
Giving

Teisho by Roland Yuno Rech - Gyobutsuji Temple in Nice, January 2021

Master Hyakujō used to say: "How can we enter the way of Zen? It is through the practice of the *paramita* of giving". And why this *paramita* of giving? Because the *paramita* of giving is what really allows us to actualize our total interdependence with all beings. In the end, we do not own anything. Even our own body does not belong to us and we will have to give it up one day. We will also have to abandon all our possessions. On the other hand, if we realize that nothing belongs to us, it is first of all a great awakening, because it has the merit of eliminating all our anxieties, all our fears linked to greed, the idea of losing, of not having enough, and that is a source of joy. And this joy of liberation is such that, finally, the fact of giving becomes something natural, becomes the very expression of this joy, of this happiness of the awakening of zazen.

In zen, contrary to what may be the case in some religions, giving is not experienced as a sacrifice, as something to be renounced, but as something joyful coming from our awakening to the true nature of existence, and not only ours, but that of all existences. This is the reason why giving always comes first.

I will talk today about the different aspects of giving. As you know, in Buddha's teaching, there are the Four Noble Truths. This is the first teaching. I'm going to mention them quickly, because we'll come back to them in more detail in other *teisho*. In the Four Noble Truths, there is the awareness of suffering, the causes of suffering, the fact that there are remedies for suffering, and finally the Eightfold Path, in which the different remedies for suffering are listed as forms of practice.

All this shows that the whole teaching of Buddha is based on the fact that, from his Enlightenment, he wanted to give all beings the means to become aware of suffering (not only their own, but also that of all living beings) and at the same time, that there are causes for this suffering and therefore remedies, and he listed them. The starting point of all Buddha's teaching is a great gift, a great *fuse*, a fundamental gift, because it helps all beings to become aware that there are causes - and therefore remedies - for suffering. And among these remedies, giving, *fuse*, has an important role.

The remedies taught by the Buddha are the eight practices called the Eightfold Path, and also the six *paramita*. I have already listed these *paramita*, including giving and the precepts (we will talk about them another time). But the precepts are also a form of giving. Everything we do in accordance with the precepts is a way of avoiding creating suffering. The first precept is: "Do not kill". Then comes: "Do not steal", because it is also not creating suffering. Not only do we not steal, but we practice giving in the sense of "refraining ourselves from taking what does not belong to us". Since nothing is fundamentally ours, we can only give.

We find other bodhisattva practices in what Master Dogen called the *Shishobo*, or the Four Practices. And again, in these practices, the *fuse*, giving, comes first. Then comes *aigo*, which is the words of love, because speaking is an opportunity to give. *Aigo*, or speaking words of love, is to give comfort, to give recognition to others. The way we speak to others can become a

practice of giving and at the same time a practice of listening: the time we take to listen to others is a fundamental practice of giving. People need to be listened to, more than receive advice or recommendations. Again, we see this as a form of giving practice.

There is also the whole aspect of the practice of giving called *rigyo*, that is to say "giving service". And here, we can see that there are numerous ways of giving service. For example, the fundamental service is doing *samu*, which you can practice in the *dojo*. But all the work we do in society can also be a form of giving, that is to say the service we give to the community in which we live, so that it can function in good conditions. It is also the way we use our energy generously: we do not only work to get rich or to support ourselves, but we also work to serve the community in which we live. This is another form of giving.

This means that giving is both an expression of awakening, but also an opportunity to realize it. There are always these two aspects in the practice of giving, and particularly in the gift of our time and energy to the practice in a *dojo*, whether it is *zazen*, *samu*, and even rituals. Rituals in a *dojo* are always dedicated, as we did this morning, to the good of the beings to whom we dedicate this ceremony. All practices in a *dojo* are forms of giving practice. But at the same time, these practices also become an opportunity to receive ourselves the benefits of our practice. There is always an attitude of sharing in the practice of giving, which makes our practice a happy practice. Often in religions, there is a notion of sacrifice. In zen, there is no notion of sacrifice, but on the contrary of joyful sharing with all beings.

Earlier I was talking about the Four Practices of the bodhisattva, apart from the *paramita*: first giving, then the loving words, giving service and finally *doji*, the fact of never separating oneself from others. This too is an extremely important practice. In the ways of meditation, one can often see a tendency to consider that solitude is a good thing, that one should collect oneself and therefore cut oneself off from interdependence with others. There are a number of meditation practitioners who would like to withdraw into the mountains, in caves or even a monastery, and therefore cut themselves off from social life. On the contrary, Master Deshimaru and all the masters have preached the sharing of everybody's life, including in the Buddhism of the Great Vehicle.

In this respect and as you know it, there are three Vehicles: the Theravada, which has been qualified in a somewhat pejorative way as the "Small Vehicle", because the priority of the practitioners of this Small Vehicle, notably in India and in all of East Asia, is to save oneself, to ensure one's own salvation. This salvation consists of not being reborn in this world, because in our world we will sooner or later encounter suffering (illness, old age and death), not obtaining what we desire, losing what we love, and these are causes and forms of suffering.

There is an aspect of the Buddhism of the Small Vehicle in which we see the exact opposite of giving: the idea is "every man for himself", it is wanting to escape suffering. Whereas in the Great Vehicle (which appeared in the first century BC), a good number of Buddhists fortunately became aware of the absurdity of this attitude. The true meaning of Buddha's teaching is, on the contrary, to help all beings, as he himself did. Buddha was - above all - a bodhisattva and a bodhisattva is - above all - somebody who practices giving, practices *fuse*. So, from the first century B.C. onwards, we can see a great development of Great Vehicle Buddhism in which giving really comes first.

Of course, Dogen in the *Shishobo* recalls other practices than just giving. I already mentioned the words of love, giving service and not separating oneself from others. And that's what I wanted to come back to. Not separating oneself from others, but instead sharing the condition of all beings is also a form of giving. Living in society instead of retreating to the mountains is really giving ourselves to social life, to a life with others, and taking every opportunity we have to be of service and help others. That's why zen has always been a practice with others and for others, and therefore in the social world, a world where we don't separate ourselves from the environment.

And even more, now that we became aware of the importance of protecting life on this planet, it is to live in an ecological way. Ecology as a whole is a practice of giving. Protecting all living things, not only humans, but also animals, plants, the air we breathe, all of this is a form of giving practice which, in ordinary life, is very respectable, because it is protecting the conditions for the continuation of life on this planet. But in zen practice, it's more than protecting, it's expressing, living the very essence of awakening, which is to feel in unity with all beings, and it's actualizing it as much as we can in every moment of our daily life.

Thus, in giving, there are these two aspects: it is a practice of giving up by abandoning greed as one of the poisons (as you know, the three poisons are greed, hatred and ignorance: they sum up the essence of all causes of suffering) and therefore the practice of giving is the abandonment of greed. This is why giving is always put first in the practice. But at the same time, it is also the actualization of awakening. Thus, there are two aspects of giving: on one hand, it expresses awakening and on the other hand, giving also allows us to awaken, and to constantly renew our awakening. It works both ways.

Question 1: Talking about the Small Vehicle, you said: "The idea is to avoid being reborn, because of suffering". What does that mean?

RYR: Yes, it is seeking to end this life on earth by gaining nirvana, which is the extinction of suffering. The cause of suffering is that we live in this world and therefore, for the people of the "Small Vehicle", there is this idea that the practice of Buddhism aims at reaching nirvana, nirvana by which one does not return to this world. In Buddhism, there is a general belief in rebirths. In zen, the question of rebirths is not so important. We can talk about it and make it the subject of another teaching, but it is not fundamental. In zen, we are "here and now". We don't worry about rebirths, although we don't deny them or reject them. On the contrary, in relation to giving, accepting to be reborn is a fundamental attitude of giving, because it means that, from existence to existence, we will dedicate our body and our energy to help all beings. And this is the fundamental gift: to give our own life.

Question 2: Sometimes, I would like to retreat to a cave. Do we have to force ourselves to go to the dojo if we don't want it? I'm tired of being of service, I feel "like a mop".

RYR: Yes, I think you have to force yourself and make the effort to come to the dojo. We were talking about the six *paramita* (the first of which is giving and the second the precepts). But the third one is precisely the effort, the effort as energy that we put into the practice, especially the practice with others. Obviously, getting up in the morning and sitting on your zafu in your room, then going about your business, is much easier than taking public transport or walking to

the dojo to practice. So, there is a real effort here and this effort is linked to the gift of our time, our energy, to create a strong atmosphere in the dojo.

As for the impression of “being a mop”, yes, we mop the floor to clean it, but we are not the mop ourselves, we are the one who does the samu. But the samu must not become an object of exploitation. Here, for example, we do samu twice a week and only for a quarter of an hour, which is not much compared to the hour and a half we spend in the dojo. But the most important thing is that doing samu is also a gift to oneself, because it's giving oneself the opportunity to be of service to a community. So, it's a real gift.

And as I said earlier, I think the same about work. You can say that if you go to work, you will be exploited. And this is true in a way, because there will be people who will benefit from our work (but not always, because there are also works that do not bring personal profit to employers, such as public service for example, administrations, etc.). But the fact of working is in itself a source of satisfaction. Of course, there are jobs that are frustrating: you do them to earn a living, but if you could, you would do something else.

But it is precisely the fact of considering one's work as a samu that transforms the relationship to work. This means that what can be frustrating about working, the fact of doing something that is not interesting, of wasting one's time and energy when one could be doing something much better, is cancelled out, is transformed, because of the idea that our work is a practice of giving. Depending on the state of mind one has while doing it, the work can be experienced as a happy thing because - precisely - it is a practice of giving.

And in relation also to the current problem of Covid, I think that it gives us many opportunities to practice. Taking care of others, respecting all the "barrier gestures" for example, is also a practice of giving. Taking great care of others, not only to avoid contracting the virus yourself, but also to avoid transmitting it to others is a very good opportunity to practice. People who go to work, in spite of the risks that work represents because of the contact with others, are also making a great gift to society, by doing a job that is really experienced as a samu and a service, whereas they could very well ask for a medical certificate and stay home.

As you know, the very essence of the practice of Great Vehicle Buddhism and zen is *mushotoku*, or practicing without aim of profit, whereas the merits of zazen are immense. Master Deshimaru made a list of the ten great merits of zazen. They are considerable and we give them back to the community, to others. We are happy to be able to give these merits of zazen to those who do not practice, because there is this somewhat subtle notion of transferring merits. You either believe in it or you don't, but I believe in it. The fact is that everything we do has an invisible effect: it's not something concrete, it's not palpable, but it has a definite effect on the environment in which we live. Moreover, the places where there is a dojo or a temple receive this influence and it is a very positive influence. There is a kind of radiation of the practice.

I just spoke about *mushotoku*, which is the essence of zen. After zazen, we chant the Hannya Shingyo, which is really the practice of giving. Then we follow with the Four Bodhisattva Vows which are also the expression of giving. Basically, our whole practice is nothing other than the practice of giving. That's why it's a happy practice, a joyful practice of course, if we understand it in that sense. And the purpose of a workshop like today is to clarify this.

Moreover, the fact of feeling the joy of the practice oneself is something communicative. I think that, for the people you meet when you come back from zazen, from the dojo, if you have experienced the joy of the practice, you can feel it and it has a soothing and comforting effect, even on people who don't practice. There is what is called in zen "*kano doko*". This means a kind of radiation of the practice, which makes it have an effect that reaches far beyond the practitioner himself.

Dogen says, in relation to the causal relationships of giving, that these effects reach even awakened people. Basically, when we practice zazen, we are practicing a *fuse* that reaches even a buddha. Buddha himself receives the benefits of our practice. He is the source of our practice, he devoted his life to it as a great *fuse*, as a great gift, and for forty-five years he devoted himself to helping beings remedy their suffering through the practice he taught. But at the same time, when we practice through him, through this enormous effort he made to transmit his teaching, he himself receives the benefits of our practice. This means that there is a circular aspect to the *fuse*. It produces benefits on the persons who receive our gift, but the receiving of the gift goes back to the person who practiced or taught. Dogen says that even giving a single sentence, or a single verse that expresses the truth, the Dharma, the teaching, is a great gift.

Question 3: *You spoke of three Vehicles, but I only know of two.*

RJR: The third one is Tantric Buddhism.

Q.3: *I thought it was part of the Mahayana.*

AYR: Yes, it is, but it considers itself a third Vehicle. To clarify, what is called Hinayana (I never use that term) or Theravada is the original teaching, which is basically based on the Four Noble Truths. Of course, people who practice the Great Vehicle also follow these Four Noble Truths, but they focus mainly on the *paramita*. The generous aspect is much more accentuated in what is called the Great Vehicle. And it is called "Great" because it embraces all beings, or it would like to be like that. But I don't really agree with that, because in the Theravada, generosity is also practiced. The people of this Vehicle in their actions are often much more "Great Vehicle" than the practitioners of the so-called "Great" Vehicle, who sometimes have more selfish attitudes than the practitioners of Theravada!

Question 4: *How can we practice giving and benevolence at work, when working with a boss who harasses us?*

RJR: You have to fight against harassment by all possible means. But first of all, we must try to make the harassers understand that it also creates a kind of suffering for them. People who commit evil (because harassment is a form of evil practice), create suffering around them, but ultimately also for themselves. Deep down, without really being aware of it, they are hurting themselves. Whoever harasses others is ultimately doing something bad for himself. When some people commit harmful actions, the first thing is to try to stop them by all possible means, to prevent them from continuing. But the best way to stop them from going on is to convert them, by making them understand that harassment and the suffering he causes others is also a bad thing for themselves.

Question 5: *Why is it said that the donator, the gift and the receiver are one? How can we understand this teaching?*

RYR: The person who gives is necessarily in unity with what he/she does and with the *fuse*. At the same time, the fact of giving is giving oneself. There is no separation when you give. Obviously, when you write a cheque for UNICEF and put it in the post, you don't feel like you're giving yourself, but in reality, you are. In all forms of giving, there is this inner impulse to give up something that - supposedly - belongs to us, to help others. One is completely involved in the practice of giving. So, the gift itself comes from ourselves, it is something that we give up. It is something that is part of ourselves that we give. That's why the gift and the donator are in unity.

Question 6: *Is it possible that by fixing our breathing, we block zazen? What should we do in this case?*

RYR: Breathing is a practice of receiving and giving. I breathe in and receive energy from the air I breathe in, the energy of the cosmos, and then I breathe out and give it back. Especially in zazen, when we breathe out, our exhalation is also a form of giving. We let go of what we want to keep. You know that there are practices in some forms of yoga where we do some breath retention. In zen, it's the opposite: everything you receive, you give back immediately. It becomes a form of giving, because the air we exhale is inhabited by the practice of zazen. On a vibratory level, there's something communicative about breathing out together in a dojo and everyone receives the benefits of each other's breathing out. You don't hold anything back.

And especially don't hold back the merits of zazen. The merits of zazen are unlimited. They are extremely numerous, but the bodhisattva who practices in the dimension of the Great Vehicle immediately retransmits the benefits of his own practice. He does not keep them for himself, but dedicates them to others. This is what we say when we chant the Four Bodhisattva Vows after zazen. The ceremony is a dedication. We never do a ceremony for ourselves, at least in zen, it's always for others. Moreover, this is what makes ceremonies in Japan a little bit too long for my taste, because we start by dedicating the ceremony to the Buddha, then we do a second ceremony with a second sutra dedicated to the masters of the transmission, then to the family and finally to all beings. We want to do a four-step ceremony to make sure that we have included everyone in the ceremony, because the essence of the ceremony is the practice of giving.

Question 7: *Can over-attachment block the practice?*

RYR: Of course, it can, but it depends on the attachment to what. In any case, generally speaking, any attachment blocks life and therefore blocks the practice. But at the same time, we can say that attachment is a first step. We should not neglect the fact that there are many people who are suffering and who are looking for a remedy for their suffering. They may begin the practice because of their attachment to the hope of remedying their suffering through the practice. In this case, it is a first step: it is better to be attached to the practice with this state of mind than not to practice at all.

But if one practices with a master who transmits a correct teaching, he will not condemn this attachment to the practice and to the merits of the practice, but he will also try to convert the

person's mind, so that little by little the person will realize that giving to others the merits to which he is attached is the superior form of practice, and that finally, the practice also becomes favourable to the one who practices with a *mushotoku* mind, that is to say without attachment.

Question 8: *I cannot let go of my breathing.*

RYR: I quite often insist that there are always two steps: the first step is to consciously focus on the posture and also on the breathing. Conscious concentration is a form of attachment. You become attached to the practice of breathing, you think of breathing out deeply, for a long time, you make the outbreathing go down to below the navel and so, there is a whole conscious process of concentration on the breathing which is a form of attachment. As soon as we practice consciously, there is a form of attachment, but it is a good attachment, because it allows us to enter into the practice. Then if the practice, thanks to this attachment, becomes strong enough, it will take us beyond. In other words, in the second stage we don't even think about our breathing. It happens by itself. So, it becomes a gift and no longer something we do to obtain something.

Question 9: *Almsgiving to monks by the laity in exchange for teaching almost disappeared in Japan, and it is not done at all in Europe. How can a monk survive in the West?*

RYR: It is very simple: as a monk, you have to work. Master Deshimaru ordered it very soon during his mission. He said: "You must work". The idea that the monk should not work in society is an idea of the Small Vehicle. Theravada monks are not even allowed to practice in the society, they have to live only on alms. Obviously, this makes their practice difficult in Europe, because they are not supposed to have a professional activity. But zen monks, on the contrary, are supposed to work. So, the problem does not exist for us.

Q.9: *What happens in Japan is that the temples are financed by the laity, by kito and things like that. That's where the money comes from. But it's also a kind of family business: they have "family temples".*

RYR: You're right to mention it. Like you, I went to temples in Japan where almsgiving is a real and effective practice. That is to say, in the temple where I have been, once a week the monks put on their sandals, take their bowls, walk all morning through the streets and beg with their hats pulled down, so that they don't see the person who gives. The donator sees the monk, but the monk just bows in thanks without seeing the donator. They do this to get an additional income for the temple, but even though it is not negligible, it is not what they can live on. They do it as a *fuse* of the benefits of giving, meaning that - with this almsgiving - they give people the opportunity to obtain merits by the fact that they practice giving. And so, in the end, the monk gives as much as the person who gave something to the monks.

Question 10: *Here, we don't charge anything for the ceremony for the deceased ...*

RYR: Normally we should ask for a *fuse*. You're right to mention this, because I dislike to be in any kind of trade. It's a pejorative way of talking about the donation for ceremonies, because I think the *mushotoku* spirit is important. When you do a ceremony, if you know that you are going to get a *fuse* afterwards, it is not very good for the mind of the person who does the ceremony. This is my point of view. But at the same time, I won't complain if people who do

ceremonies get a *fuse*, especially if they need them because they chose to devote themselves to zen and might lack the financial resources to live decently in society.

Q.10: *Here, when we do a ceremony, there is a "fuse box" and people put money in.*

RJR: Yes, and after all you could imagine putting a bowl somewhere and saying: "It's free, you can give; the idea is not to take money from you, but you can give."

Q.10: *At the Gendronnière, they ask for a fuse. You can give an envelope and you give what you want. But if you can't afford it, you don't have to give anything.*

RJR: You can always give something.

Question 11: How can you help someone who is suffering, who is dying, without losing yourself in the suffering?

RJR: We have to admit that it's difficult to be near a person who is suffering and to give her our presence. But you have to avoid saying to yourself: "I have to do something!" because if we think we have to help, it puts us in a state of constraint that is not good for us or for the person. The best thing to do, in this case, is to be in a completely *mushotoku* state of mind, strongly present, silent, almost like in zazen (but not necessarily on a zafu, it can be on a chair), next to the bed of the person who is dying and to try to have a zazen practice. It radiates beyond ourselves and is soothing for the person. Often, people who are dying are concerned not to burden their loved ones with their suffering, precisely because they know that they are loved by these people. Often, they don't dare to say anything, to express their own suffering, or even to mention that they are going to die, because they don't want to make their loved ones suffer. This is not right. On the contrary (I'm talking here for the people near the person who is ill), you should not hesitate to encourage the person to express everything they feel, and show that you are quite capable of hearing it. Of course, this creates a suffering for ourselves, but a suffering mastered by the practice of zazen, and therefore marked by a certain equanimity, the fourth of the bodhisattva practices.

- In Lyon, there was a lady who was dying of cancer in hospital. Several of us went to be near her and it was a very interesting experience. But we were still shocked by it. It's impossible not to suffer from that experience. But I think that, for the person herself, this contact that we had with her was, I think, something positive. She was calmer and happy to see the people she had practiced with.

RJR: At that point, the greatest suffering is loneliness. And this is another form of giving: giving your presence. Sometimes people are a bit awkward and embarrassed, because they ask themselves: "What can I do?" But there is nothing to do. You just have to be there, that's enough. Be there with a strong presence.

Thank you for your participation and thank you also to the participants who followed us on Facebook or the Internet.

I wish you good practice and I hope to see you soon.