

My own personal opinion on this is (again, my teachers might disagree), I feel that the thing is to develop the heart of giving and not worry so much about whether am I going to get so much merit or not. The important thing is to have enough bodhicitta so that we are willing to sacrifice getting that much merit in order to benefit people. For example, one thing that happens in the Tibetan community is, they say the more vows somebody has then the more merit you get by giving to them. Because the full ordination for women didn't spread to Tibet (only the novice ordination spread to Tibet) the novice nuns have ten vows while the fully ordained monks have three hundred and fifty-three vows. Then people think, "I am going to get more merit from giving to monks." Thus everybody gives tons of money to the monks and not very

much to the nuns because of this kind of mind that says, "I get more merit when I give to these people than to those people."

Of course, when I point out that the fully ordained nuns have more vows than the fully ordained monks, somehow they don't feel quite the same about this thing that you should give to the people with the most vows. [laughter]

[Audience:] What is the basis for saying that more merit is created on certain occasions, e.g. on new and full moon days?

You are saying, who made all this up to start with? I think that the emphasis on the full and new moon days, for example, came about for a few reasons. One is that there is some kind of special energy on full and new moon. Sometimes people have different kinds of energy, so to make an effort to do virtuous practices on those days becomes a little bit more potent. For example, the police department discovered that there are more homicides on full moon days than on other days. If you take the eight precepts that day, it's like you are really going against even the influence there.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Oh, no, nobody gives you merit. Nobody else is giving it to you. Buddha isn't sitting there with gold stars. And there is no ledger [laughter] – "How many merits do you have? How many demerits do you have and where are you going to go, up or down?"

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

[Audience: Inaudible]

Also, for example, they say that if you give to somebody imagining that that person's the Buddha, it's the same merit as actually giving to the Buddha. So I think whether we give to our parents or whether we give to our aunts and uncles, whether we give to this person with so many vows or that person without those vows, if we look at that person as the Buddha and think that we are giving to the Buddha, I think it really enriches the whole process.

[Audience:] What are the four great days in the Buddhist year when the positive potential one accumulates is multiplied many times?

One is the fifteenth of the first month. During the time of the Buddha, there was a group of people who didn't believe in the Buddha's teaching who challenged the Buddha to a competition of magical powers. The Buddha didn't want to do it. But in the end he did and, of course, the Buddha won, so these five hundred people converted to Buddhism. So that became one of the special days where merit is multiplied.

The second one is the full moon of the fourth month. That's the anniversary of the Buddha's birth, parinirvana and enlightenment. Many traditions, including some Tibetan traditions, say that the birth was on a different day, but all agree that the enlightenment day is the fifteenth of the fourth month.

Then seven weeks after that is the anniversary of the first teaching, when the Buddha taught the four Noble Truths, the first turning of the Dharma wheel. That, again, is a very potent time because of what happened.

The last one is when Buddha descended from the god realm of the thirty-three gods back to the earth. It was the practice in ancient India that during the three months of monsoon season, the monks and nuns did retreat. They weren't allowed to move around. One rainy season the Buddha went up to the god realm of the thirty-three where his mother had been reborn. He spent the whole summer giving her teachings to repay her kindness. Naturally people here missed him very much, so when he came back down, it was a time of big celebration. That again is one of the special days. (That's why sometimes you see on certain Buddhist artwork some golden stairs and the Buddha's walking down the golden stairs. They say that's how he came down from the god realm of the thirty-three. The golden escalator.) [laughter]

Those are the four special days when the positive potential is multiplied.

2) Giving Protection from Fear

The second type of generosity is the protection from fear, giving protection from fear or giving protection from danger. If somebody is in trouble, helping them out, protecting them. It's curious that in the scriptures they always talk about freeing prisoners. I think this instantly tells us something about the prison system at the time of the Buddha. It's probably the case that a lot of people were mistreated and put in prison unfairly. I don't think that means that in our modern times that we should break into the jail and free everybody, because I don't think that would be particularly generous to the society. However, if somebody is in prison unjustly or something like that, if there is a way of freeing them, to do so would be giving protection from fear.

Another example would be helping people who are experiencing danger, harm, or threats against them. Helping those who are traveling, if they are afraid that they might lose their way, or that their things might get stolen, then protecting them, going along with them, accompanying them, giving them the things they need or giving them the instructions that they need. If one kid is getting beaten up by another, protecting the kid that's getting beaten up. If two dogs are fighting or two cats are fighting, interfere. Protecting beings from danger. If you see a bug drowning in water, scoop it out. It doesn't take that much effort. Lots of times bugs are drowning in water. Just whenever there are situations where we can intervene and protect beings, be they insects or animals or people, from danger, from fear. But it's not particularly good to shelter those who would go out and harm somebody else again. Again, we have to conjoin wisdom with generosity.

3) Giving the Dharma

The third kind of generosity is the generosity of Dharma. This can be in a formal situation like actually teaching the Dharma, giving teachings on texts. It can be leading a meditation. It can be just giving counseling and talking over a problem. Your friend has a problem and you talk it over with them but in the light of the Dharma. You might give some kind of Dharma advice or Dharma remedies to help them with their problem. All that is giving the Dharma. If you encourage people in their practice; if you give encouragement so that they act virtuously, so that they do things that are constructive, that's giving of the Dharma. If you say your prayers out loud where other beings can hear, that's the giving of the Dharma. Lots of times when I feed Achala [the kitten], I say mantra. Lots of times when I chase him around the house I say mantras [laughter], or when he chases me around the house, I say mantras. I think that it's very good that other beings hear the words.

Saying mantras to animals

Lama Zopa used to have a bunch of dogs. There was one nun who was in charge of these dogs. I think these dogs went to more initiations than I did, because Rinpoche felt very much that this was the giving of the Dharma. He didn't give the initiation just to the dogs, there were people there; but he was insistent that the dogs went. One summer a few of us nuns went every evening to chant certain prayers to the dogs. Rinpoche wanted them to get the imprint of hearing the Buddha's words, because they say that hearing chants makes a positive imprint on the animals' mindstreams. It will help them in their future rebirths.

One time I was with Rinpoche in Singapore and we were doing animal liberation. We went to get birds. We went in the pet store and there was a parrot that was all chained up. We got the parrot, put it in the cage and took it to this park. Rinpoche spent about fifteen minutes looking at the parrot and saying prayers, and the parrot just kept looking at Rinpoche. At the end he opened the door and the parrot wouldn't fly out. He opened the cage and the parrot didn't want to go. We had to take him out of the cage and urge him to fly. *[NOTE – see important annotation at the end of this document]*

The whole idea is, it got this imprint of hearing some of the teachings and the prayers in the mindstream. So, likewise, we can say mantras out loud and other people or animals or insects can hear. Even if you don't say things out loud, if you imagine that there're other people around you and that they hear, this is giving the Dharma. Obviously you can't be walking around Green Lake chanting mantras at the top of your voice, although I did it once. [laughter] You can still visualize that there are people hearing it, so it becomes the generosity of the Dharma.

Making Dharma books available

What our group did in sending Dharma books overseas is practicing generosity in giving the Dharma. We sent all those books in Terry's name to places in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Africa and South America. (By the way, we have gotten some replies from the people who have received the books. I leave them in the green folder there for people to read. We got one from Estonia recently and another one from Uday a few days ago. There were also letters from South America and other places. People write to say thank you. It's something so simple; all we did was send books. But they have a hard time getting books there, so what we do becomes the generosity of the Dharma.

There was another time Greg collected Dharma books to send to prisons because we saw an ad in the Buddhist Peace Fellowship about the Dharma prison network asking for Dharma books that people didn't use. He collected them and sent them out. This is the giving of the Dharma, making Dharma available for people. Organizing the conference that we are having is also the giving of the Dharma, isn't it? All these people who would probably never come to Buddhist teachings are going to spend a whole day listening to something that's going to have some spiritual content and talk of loving kindness in it. It's making the teachings available; it's the giving of the Dharma. To think of all the ways to share the Dharma with people besides standing with leaflets on street corners. Tactful ways of giving the Dharma.

How to share the Dharma with family and friends

What I usually advice people is when you are explaining Dharma to your family or people at work, talk about the aspects of Dharma that you know these people already agree with. For example, I went to give a talk at an evangelical Lutheran church. I dressed up as a Buddhist nun for Halloween. [laughter] I went to give this talk and what did I do? I talked about ethics. I talked about love and compassion. I talked about patience. Then these people said, "Hmm, Buddhism is pretty good. This makes sense." Then I left it open to question and answer. I let them ask the question, "Do Buddhists believe in God?" and get into other topics like that. I find that that usually works well. If we say things that are very general that are basic common sense and nothing particularly religious, then it becomes easy for people to listen. We don't have to use fancy words and talk about samsara and nirvana and bliss and void. There is no need to use all the Sanskrit and Pali and Tibetan words all over the place that make us seem blown up and important. Just be a regular human being.

If you watch the public talks that His Holiness gives when he is talking to a general group, or read some of his interviews, or see things that he has done with journalists, you can see the giving of the Dharma, just how astute he is in doing it. He gives all the incredibly profound meanings in very simple terms. He makes them laugh and they really listen. It's important to remember that.

Those are the three specific ways of giving: giving material aid, giving protection from fear and giving of the Dharma. There are some more things about giving, but I think I will go into them next time.

Any questions about this? Debates?

Questions and answers

[Audience:] What mantra do you use for cats?

I usually do *Om Mani Paymay Hung* or the Vajrasattva mantra. Sometimes Vajrayogini. Various things, it depends on what I happen to be doing at the moment. That's what the kitty hears. [laughter]

[Audience: Question about the book covers Ven. Chodron gave to Rinpoche]

I think it's because I got too lazy, but I am sure he could use the cover some later time. Just because the person gives it away doesn't mean that we don't give to them again.

[Audience:] But how do you deal with the mind that's reluctant? I see it in myself.

One way to think about giving is if you give something to another person, it's theirs; you are not involved with what they do with it. Second of all, if you give it to them and they give it away, that's really nice because then the thing is going to get used in a very good way. If you give to somebody whom you trust as a spiritual person, then you can be sure that person is going to use it in a very wise way.

For example, you make offerings to some Lamas and they take the money back to build up their monastery, buy texts for their monks, or get tutors for their monks. They don't spend the money on themselves, but they use it in ways that are helpful for other people. You don't have to think, "This is my gift to them personally," but, "It's my gift to them and they can give it to others, and I trust them." They get more pleasure out of using it for others than they would out of keeping it for themselves, so why are we so attached to it? If it made Rinpoche happier to give the book covers to somebody else than to keep them for himself, why shouldn't I rejoice? The whole purpose was to make Rinpoche happy. But all of a sudden it's, "I am sorry, Rinpoche, you can't be happy that way. You have to be happy the way I want you to be happy."

[In response to audience:] The purpose was to give, and if he received more joy from giving it away because the things were actually more useful to somebody else than to him, why not? Very often it's the same with giving to my teachers. I am sure my teachers don't need the money themselves – what do they need it for? But I know they use it in very wise ways.

[Audience:] When we try very hard to help somebody but they refuse our help, then we get very upset and angry with them. This is not a healthy attitude, is it?

That's a very good point. When you are really trying to help somebody, to protect them from fear and give them the Dharma, but they don't want the help, then we tend to take it personally, don't we? It's like something against *me*. Actually where does *me* fit into this at all? You can't make a phone call if somebody doesn't pick up the receiver. If I make the phone call and they don't pick up the receiver, it's not that there is something wrong with me.

The thing is to recognize that this is that person's own limitation; but if we can keep the door open, then later on they might be more open and pick up the receiver. I think that's the thing: to try hard, to keep that door open when relationships aren't going well, because we tend to say, "I am giving you this. I am doing so much for you. You don't appreciate it. Ciao, buddy!" [laughter] But then, what about the fact that people change? What about the fact that your teenager might actually grow up and might someday actually seek your advice? Why throw them out of the house? Why break the relationship? Give them some space. They might come back. Same thing with our parents – big teenagers. Same thing with us – we're medium sized teenagers. [laughter] Recognize that people change, and try and keep that door open so that even though they can't receive it right now, some time later they might be able to. To recognize that there is this tendency when we give: "You are going to get this whether you want it or not!" We start force-feeding others our generosity.

[In response to audience:] It doesn't mean that you need to keep giving even though they don't want it. That might just waste your time or waste the material. Again, you need to use your wisdom. But it is good to have that fresh mind that you were talking about so that we think, "Well, here is this opportunity. It may not work again for the fiftieth time, but I am going to give it the space that it actually might work this time, instead of telling myself before hand that it isn't going to work." That's hard. It's an interesting thing to think about. If this client you mention shouts at some other mental health care worker, it doesn't bother you particularly. If they shout at you, it's a big deal.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Well, do you necessarily need to tell her? Can you just get rid of it, and later if it comes up, say, "Well, it was in storage. I was paying all this money to keep this stuff and I wasn't going to use it. I thought it was good if somebody else used it so I gave it away." But you don't need to announce it to her before hand. If it comes up ten years from now, maybe you can say that, but you don't need to bring it up if she doesn't.

I think you brought up a very good point. Lots of times people want to give and it makes them very happy to give, and if we refuse the gift it hurts them. We went over this in the sessions on bodhisattva vows. If we are feeling ill-will, arrogance, pride, or something like that and we refuse a gift because of that, then that goes against the bodhisattva vows. If you are afraid that somebody's going to be rock bottom broke if they give it to you, then don't accept it. Otherwise, if they really want to give it and it makes them happy, I think it's nice to accept. Look at that mind that feels, "Oh no, I am obliged to them." Why do we have to feel that? Or the mind that says "But I am so wonderful, I don't need to accept

charity. I am an adult now. I am not going to take anything from my parents.” Look at that mind that says that.

[Audience:] I don't wish the taxes that I pay to go towards military purposes. How can it be done?

There are different ways. One way is the portion that goes for military things, deduct that from your taxes and give it to a charity instead, and just write that in when you send your taxes in. Another way is to write on your check, “Please use this money for social services and not for military things.”

[Audience:] But it doesn't really happen.

It doesn't happen from their side, but it happens from your side. In your motivation you are not backing the military, because even if we deduct that portion – if I don't pay \$100 in taxes – it's not going to hurt the military at all. It's not so much that this is my way of stopping the military, but it's my way of staying free from getting involved in their trip.

[In response to audience:] Well, it's the same thing when you offer an apple and in your mind you are offering the whole space full of beautiful things. There are no real beautiful things that you are giving to the Buddha; you are just imagining them.

[In response to audience:] That's why I say if we say, “Do not use this money for military things,” we are, from our side, un-implicating ourselves, because there's that clarity in our mind. We are not giving that money for that purpose. If they take it and misuse it for another purpose, that's their trip.

[In response to audience:] But you are alive and I think you are mentally extricating yourself, which is all you can do, because where are you going to go live on this planet where you are not going to be involved in other people's samsara? You can live on top of Everest; you will still be involved in other people's samsara. The main thing is that enlightenment is attained by purifying our own mind.

[In response to audience:] But from my side I am not saying, “Well, I am telling the government to use it for other things but they are going to use it for the military”, because I don't know, maybe my check does go for something. I mentally am directing it for something specific. It gets all mixed in with everybody else's. I don't know what happens to it.

Anyway, we all have our own way of dealing with it. What do other people think? Do you think you get negative karma because you pay taxes even if you disagree with the purpose of the taxes?

[In response to audience:] But what do you do to get out of samsara? Is it by changing the external world or by changing your mind?

[In response to audience:] How do you change that? What do you need to change?

[Audience:] Well, you think that ten dollars is going to the military. You really regret that and purify that, because to be realistic, it is going to that.

Okay, then do it that way. [laughter] I don't agree, but do it that way. But you see, in this case, in your mind, you are giving it to the military. You are saying that this ten dollars is going to the military.

[Audience:] It's like saying, “Well, in my mind I didn't kill this man so I don't have to purify killing that man. But if you killed a man you still have to recognize what you have done wrong.

But if you didn't give your money for that...

[Audience:] But you knew where it was going realistically.

I once read an article in Buddhist Peace Fellowship Journal and it was right after they executed somebody in California. This one guy wrote, “I killed (whatever his name was).” He was saying that because he was a taxpayer in California; therefore, he is guilty of this person getting the death penalty and being executed, and he felt very lousy about it. I felt, “Wow, this is American guilt tripping!” How we

guilt trip ourselves, because if you don't support the system that does the capital punishment and they do that without your permission, I don't see how you are implicated. If you think that is a good thing or if you are just apathetic about what they do, then I think there is some karma created. But if you don't back it then...

[In response to audience:] I would think that if you voted for that person knowing that they believed in capital punishment and you agreed with that, it is one thing. But if you voted for them and you didn't know that they believed in capital punishment, it would be different.

[Audience: Inaudible]

That's why it is always important to be very clear in our own mind about what we advocate and what we don't, what we rejoice about and what we don't.

[Audience: Inaudible]

It would depend a lot on the situation. Ignorance in this case doesn't just mean you don't have the information. Ignorance is thinking that a wrong action is okay. That's the ignorance that you create karma with.

[ANNOTATION to page 9 - added April 16, 2011 by Father Don, a student of Ven. Chodron's. Father Don runs a parrot and cockatoo sanctuary and has suggested the following approach to the liberation of parrots:

"Parrots who have been imprinted on humans usually die shortly after their release from captivity. Although a freshly caught parrot might be released in its habitat, to release one in a foreign habitat might be less than compassionate since they would probably die. Perhaps death is better than being chained in a cage but only someone such as Rinpoche or a qualified naturalist specializing in psittacines should make that decision."]

This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks:
<http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>