

Skilful Giving – Some First Thoughts

Here are some thoughts in response to a question I received last night. They're rough and provisional, but they might be helpful in exploring some of the issues involved. The question was:

Is there a place for healthy boundaries in terms of how much one gives, at least on the mundane level? Or is 'no' not in the vocabulary of a bodhisattva? Can chronically saying 'yes' to things that you don't really want to do be bad your health?

In principle, the answer is always yes. The bodhisattva is here to help. However, we need to have the wisdom and skilful means to decide how best to respond on the everyday level. Otherwise we shall have a lot of burnt-out bodhisattvas...

There are some areas of Dharma practice about which we can decide by referring to the precepts. Then there are whole areas which involve learning by experience, by trial and error, and getting to know our own tendencies, our strengths and weaknesses. This is one of them.

Here are some questions that can be helpful to ask ourselves:

1. Are we empathising with the person or situation, to know what our help would mean to them and how helpful or not our involvement would be?
2. What is the most compassionate response? Will doing this benefit others really? There may be something that someone wants that isn't really good for them. Or maybe they are trying to pressure or manipulate us into giving. To allow them to do so wouldn't be good for us or them.
3. Are we clear about what is involved in what we're taking on? (Bhante said of Tibetans that they were often slow to say yes, until they were sure they knew what was involved. Then once they'd agreed, they were usually very reliable.)
4. Do we have the resources to help: the skill, physical energy, knowledge, etc. for this task? Are we objectively the best person to do it? Do we have the time? For someone with a full life, everything we agree to is effectively saying 'no' to something or someone else. When deciding about taking on a large task we need to consider it not in isolation but in relation to all the other aspects of our life. Is this the best use of us as a resource?

5. Are we motivated enough, or can we find the motivation and set up the conditions to sustain it, to see us through a big task?
6. Is our motivation right? Are there elements of guilt, desire to please, wanting appreciation or admiration, etc? Can we set them aside and find a simple and authentic wish to help? (An interesting question to ask ourselves from time to time is: If someone wanted to manipulate me into saying yes to something, what would their best strategy be? It can make us aware of our vulnerabilities to flattery, manipulation through guilt, etc.)
7. Have we found a 'point of freedom' from which to decide what to do?
8. If we give in this situation, can we do so without regrets? Of course, we need to consider the objective good that our giving will do. However, from the point of view of our Dharma life, what we want is to build a steady momentum of generosity, a series of open, loving mental states, moving in the direction of less selfing. We can create a 'virtuous spiral' in which we follow our generous impulses skilfully and appropriately. Giving without undue strain or regret, we feel happiness and satisfaction at having been of help, and that encourages us to do more in the future.

When it is appropriate, we can work through some or all of these questions in order to help us decide what to do. Doing so will help us to make better decisions about giving, and in the process we shall learn more about ourselves. However, sometimes we just need to follow our heart, and give intuitively and spontaneously!

Vessantara

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