The background of the cover is a watercolor wash in shades of blue and purple. At the top, there is a horizontal band of white, textured paper that appears to be torn or layered over the watercolor, creating a layered, organic effect.

GIFTS GREATER THAN the OCEANS
Benefits of the Buddhist Practice of Giving

By Ayya Dhammadīpā

Dedicated to the awakening of all beings.

Because this book is an offering from my heart, born from the wish to share some of the Dharma that has arisen in my life, I chose to self-publish and make it freely available to everyone. There is no charge for the book, and it should not be sold at any price.

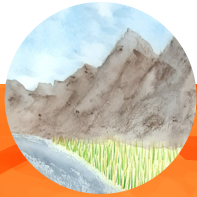
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October 2021
Alexandria, VA

GIFTS GREATER THAN the OCEANS

Benefits of the Buddhist Practice of Giving

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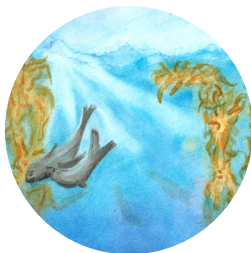
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Benefits of the Buddhist Practice of Giving

INTRODUCTION



Living in Miami in the mid-1980s, I had never met anyone who considered themselves to be a Buddhist, or perhaps it was just that no one had shared that with me. I did, however, have access to lots and lots of books. When I first discovered a book about Zen Buddhism, I knew that it was the path for me. I knew then that I was a Buddhist. It was that reality in my heart and mind that led me to meditation, but I never imagined that there was so much more to Buddhism, because I hadn't yet met anyone who had experienced it.

Many years later, I found myself at a Japanese monastery where the practice of receiving *dana* was a routine part of the training. I took up that form of practice because that's what my Root Teacher, Sekkei Harada Roshi, had decided was the best way to train. Harada Roshi was the Abbot at Hosshinji, a Soto Zen monastery, and he made key decisions about the practice

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there. At first, I thought that we went out collecting dana because we had to do it to keep the monastery running, thought it was a distraction from sitting in meditation or studying. However, it didn't take long for me to discover that the teachings of alms collection - *takuhatsu* as it is known in Japanese, *pindapata* as it is known in Pali - were life changing. These were the very teachings we were sitting with and reading about, enacted in the world. Alms collection encounters were fresh, unpredictable, and every bit as profound and challenging as the koans of Zen or the discourses of the Theravada.

The practice of giving and receiving finds its history in the very inception of Buddhism. In fact, the ancient texts that describe the Buddha and his discovery of the Path to awakening tell us that the decision to receive food offerings was a pivotal moment. Prior to that he had been practicing extreme fasting, as was the practice of many ascetics in India at that time, but then he realized that he needed his body to be strong enough to also support the development of the mind. From then until the end of his life, the man who would become the Buddha received donations of food and other gifts that sustained him. These donations are called "*dana*" in Pali and Sanskrit, the languages of some of the ancient texts that record the early history of Buddhism and other spiritual traditions.

In discourse after discourse, we hear stories of encounters the Buddha had while he walked through the towns and villages of Northern India collecting his daily meal, as did other Indian homeleavers of that time. We also hear about the practice of receiving dana, sometimes called alms collection rounds, in the

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poetry of the women disciples who awakened in the Buddha's time. These elder nuns, known as the Theris, extolled the wisdom earned by living solely on food that was put in their bowls. The practice of giving and receiving dana expresses a wisdom and an intimacy that resonated with the lay folks and monastics of the Buddha's time. And this practice has been passed on, through many countries, over many centuries, by folks who also felt deep resonance with the teachings it expresses. I consider myself one of those folks.

Yet the question of why we practiced takuhatsu stayed with me. There are lots of answers, I've come to believe, and some of them are expressed later in this book. However, the great, amazing, almost unbelievable answer is that its benefits extend far beyond the people involved. It is a practice that benefits all beings. In order to make sense of that, it's important to understand a bit about karma and about merit. "*Karma*" as it is written in Sanskrit or "*kamma*" as it is written in Pali, was described by the Buddha as a universal principle. To put it succinctly, karma is the principle by which any intentional activity of body, speech or thought sets in motion the momentum of a result that corresponds to its moral quality. It is, in effect, a complex principle of morality that operates in the material and mental worlds. It functions everywhere and at all times. And when that intentional activity is wholesome and supportive of clarifying the true nature of reality, then it creates something called "*punya*" in Sanskrit or "*puñña*" in Pali. In English the word that is used is "merit," a beneficial type of karmic result that

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moves a person forward on the Path to complete liberation from suffering. This merit can be, and is often shared, which is akin to holding up your lamp so another person can see. Typically this sharing is explicitly stated at the time an offering is made or when it is acknowledged with a blessing. What I have experienced over these many years is that the merit of takuhatsu or pindapata was often shared with all beings. This is akin to brightening the light of the lamp to encompass all sentient beings everywhere. Interestingly, merit is said to grow when it is shared, not diminish. This is because the intention to share the merit is also generating merit.

When I and my fellow monastics and lay folks practice giving and receiving dana, it creates an opportunity for wholesome, beneficial, intentional activity. That is, it works together with the function of karma to generate merit. This benefits the folks involved. And, even when it is not explicitly shared, the wholesome activity of giving and receiving dana is also benefiting all the beings because of their interconnections, people who have benefited directly or indirectly from this practice coming into contact with others, who come into contact with others, and so on. Whatever your motivation, whether you call it pindapata or takuhatsu or alms rounds, this practice of giving and receiving donations in support of Buddhism is itself the activity of Buddhist wisdom in the world. It is a statement about the nature of human life, and about each person's capacity to be on the journey of transcending suffering. That journey, in the form of teachings and practices given by the Buddha and those wise teachers who followed in his literal and figurative footsteps, is called the Noble Eightfold Path.

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In recent years I practiced and taught at Aloka Vihara Forest Monastery, a Theravada Buddhist monastery for women in Placerville, California. Pindapata is also part of the training at this monastery, though the form it takes is somewhat different. Since I and my fellow monastics live and practice in the United States, where Buddhist alms collection rounds are practically unheard of, we have chosen to adapt the traditional Theravada form so that it allows for a bit more interaction. [If you want to learn more about the forms of alms giving, please see the Appendix.] However, I believe that the ritualized nature of giving and receiving dana is not as important as the encounters it enables. I've found that no matter which form one uses, the practice of giving and receiving dana is face-to-face transmission of the Dharma.

Over time, I've had many meaningful encounters while on alms rounds. This book consists of a handful that stand out as shining examples. These stories point directly to beneficial action, to the opposites of the unwholesome mind states of greed, hatred, and delusion. These three unwholesome states are called the poisons or the unwholesome roots. The Buddha identified them as three of the most fundamental problems in human life. Yet alms round encounters were moments of generosity, personal connection, and kindness, moments of seeing with profound clarity and applying bright discernment. They were moments of transcending the poisons. I share them because it is my hope that these stories point to the opportunity for goodness that is inherent in every human life.

May these stories be a support for your awakening journey.

Non-greed: generosity, sharing, renunciation

CHAPTER 1

Turning Onions Into Goodness



It was a sunny Saturday morning at the Placerville Farmers' Market, warm and inviting of a leisurely stroll. Folks walked up and down the bike path, between the rows of white tents where purple peppers, curly greens, and bright cherry tomatoes were displayed for sale. I stood in a shady spot, my bare feet on the stiff, dry grass, and asked my Dharma Sister whether she thought it was time to go. No, we decided, let's stay a bit longer.

It was then that I noticed the little girl, my eyes drawn to her lively hat. It had a wide brim and joyful yellow sunflowers all over. She had the face of one with enough love and enough nourishment in her life to be well and happy. Still, the little girl seemed a bit shy, not willing to hold my gaze for more than a moment. She was clearly comfortable with the two women who accompanied her, though, as they walked along the bike path hand in hand. One looked older than the other, and I guessed that they might be her mother and grandmother.

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Mother held her hand and talked to the little girl, pointing out friendly dogs and naming the foods that were familiar, perhaps teaching her some new words. Meanwhile, grandmother approached my Sister and me, and matter of factly handed us a bag of vegetables. She smiled, but didn't linger to talk. "Blessings," I said, as she walked away, still smiling quietly as she rejoined the other two.

By this time, the little girl was hiding behind her mother's leg, hanging on tightly, with both hands, head tilted to one side so that she could see me. Peering out from under the bright sunflower hat, she suddenly seemed more timid and unsure. Perhaps she had noticed my shaved head or maybe it was the long, draping robes that put her off. However, this didn't seem like a strong negative reaction. It was just a moment of uncertainty that was all the more endearing. I smiled again at the little girl. Mother kept talking to her, though they were distant enough that I couldn't hear what she was saying. The girl stayed there, behind mother's leg, for a moment. Then all three turned and started to walk away.

I too turned and contented myself with observing the other patrons at the Market. After a few moments, I shifted my focus again, only to find the girl and her mother and grandmother approaching us once more. The little one held up a large bag of onions so full that it was a bit too heavy for her. I leaned down to offer my bowl as a container, and she gleefully put the bag inside. "Thank you. Many blessings to you," I said with a wide grin. The girl grinned too, clearly pleased with herself, and she put her fingers to her mouth, as children often do when they are thinking. Still holding mother's hand, the girl in the sunflower hat

walked away, toward the low stone gate that marks the end of the Market and the beginning of the other activities of the town. She turned and looked back one last time, her smile even bigger, her eyes looking directly into mine. I raised my voice just enough so that she could hear me, and called out cheerfully, "That's what it feels like!" In that moment I was pointing out the joy that came from giving, that the girl might remember it as she grew up.

The Buddha spoke directly to this kind of joy in the sutta called "A Gift with Six Factors".¹ He taught that giving can be joyful before the act itself, foster confidence during the act, and be uplifting and joyful again after the act. And so it was for the little girl in the sunflower hat. Though she felt uncertain at first, the plan to give a gift gave her enough joy to overcome her shyness. Then, the intimacy of giving gave her joy and more confidence in the moment, and left her feeling even more joy in the end. On that sunny day at the Farmers' Market, the little girl learned that it feels good to do good.

The Buddha went on to express the vastness of his understanding. When those three kinds of good feelings are present, and the gift is given to anyone aiming for the end of greed, hatred and delusion, there is no limit to the benefit that is generated. He said that the giver experiences "overflowing goodness that nurtures happiness." This makes sense simply because the initial gift continues to generate goodness and happiness through the lives of the recipients, and through the encouragement that the giver continues to feel afterward. They turn that happiness into nourishment of the heart, nourishment

1 *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 6.37

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for more goodness to come forth and touch the lives of others with happiness.

At times, though, generosity can feel awkward, like a kind of intimacy that we aren't willing to step into. Particularly when giving a gift into someone's hand, it can feel too close for comfort. For the girl in the sunflower hat, the initial feeling was one of uncertainty. Yet she felt drawn to give a gift in spite of her doubt. It looked to me like she changed her mind because of the good company she enjoyed; she benefiting from the generosity and wisdom of the women who were caring for her. Perhaps she saw grandmother giving the gift of vegetables. Perhaps mother encouraged her to give. The Buddha also spoke about this kind of goodness. He said that good friends, those who help us to lead a wiser, more compassionate life, can turn us in the right direction with their words. We all feel drawn to give, and some part of us knows that it's a good thing to do, but sometimes we need a friend to give us a nudge in the right direction.

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The Buddha's brilliance as a teacher shines through the forms and practices of mendicancy that he developed and taught to his community. He recognized that it is in our day-to-day relationships that we put our practice into action, that we go beyond an intellectual understanding and embody the truth of Dharma. For him, it was important for the ordained saṅgha, those we call monastics or mendicants, to have regular contact with the folks who support them, with the folks who look to them for inspiration or spiritual guidance. This helps the monastics to be upright, and gives them an incentive to make the most of the opportunity that so many people are enabling.

NON-GREED: GENEROSITY, SHARING, RENUNCIATION

The Buddha also knew that it was important for the lay community to be face-to-face with the people they were supporting. That way, the lay folks could see that the Noble Eightfold Path is not just a dream, or something that had happened thousands of years ago. They could see the monastics as individuals. They could see the results of practice in the way that monastics embody the Dharma. Lay donors would come to know themselves as practitioners too, as folks who are also embodying the Dharma. And for some, these encounters would inspire them to practice in other ways as well, taking up meditation or chanting or pilgrimage. In this way, practitioners would come to know one another, everyone making an effort to discover the wisdom of giving, whether giving food or receiving food. Everyone could share their experience of the Path. Everyone could be an inspiration for someone else on the Path.

The benefit of all this giving is so great that it is hard to measure. In fact, the Buddha said that trying to measure the benefit of a spiritual gift is like trying to measure all the water in the oceans. Underlying this teaching is a profound aspect of the human experience. The Buddha was pointing to emptiness. Emptiness is a key principle in the Dharma, and it can be understood in many ways. Because anything that we experience in a typical human life is present only on the basis of its supporting conditions, in Buddhism we say it is empty of independent arising, empty of a permanent existence. In other words, one of the implications of emptiness is conditionality. It is a form of interdependence, each thing present because of its relationship to other things. Due to interdependence, giving in the spiritual context becomes

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a vehicle for manifesting our true interrelationship with each other, and with everyone and everything they are connected to, and with everyone those other folks are connected to, in a vast framework of interrelationship. This extends far, far beyond the giver and the receiver. During the formal meals at many Zen monasteries, those who receive the food chant about their aspiration to "realize the emptiness of the three wheels - giver, receiver and gift." We can understand emptiness as interdependence, the principle by which those three wheels can only be present in dependence on the others.

Giving alms is a way of demonstrating our inner understanding of interrelationship and interdependence. It is manifesting an understanding that we can only be alive because we are amidst the causes and conditions necessary for life, and others can only be alive because they are in the midst of the causes and conditions necessary for life. Emptiness is also pointing to this aspect of experience. Because all things and people are empty of independence, they are also provisional. They cannot be said to exist because they are constantly in the state of disappearing, but they cannot be said to not exist because they are also in the state of being present. We are here when the appropriate conditions are supportive for us to be here, and we will cease to be here when those conditions are absent. Some of the appropriate conditions for human beings are food and water. With practice, we can come to a profound realization of the provisional nature of a human life, the way in which all life is simply a coming together of the appropriate conditions of food and water and the generosity that brings them to us.

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That's why giving feels good, even though we may have fewer material belongings afterward. We discover that we have plenty of supportive conditions for life, enough to give, and that can foster gratitude about our own lives. We discover that we are also interdependent, connected to others on whom we depend. When giving we have the intuitive sense that we have benefitted and that others have benefitted too, that the good effects go beyond us. And going beyond our self interest is fundamental to developing a spiritual life. We find our alignment with the principles that are greater than us, and find a way to transcend the self-concern that constrains us. That too is the beauty of giving.

What does this have to do with a little girl in a sunflower hat? Well, she is learning that I am here with my Dharma Sister because folks give us food, and she is here because her mother and grandmother helped make it so, and together we are all turning a bag of onions into goodness for the whole world.

Non-greed: generosity, sharing, renunciation

CHAPTER 2

A Bridge Between Worlds



My mind was full of thoughts of tomorrow. I could hardly remember to do the mundane daily tasks of brushing my teeth and sweeping my room because I was wondering what would happen the next day. Would I cry? Would I change my mind? I felt sure I would forget to say something I was meant to say.

Of course, all of this was natural on the day before my ordination into Soto Zen Buddhism at a training monastery in Japan. Yet no amount of looking forward with apprehension would halt the preparations that were happening on this day. One such preparation, perhaps one of the most symbolic and dramatic for me, was having my head shaved. I had been wearing robes of a sort for some time, the lay kind that have shorter sleeves than the robes that Zen monastics wear. I had participated in any number of ceremonies and attended many teachings, but cutting off all my hair was not something I had

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ever done before. So I was grateful that no one expected me to do it myself, at least not the first time. The local barber had been called in. He was giving the gift of his time and his experience to help with the preparations for the next day's ordination ceremony.

Like many Japanese folks, he was a slight man, both smaller in stature and in bulk than I was. His hair was black, shiny, and short; mine was brown, also short. I had cut my long, dyed-red curls six months earlier, before I came to practice at the monastery in Japan. I did not yet realize, though, that I still had quite a bit left to relinquish.

He began by taking care to drape a towel over my shoulders and to apply some shaving cream to my head. When I placed my hands in *gassho*, palms together, he started cutting. Every few minutes he would ask in Japanese whether I was okay. It wasn't painful, except to my heart. So each time I replied that I was alright. After a few minutes, though, I began to notice the tension in his movements, the jerkiness, and it occurred to me that he too was nervous.

He seemed to be concerned with not injuring me, but perhaps there was more to it. Maybe he felt some trepidation knowing, even more clearly than I did at that moment, what it meant to take up a Zen monastic life, the hardships and renunciation that it would involve. He lived in this part of the world and had seen, over the years, the demanding nature of monastic practice and the difficulties that practitioners faced. I knew how it was done in San Francisco and how it had been to live at Hosshinji over the past several months, but I had a lot more to learn about renunciation.

In practical terms, the barber's nervousness meant that he wasn't doing a very good job of getting my head very smooth. After the shave, I went to the bathroom to look at my new "style." What I saw was a very rough shave, with big patches of stubble, not nearly as smooth as the other nuns and monks at the monastery. The senior nun assured me that it had been done well enough to go on with the ceremony. I went to bed and tried to get some sleep.

The next day I was ordained in a brief, traditional ceremony, performed completely in Japanese, with only the monastery residents, the barber, and one friend from America in attendance. During the ceremony there is a moment in which one's ordaining teacher shaves off the last tuft of hair, called the "shura" in the ancient Indian language of Sanskrit, as a symbol of leaving behind one's lay identity. Sekkei Harada Roshi was my ordination teacher, and he cut the shura so gently that I hardly felt a thing. I did forget a line or two but, generally speaking, it all went as planned.

A week flowed by as we performed other ceremonies and sat in meditation to launch the practice period. Practice periods in the Soto Zen tradition of Buddhism are called "ango," a Japanese word that means "peaceful abiding." Harada Roshi would say that practicing together in this way was like going together on a journey in a boat. I wondered how I had managed to be in the same boat with these people, in this place that felt so foreign. That said, I certainly felt carried along by the flow of Zen monastic life, each activity a movement of the hands of time. Days flowed into days. Though I had also lived at

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this monastery during the previous practice period, I was now a nun, involved in the intricate workings of the place, and that meant that I was busier. There was plenty to do, and the days passed quickly.

Then, one morning, we were asked to go into town for takuhatsu, the regular alms rounds. Having eaten breakfast, having dressed in our homemade sandals, having lined up in the entryway and chanted, we walked across a neighboring field and into the town of Obama. We walked and walked, it seemed, before finally reaching the parts of town that looked familiar to me. It was then that I saw him. The barber stood in the doorway of the barbershop, palms together, head slightly bowed. As I walked by, together with my Dharma companions, he looked up and smiled shyly. I called out "*arigato*," thank you, and carried on, not wanting to be scolded for holding up the group. Then, on our next trip into town, I was surprised to see him again, greeting us as we walked by his shop wearing the bamboo hats with the Hosshinji temple name on it. And again I saw him on our next takuhatsu. This scene happened many, many times. In fact, it happened nearly every time we went into town for alms round.

Entire worlds can be bridged by the practice of giving. Through giving we can form bonds that talking could never create. This is why people around the world share gifts with one another. They are symbolic of relationships, symbolic of the effort to connect. Eihei Dogen, the founder of Soto Zen Buddhism, recognized the power of giving to create connections. He taught that "The power of the causal relations

of giving reaches [the heavenly beings], human beings, and even enlightened sages. When giving becomes actual, such causal relations are immediately formed".¹

On seeing the barber after my ordination, I felt that we had broken through the language barrier and the immense cultural gulf between us. This had happened due to the gift he had given, the gift of his time. In fact, he was giving his time again and again in an acknowledgement of the bond that had formed. I learned that we could know each other in a way that was personal, yet retained a respectful form. It was a form steeped in Buddhist tradition, steeped in Japanese tradition, but it was uniquely expressed by the two of us. I didn't expect to become friends with a barber from the town of Obama, but I found that I already had.

Intimacy is crucial for deep practice. Without it, we only swim in our own ideas about our inner and outer worlds, and we lack the clarity that comes from others' observations and expressions. At times, intimacy is being with what seems external, like when we go to a center or a temple for a period of practice with a group. It is there that the absurdity of our ideas about others disturbing our lives becomes apparent. It is there that we can see, at times with painful clarity, the fact that no matter where we are, it is our own views and desires that give us trouble, particularly views about how things would be so much better if everyone were like us, or agreed with us,

¹ Dogen's Shobogenzo "Bodhisattva's Four Methods of Guidance", translated by Lew Richmond and Kazuaki Tanahashi. Where they used the word "devas," I have inserted "the heavenly beings."

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or even just understood us. Yet the barber demonstrated very clearly that he had something beautiful to give that had nothing to do with our being alike. And I, by using my time to engage in monastic practice, also had something to give. With time, I became more aware of our similarities, the simple sharing of human experience.

Yet the poignant gifts we shared also gave me a much deeper appreciation of our differences. I felt that my life was enriched by the Japanese and their culture. It was so very different from what I grew up with, but the Japanese had embraced Buddhism, enabled it to flourish, and even extended to America. In fact, the first Buddhist tradition that I encountered all those years ago in Miami was Zen that had come from Japan by way of Europe. I also felt that my wish to go forth as a monastic gave the barber a new perspective on the value of this tradition that he'd lived down the street from his entire life. It was those very differences that brought us to that moment of meeting on the street in Obama. In fact, without difference there would have been no friendship with this man whom I now looked forward to seeing, our intimacy a sharing that required no hair and no words.

NON-GREED: GENEROSITY, SHARING, RENUNCIATION

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Non-hatred: kindness, empathy, harmlessness

CHAPTER 3

A Farmer's Faith



My Dharma Sister and I are standing side by side in a shady spot along the bike path, our alms bowls carried in their slings on our left shoulders. A couple of booths to our left and across the way stands our friend the farmer, wearing his usual red tee shirt. He is smiling broadly, and chatting with the customers at the booth where he sells the vegetables he and his family have grown on their farm. His booth is one of the larger ones at the Saturday Farmers' Market in Placerville. The vegetables shine and are plentiful. It is clear that he enjoys his role as a farmer.

When things slow down a bit, the farmer comes over to visit with us, as he does every weekend. It sounds like his native language is Spanish, and I warmly greet him. "Hola! Buenos dias!" Yet he asks how we are doing in English, because he knows that my Dharma Sister can then understand the conversation too. The farmer asks how things are at the monastery, and he

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genuinely wants to hear a little bit about our week. We tell him about our most recent meditation retreat, or about something we are doing to care for the land on which we live. Next he asks whether we are receiving any offerings, though he can see for himself what is in our bowls. We smile and say something like, "Yes, we're receiving some lovely food." This has become almost a ritual between us, and we all enjoy it.

Today is different, though. Instead of handing us some tomatoes at this point in the conversation, the farmer reaches down to pick up one of the shopping bags we have brought with us to carry the offerings home. He says, "Can I take this?" My Sister and I pause for a heartbeat. Anything that we have, other than our robes, bowls and a few personal items, belongs to the monastery. It is not ours to give away. In the next moment, I say "Sure. Yes," wanting to give it to him if he needs it, and to trust that he'll bring it back if he's just borrowing it. Our farmer friend smiles like the cat that has eaten the canary, and walks away with the largest shopping bag we have. As he turns to leave, I read what's written on the back of his red shirt. It's a quote by Pope John Paul II about one's responsibility to care for future generations by caring for the land.¹

The farmer walks over to his booth and fills the big shopping bag to the brim with vegetables, not badly bruised or rotting vegetables, but the ones right on the top of his best piles of lovely produce. Grinning happily, he returns with the bag and

1 "The earth will not continue to offer its harvest, except with faithful stewardship. We cannot say we love the land and then take steps to destroy it for use by future generations." Pope John Paul II, Mass for the Rural Workers, USA, Thursday, 17 September 1987

hands it to us saying, "It's heavy!" He is so pleased with himself. And I am so pleased for him. He's just done a good deed and enjoyed it too.

It seems so simple, but that is one of the great mysteries and deep teachings of the practice of Dharma. To this day, I think about why this farmer is so generous with us. Week after week, we can count on him to make the most generous offering of our pindapata, and to have great fun doing so. Is it because that is how he lives out his Christian faith and ideals of goodwill? That certainly could be the reason. Before he began making offerings, the farmer asked us who we were and what we were doing. My Dharma Sister and I answered as we usually do, "We are Buddhist nuns, and we are collecting food donations." We try to keep it straightforward. Head tilted to one side, he asked a few more questions. At some point, he made up his mind and replied, "Okay, you're doing good." From that point on, the vegetables have flowed freely.

As the relationship deepened, this farmer shared with us about his own path of shifting from Catholicism to the Seventh Day Adventist tradition. He says that he is pretty involved in his church, and that it's the community that is the most important part for him, that, and giving his five kids a religious education. One week he showed us a blue tee shirt he was wearing. It was from a spiritual retreat he had been on with his daughter. He smilingly said that he was one of the chaperones, and that it was his job to keep the kids out of trouble. It wasn't until later that I realized that he was telling us that he goes on spiritual retreats too. Our friend was sharing about an aspect of spiritual life that we have in common.

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Still, I believe there is more to our relationship than Saturday morning small talk. This farmer knows that we are Buddhists and, though I doubt that he knows much about what that means, he is surely aware that it's not the same as Christianity. His faith tells him one thing and our faith tells us another. On the surface it might appear that our traditions are incompatible. Yet he is a friend and a willing benefactor. Is he trying to convert us, to make us into followers of the Adventist faith? I doubt it. Instead, week by week, we are discovering how each of our traditions teaches and enacts compassion, another aspect of spiritual life that we have in common.

I also wonder whether there isn't some deeper resonance in him. I wonder whether the farmer is relying on spiritual discernment. He has some intuitive sense of our practice, not just as doing good, but as something that is directly nourishing his own heart and mind. This is the way I understand it.

I believe that our farmer friend is generous with us because he senses that he is doing something wholesome for himself by supporting us with food. One occasion on which we see the Buddha address this dynamic is in his teaching as recorded in a sutta called, "With the Kālāmas of Kesamutta"². They lived in a part of India where they were visited by spiritual teachers from a variety of faiths. The troubling part was that these teachers all taught something different, and all said that other teachers' beliefs were wrong, and theirs were the only correct beliefs. So the Kālāmas approached the Buddha saying that they were confused by this, and asked him whom they should believe.

The Buddha gave a somewhat surprising answer. He told the

Kālāmas that they shouldn't choose whom to believe by trying to figure it out, using reasoning. Nor can one discern by referring to the lineage of teachers to which they belong, or by the texts from which they taught. Neither should one be convinced by the one who was the most convincing orator. Instead, he taught, one must live a teaching, and then only continue to practice whatever leads to well-being and contentment, universal kindness and equanimity. The Buddha said that it is wise to follow whoever teaches that way.

When the farmer senses that my Dharma Sister and I are content with our practice, that we are kind to him, that we are uplifted and steadied by doing whatever it is that we're doing, then he feels good about his relationship with us. When he feels good about his relationship with us, he feels contentment about his own life, his own giving. He finds he too can offer kindness and friendliness, and he feels clear about how he is doing good with the resources he has.

This is a very strong kind of faith, a faith that cannot be taken from him. Our farmer friend has chosen it for himself, based on his own discernment about what happens in his heart and mind when we interact. It is not based in a shared belief about God, or about the Buddha, or even about my Dharma Sister and me. It is not based on a doctrine that we believe or a social construct. If anything, our social construct would tend to keep us apart. He is a Latino man living with his family and practicing Christianity in a location miles from us, the vast farming region in the Central Valley of California. We are a white woman and a woman of mixed race practicing celibacy as part of an ancient

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Eastern religion, and living in the suburbs about 30 minutes from the Farmers' Market in Placerville, a town of about 11,000 people. Yet the strength of universal kindness easily overcomes any folly in our views about kindness and about who deserves it. Universal kindness brings us into each other's lives despite all differences. The strength of universal kindness is that it doesn't need us to believe in it.

What universal kindness does require, however, if it is to transcend the social construct, is honest inner listening. I'm struck when the Buddha implicitly conveys to the Kālāmas his profound confidence in the human ability to listen to our hearts and minds, to know clarity, kindness, and contentment when we see it. He didn't tell the Kālāmas that they needed to find more faith, or that they needed to memorize his dogma. Instead, I hear his compassionate encouragement to listen to our own experience. So I am also struck by the farmers' intuitive wisdom. Perhaps without knowing it, he is practicing what the Buddha encouraged everyone to do. He is listening to that gentle inner voice that tells us to stay with contentment and kindness when it finds us, right there on the bike path at the Farmers' Market in Placerville. Our farmer friend knows for himself that he is doing good.

NON-HATRED: KINDNESS, EMPATHY, HARMLESSNESS

Non-hatred: kindness, empathy, harmlessness

CHAPTER 4

The Moment of Reckoning



As I walked along the narrow concrete driveway, toward the house, I sensed that the pickup truck was still warm, in contrast to the coolness of the crisp autumn air. "Oh great," I thought, "Maybe this is a good time to catch them at home." The house was typical of the small, prefabricated homes in this part of rural Japan. It was very unassuming and unremarkable, since there was no personal expression evident from the facade. This was fine with me. During the autumn takuhatsu, we visit each and every house in the neighborhoods surrounding the Hosshinji group temples, unless they display the signs of following another religious tradition. We don't chant Zen teachings on the doorstep of folks of other faiths, as a sign of respect, but we remain open to those folks too. Zen monastics don't differentiate when it comes to receiving dana. We respectfully give everyone an opportunity to participate, in keeping with the exhortations of the Buddha to his disciples so many centuries ago.

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On this autumn day the group of monastics from Hosshinji was smaller. We could not stay in groups if we were going to visit everyone in the area before lunchtime, as we hoped to do. So each of us was sent off in a different direction. Each one was instructed to chant at all of the houses in an area of a few blocks. Then we would regroup, and move to another area. This aspect of takuhatsu was really challenging for me. My sense of direction is not strong, and I could, and did easily get lost when traveling by myself in Japan. Even so, I went off on my own to chant the "*Maka Hannya Haramita Shin Gyo*" door-to-door. It was at times like these that I reminded myself that the monastery was more than 450 years old. So many others had gone before me. Surely some of them had also gotten lost and gotten found.

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Arriving at this modest home, I approached the door dressed in proper Zen takuhatsu gear: a bamboo hat that bore the name of the monastery where I lived; full length monastic kimono hitched up with a thin fabric belt to prevent it from getting wet; black outer robe with the long, flowing sleeves tucked into my outer belt; white cotton wrist and shin covers; and white toe socks called "*tabi*" inside my "*waraji*," the sandals I had made by hand from two lengths of rope. I knew that virtually every Japanese person recognized this as the attire of a Soto Zen monastic collecting dana. It has been the same for many centuries. Nearly every person I would encounter that day had grown up seeing people dressed like this, doing this practice, chanting these texts. In contrast, I had only seen this practice done for about three months. Nevertheless, I felt ready for today's takuhastu.

There I stood, an outsider outside on the doorstep. It seemed a bit cramped, with the truck behind me and the house in front of me, positioned on such a small step, one that suited the small house. Nevertheless, that was the usual way. Ringing the small, but loudly clanging handbell, I began to chant the Maka Hannya Haramita Shin Gyo in medieval Japanese. This sutra is usually known as the "*Heart Sutra*" in English. During the time that I trained there, the Hosshinji monastics chanted the same thing at nearly every house in every neighborhood we visited when practicing takuhatsu. It is a classical Buddhist text that predates Zen by at least a thousand years, but it has become a hallmark of the school because of its teaching on emptiness. Many Japanese recognize it. A few would even recite it with us.

On this occasion, I had barely gotten to the second sentence of the sutra when a man opened the door. Most folks seemed to know the etiquette: the chanting of the sutra stops when the donation is given, so that the shorter blessing chant can begin, and both donor and monastic can be on their way. In this case, I wasn't so sure that the gentleman understood.

The man at the door was small in stature, as many Japanese folks are. Even though he was perched a bit above me inside the house, we stood eye to eye. However, in Japanese culture and in takuhatsu practice, it is considered impolite and arrogant to stare directly into a stranger's eyes. I met his eyes briefly, and then shifted my gaze a little lower. While gazing down, I noticed that he had on a very odd looking belt, one that seemed much too large for him. I just kept chanting.

The man paused at the door for quite a while, not saying or

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doing anything. I stood on the step and continued chanting, not knowing what else to do, not knowing whether he would make a donation or whether he wanted me to leave. It was as if he didn't know what to make of my presence, but he didn't make any indication that I should go. I wondered whether I had made a mistake and approached a household of non-Buddhists. Still, I just kept chanting.

Finally, I was approaching the end of the sutra when he walked away, leaving the door to the house standing open. I could only guess that he had gone to get something to offer. So I finished chanting and stood there quietly awaiting his return. Return, he did, with a couple of 100 Yen coins that he dropped in my bag. Immediately he started to close the door, even as I began intoning the short blessing chant that always follows a gift. This seemed quite abrupt. Again, it contrasted with my idea that most Japanese folks understood the etiquette of takuhatsu. He waited, though with the door half closed, while I quickly completed the blessing and bowed. Then this seemingly very impatient man shut the door at the first opportunity.

The exchanges that occur on takuhatsu are usually not personal. In that situation, I represent the Dharma in an archetypal form, not an individual standing there asking for money, or trying to make polite conversation or to make a personal connection. I couldn't even guess at what he made of this moment together. Though this exchange seemed particularly awkward, I shrugged it off and headed back up the driveway, toward the street.

I casually glanced into the back of the pickup truck that was

parked in the driveway as I was departing. And I was completely dismayed, taken by surprise by what I found there. There, on the flatbed of the truck, was a doe. She was lying in a pool of blood from a bullet wound to her head. The shock of the moment of death still registered in her glistening black eyes. Even dead, this deer was a breathtakingly beautiful creature. Even lifeless, she was lovely.

It appeared that the killing had just happened, as though her body were still warm. I looked at her chest, almost expecting her to be still breathing, still heaving from the surprise encounter with the man. Yet there was no movement, only the stillness of her unblinking eyes, only the stillness of her legs weakly outstretched across the flatbed of the small truck. The blood from her head wound continued to flow. Slowly it began to spill from the tailgate onto the driveway, red drops staining the white concrete. It seemed to me as though her death was being inscribed in blood at this house. Suddenly recalling where I was, I forced myself to look away, to continue walking toward the street. I too was in shock. The sight of the doe's body was startling, ghastly, deeply disturbing. She lay there still stunningly lovely, but for the bullet wound. What a tragic loss.

At that moment, I flashed back to our arrival in the village. As our group was arriving at this inland town, I had noticed large signs in Japanese and English prohibiting hunting in the area. They seemed very stern, and spoke of large financial penalties for anyone caught hunting. It seemed odd to me, as I couldn't detect a forest nearby, and I'd not seen these kinds of warnings in other towns we had visited. Still, we weren't there to hunt, so

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I was not worried. I had forgotten all about it until seeing the doe. Then I remembered the belt the man had been wearing. Now I had the abrupt realization that it was a cartridge belt, a large leather belt meant to carry ammunition, to carry the large bullets needed to kill a deer with one shot. The man was a hunter and had killed that doe that morning, shortly before my arrival.

It was at that moment that I realized the deeper meaning of giving and receiving dana. When practicing takuhatsu or pindapata, I am both creating karma and I am the instrument of karma. My choice to engage in this practice is generating karma. Yet my life also becomes the vehicle for others to make merit. That is my role in alms collection, any person's role in it. I am presenting him, and everyone I come in contact with, the opportunity to do something positive with their money or with their food. Whether I meant to or not, I was presenting people with a choice that had karmic implications.

Suddenly it made sense that the man had taken so long to decide what to do about my arrival. I must have arrived immediately after him. That's why the truck was still warm. I then abruptly presented him with a decision, presented him with the opportunity to make an offering and begin to counteract the negative karma he had generated by killing that living being and breaking the local laws. At that moment, I could not have given a sermon on morality. It was not possible, given the limits of my Japanese and the confines of the moment. Neither was it necessary. The hunter seemed to realize the contrast between unwholesome and wholesome, between killing and supporting life. I was simply karma's tool.

My presence on this man's doorstep was an opportunity for him to begin to counteract the negative karmic consequences he had set in motion for himself by taking life. Even if he needed it for sustenance, killing the deer was breaking the first of the ethical precepts of Buddhism. It was an intentional act that caused the death of another being, and could be expected to have negative karmic impacts in the future. It could have been his karma that brought me to his doorstep, at that very moment, in the form of a monastic collecting dana. It was certainly my karma, as I had made the choice to do something beneficial with my own life, in the form of Zen monastic training. Our karma met on the doorstep that day at the moment when he chose to make an offering. Although he had paused to think about it, I believe that ultimately he recognized the opportunity for what it was. If he hadn't just killed the doe, I suspect he would not have made an offering that day. Yet on that day, in that moment of reckoning, he chose to do something beneficial for himself and for the monastery that would receive his money. He chose to do something good.

Buddhism is at its heart a tradition of morality. In fact, the Buddha describes the night of his enlightenment by saying that he gained three knowledges: insight into the details of more than a thousand of his previous lifetimes, insight into how people are reborn according to their intentional activities in their lifetimes, and insight into the chain of dependent causation of human birth and death and the means by which to break that chain. Each of these three kinds of knowledge provided the Buddha with an incomparable understanding of karma. He later taught that "*karma*" as it is called in the

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ancient language of Sanskrit or "*kamma*" as it is referred to in Pali, is a universal principle by which the consequences of our intentional activities of body, speech and mind manifest in the world. Knowing this, the Buddha went even further than recommending that everyone live a moral life so that we can find happiness. He taught that morality is a necessary precondition for spiritual and meditative progress. He taught that the mind of one who doesn't live a moral life is agitated in ways that make it more difficult to see clearly the greater principles at work within a human life. So when the Buddha spoke of wholesome action and the way to live an ethical life, he was telling us in detail about the workings of karma. He was pointing to the principles at work in the world. These teachings have become codified as the precepts. That is, the precepts represent the kinds of actions that we can avoid and the kinds that we can perform in order to foster bright clarity about reality and deep peace of mind.

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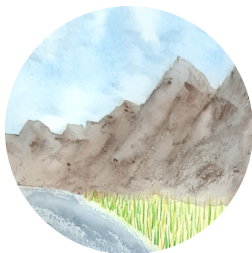
Surely, the lesson of this story is also much greater than this man and the doe and me. It is much greater than the mistake he made or the offering he made. The lesson of the story is that life presents us with countless such karmic opportunities. Monastics make the opportunity more obvious and beneficial if we are fulfilling our practice intentions. We make it more clear by being visible, by showing up on the literal or proverbial doorstep, intoning the teachings of Buddhism. Yet each day, every person has many, many opportunities to do something positive with their life, to create bright karmic results in the future. We can choose whether to give our old clothes to someone who is without. We can choose whether to

give a gift to any number of worthy organizations addressing homelessness, hunger, torture, extinction, climate change, social inequity, and much more. We can choose whether to live an ethical life and enable it for those with whom we have contact. We can choose whether to be kind. We can choose to take the spider outside instead of squashing it. And each of these choices has a complex form of consequence, intertwined with our other actions and consequences, and with the rest of the world. That consequence is called "*vipaka*," the fruit of the incredibly complex and inexorable function called karma. When we fail to recognize the opportunity that karma brings, it is a subtler form of losing a life, letting it slip away without attending to the possible consequences that we are setting in motion. Yet when we see the opportunity before us and make the most of it, life becomes a vehicle for wholesomeness and for the most amazing discoveries about how the world actually is.

On that day, on the doorstep, the hunter made the most of his chance to do better. He took the opportunity that karma presented, in the form of a monastic practicing takuhatsu, and set the positive in motion by giving dana. Perhaps the hunter had a realization that day about the workings of life and death. Perhaps he had a moment of reckoning.

CHAPTER 5

The Town of Closed Doors



The group of monastics from Hosshinji arrived at the hillside town on a beautiful autumn day. It was bright, with patches of clear sunshine and a gentle, shifting breeze. The town seemed deserted. The local Zen priest had not come out to meet us, and I'd already chanted at numerous doors without one having opened yet.

Usually I would have felt discouraged by that, as I prefer to encounter as many folks as possible on each day's takuhatsu. However, on that day, it gave me the luxury of walking slowly, as there seemed to be no one awaiting my visit. Moving my sandaled feet calmly, I took time to feel them touch the pavement. I'd been taught how to weave these sandals by hand, as has been done for centuries. My friend, the German monk who did much of the interpretation at Hosshinji, said that we were living in luxury by making them from thick, synthetic rope, rather than the thin twine that had been used by the

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ancients. Even so, there was very little rope between my feet and the ground, just enough for protection from small stones, but not enough for protection from the vicissitudes of weather. On this day, though, the weather was pleasant enough that I happily walked slowly and attentively along the road in this small Japanese town, feeling my feet meet the ground that supported them.

I rang the handbell as I walked. Feeling its weight in my hand, hearing its jangle make a bouncy tune, I enjoyed the traditional sound of takuhatsu. The handle of the bell was wrapped in medical tape, to keep it from sticking to my hand when the air was freezing cold, and to keep it from slipping from my hand on hot, sweaty days. That day, in that quiet town, the air was refreshing and it smelled clean, clear. Ringing the bell, I walked along, attentive to the ringing sound and the clean scent of fresh air.

It was a day much like any other day, and I felt at ease and unhurried. Typically, neighborhood streets in Japan are narrow, short, and winding. However, this town had several longer roads stretching out from the highway like the tentacles of a giant octopus. As I walked along one of the longer stretches between the houses, I turned to my right to glance at a rice paddy. Rice paddies are everywhere in rural Japan. I had seen hundreds of them, perhaps thousands. This one was no different, nothing special at all.

Just then, a moment of stunning beauty appeared, like a pearl dropping into my hand. Looking out over the field, I was awestruck by the loveliness of the golden green rice

plants swaying in the breeze. They moved in waves, back and forth, seemingly aware and awake to the rhythm of the wind. The colors shifted as the clouds passed overhead, now deep emerald, now gold, now bright citron. I didn't think about how lovely it was; I was just present for the view. It seemed that I had no choice but to stand very still and be fully present with the flowing stalks of rice. Each instant of movement appeared as a lovely countenance, as the face of some beautiful creature whose elegance was outshone only by her uniqueness.

After some time, I began to take in a bit more of the scene, noticing that this rice paddy was nestled against the side of a brown hill. The strength and stability of that kind of earth was clearer and more apparent to me in that moment. In one part of the scene, I saw earth as movement and in another, earth as stillness. This contrast of fluidity and steadiness of earth was also breathtaking. I was a part of this scene, standing quite still within it, savoring it a bit longer.

When I felt the moment was complete, I moved on and finished chanting at all of the houses along my part of the road. It remained a quiet day of takuhatsu; only two doors opened to me that morning. Yet I felt that I had received an invaluable offering from this town of closed doors.

Rice grows in thin stalks that reach about three feet in height by the time they are ready to be harvested. The rice is embedded in the top of the stalk, which makes their heads curve toward the mud in which they are planted. Rice is grown in fields called paddies because the plants must be kept submerged in several inches of water, which has the added benefit of reflecting

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the light back toward the plants. Many paddies in rural Japan are quite small family plots, set alongside modest homes and country roads.

One could say that rural Japan has a special beauty, a loveliness born of simplicity and the depth of the colors of nature. This is true. Her mountains and hills, her deep green forests and clear blue waters, her homes dotted along the countryside here and there - Japan is a beautiful place.

Yet this kind of beauty was grounded not so much in the place, but in the heightened awareness of the moment which was made possible by attuning to the senses. What I saw and felt was the loveliness of the present moment, and what I experienced was the feeling of ease and joy that comes from direct experience in the moment. This is direct experience based in mindfulness. It is so plain and simple, and yet it is so compelling and profound. Each moment has its ultimate beauty which is poignantly fleeting, and the discovery of a lifetime is to find your ability to see that you are a part of it too.

The Buddha often spoke about mindfulness, how it arises, where it can be directed, and how it supports the presence of other beneficial states of mind. In the early Buddhist teachings recounted in the grouping of brief suttas called "*Another Chapter On a Finger Snap*,"¹ he goes so far as to say that developing mindfulness even for the amount of time it takes to snap your fingers means that one is practicing well. In other discourses, the Buddha advises his students to practice mindfulness up to the last moment of life, even when feeling severe pain or other

mental and bodily changes that come with the dying process. Clearly, the Buddha had an extremely high regard for the practice of mindfulness.

Until that moment of truly seeing the rice flowing with the breeze, it seemed that I had spent a lifetime looking upon things as if I already knew them. Certainly there had been special moments - the birth of my daughter, moments of profound shifts in perception - but this felt like the first time in my life that I had experienced, with clarity, the exquisite beauty of the ordinary. It only took one moment of absolutely clear, truly profound mindful experience to realize the power of this practice and the way in which it is a foundation for insight. By attuning my attention with the six senses of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, and thinking, I found that experience was vivid, fleeting, full of life and of the joy that comes from feeling non-separation. I found that even mundane experience is stunning in its fullness and its beauty. I discovered that what I think of as myself is completely informed by, and integral to what I am experiencing in each moment. And I learned that no matter how many times you have seen something or heard something, this time is the only time that matters because it has never been as it is now, right now. So many teachings came forth from that moment without the utterance of a single word, because of the presence of mindfulness.

There is a teaching in the Minor Discourses² about how far this kind of practice can take us. It is one of the stories of the Buddha's experiences on pindapata. He was walking in Sāvattihī

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collecting food offerings, when he was approached by an ascetic from another tradition whose name was Bāhiya. He asked the Buddha for a teaching, but the Buddha told Bāhiya that pindapata wasn't the proper time for him to give a full teaching. Bāhiya insisted, asking a second and a third time, and the Buddha obliged by giving him brief instructions. "In the seen, there will be just the seen. In the heard, there will be just the heard. In the sensed, there will be just the sensed. In the cognized, there will be just the cognized. This is how you are to train yourself." In other words, he encouraged Bāhiya to drop all embellishment, all of the overlay that the self puts on experience, and simply be the experience itself. This practice took Bāhiya all the way to awakening. The Buddha was pointing at direct experience, always available, but seldom seen because of the views we add to things, like "ordinary" or "rice" or "earth."

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Mindfulness with its gentle, but clear and uncomplicated presence reveals all this to us in an instant. Each moment of experience is unique and integrated, and the one who looks is also part of the scene moment to moment, whether they feel it or not, whether they know it or not. This unique constellation of conditions that harmoniously fit together, briefly, uniquely, can be known. That is direct experience. It is the reason that the Buddha taught mindfulness as a vehicle for insight into the true attributes of our everyday lives. He taught mindfulness as a practice that anyone could do. He taught mindfulness as a practice that is useful at all times.³

Mindful awareness of the moment is very simple, and yet it

NON-DELUSION: MINDFULNESS, INSIGHT, WISDOM

can be quite elusive. In fact, I learned I'd been mostly living without it for a long time. Later I reflected that the embodied experience of takuhatsu was key to unlocking this gate of Dharma. Mindfulness wasn't possible until I was willing and able to relax into the sensory experience. It arose when I was abiding in the senses, simply being the moment of this body and mind. And there was one more key, the stillness. Had I not stopped to look, had I not stopped my life to go to Japan, had I not spent years stopping in meditation and observing my inner world, I would have never stopped on the road by the rice paddy. The day I stopped was the day that I stepped forward into mindfulness and into a direct experience of life.

CHAPTER 6

At the Center of It All



On a day that had begun like any other, I ascended the gleaming, white marble stairs leading up to the double doors made of dark wood. The impression was one of a grand entrance, though the house didn't appear to be anything special. It was a personal residence. There were no plaques, no signage that would indicate that someone special lived here. Yet the entrance to this home felt dignified and elegant.

As usual, I stood on the step and started chanting. No sooner had I begun, than both doors swung open wide. To my left, I saw a neatly dressed woman, smiling broadly and enjoying the chant. She was not adding her voice to mine; she was simply taking it all in. Listening and smiling, the woman seemed pleased. She was clearly planning to wait to hear me chant the whole of the Heart Sutra.

Directly ahead, there was a large room whose floors were also white marble, polished to sparkle in the midday sunlight.

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This large, spacious room had no chairs or sofas, not even cushions, rugs, or grass mats on the floor. There was only one piece of furniture in it, a large cabinet in the center of the room. This particular cabinet was carved in fine detail, and had small double doors made of dark, rich wood. Those double doors were also standing open to reveal the treasure inside: the Buddha.

The cabinet was a home altar, in the form of a single piece of furniture. I had seen cabinets like this before, in other homes I had visited. In Japanese they are called "*butsudan*." This one housed a modest statue of a standing Buddha, flanked by two other forms. It was too far away from the door for me to make out any other details, but one thing was clear: the *butsudan* was the heart of this woman's home, a place that was revered and treasured.

The woman looked from me to the altar and back a few times, as the sutra continued to rise up from my chest and suffuse the room with sound. It seemed that she thought that my chanting was blessing the lovely altar that held the premier place in her home. The sounds were floating from the doorstep, directly across the room, to meet the Buddha's ears. What an honor and a responsibility it was for me to be the one to offer such beneficent sounds. I was careful to chant clearly and slowly, and to stay focused. I wanted to honor the Buddha and honor her practice.

When the chanting was over, she thanked me and placed a few coins in my bag, bowing, and bowing again. I understood these gestures as a polite indication that my work was done, and it was time to leave. I chanted the short blessing and bowed

in return, and then I turned and left. It was a simple, clear takuhatsu encounter.

Later, I reflected on the fact that this woman's home revealed her clear choice. She had chosen to put the Dharma at the center of her life, physically and perhaps in her mind as well. Locating the altar at the very heart of her home, and removing any visual distractions from that imagery, meant that she would encounter the Dharma at the center of life again and again. Each time she entered this room in her home, she would face the Buddha, engage the Dharma, and encounter the Sangha. And it seemed, from her familiarity with the form of takuhatsu, that she saw giving as an integral part of practice. It's a rare and beautiful thing to meet with such clarity.

To this woman, the Buddha represents someone or something worthy of honor, worthy of the most prominent place in her home. She seemed to feel palpably the dignity of the Buddha, and the nobility of her practice of recalling and respecting him, or respecting whatever his image means to her. This gave her and her entire home a sense of dignity as well.

The Eightfold Path set forth by the Buddha, and embodied by those practicing the Dharma, is both noble and ennobling. It's called the Noble Eightfold Path because discovering the way to face our lives as wisely and compassionately as possible is a noble endeavor. Actually living that way makes us noble people, not because we are better than others, but because we discover and lift up the goodness that comes forth in each and every being. I don't know what was happening in that woman's heart, but I know that she had lifted the Buddha into a central place in her life.

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I felt similarly. The practice of Buddhism had given me a sense of the dignity of this human life, mine and everyone else's. It took many, many years to discover that the Path was calling me to give everything. Though it's not that way for everyone, in my case giving everything meant becoming a monastic. Eventually, it became absolutely clear that practice as a monastic meant yet another step toward life as the embodiment of the noble teachings of the Noble One, as the Buddha is often called. To be this thing means to become more clear and more sound, like the piece of wood that was carved into a lovely home altar. It's not that I cease to be a person with a history and a set of sometimes wholesome and sometimes not so wholesome tendencies. It's that monastic practice has effaced the surface of this mind, like an old coin that has become smoother, but can still be used to pay for the groceries. And the mind thus effaced can offer to chant the wise words, and ring the bell, and walk the world evoking generosity and kindness in others, that they might benefit from their own nobility. I believe it has been a blessing for them. It has certainly been a blessing for me.

It's ironic really, that the practice of receiving money or food dana, leads to an experience of dignity and interconnection. Rather than being humiliating and increasing the sense of separation, it leads to an appreciation for the nobility at the heart of a human life. However, being the one to express the Dharma is also a responsibility. I sensed that while standing before the altar in this woman's home. Expressing the Dharma with intention means that you become responsible for the messages you are giving by the way you live your life. You represent a larger community of people, and you become a

vessel of the beliefs and ideas and aspirations of the tradition. This is true whether you are a lay practitioner or a monastic. That said, monastics often take on greater visibility and accountability, and they assume the responsibility for seeing the tradition through to future generations. Yet all Buddhist practitioners have a role to play as expressions of Buddhism in the world.

The act of placing the Dharma at the center of life is one way to take refuge in the Triple Treasure - the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Expressions of taking refuge are as varied as the millions of people who have made that choice in their life. Each person takes refuge in a very personal way. Still, it can be helpful to consider what taking refuge means to others.

To take refuge in Buddha is to be inspired by awakening, whether it is an awakening that happened long ago or the awakening that is unfolding now. It can mean recalling the human being who was born in a garden in Nepal, grew up in Northern India, became a husband and father. From that perspective, taking refuge in the Buddha means turning toward the fullness of your capacity as a fellow human being, complete with everything you need to make the same discoveries he did. Taking refuge in Buddha can also mean recalling that he discovered the Path that enabled him to lead not only his son and adoptive mother, but anyone to the Path of awakening. It can mean remembering his struggles to free himself from harmful mind states, the unshakeable peace he came to embody, and his generosity as a teacher who walked from place to place for decades, guiding all sorts of people on the Noble Path. Taking refuge in Buddha can also mean taking inspiration from the bright clarity and harmony

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of awakening as you encounter it in imagery, such as statues and paintings, or in other Buddhist practitioners. Taking refuge in Buddha means turning toward awakening, and that is noble.

Taking refuge in Dharma can also find many forms of expression. A typical Pali to English, or Sanskrit to English dictionary will offer at least 25 definitions for the words "dhamma" or "dharma." For example, Dharma can mean reality, the truth of the way things are. To take refuge in Dharma as reality is to turn to Dharma as a lens for seeing all things clearly, unobscured by delusion. Dharma also means the teachings of Buddhism. Taking refuge in this aspect of Dharma involves turning toward the universal principles that the Buddha taught, particularly as they express themselves through you. This means seeing karma, impermanence, and interconnection at work within this very life. It means exploring your capacity for composure and insight. It means finding the universal right in the midst of the specifics of your life, a life which could not possibly be anything but one with reality. Thus refuge in Dharma enables you to leave behind confusion about the nature of living and the struggle against what's really happening. For this reason, turning to the Dharma as a refuge is noble, enabling you to abide at peace with what is true.

Taking refuge in Sangha is about community. The word "sangha" has the literal sense of a group or an assembly. In the Pali texts, it typically had two meanings. At times it referred to folks who had experienced an awakening, whether they were monastics or lay folks. At times it was used to mean all of the ordained folks, monks and nuns. Later the word sangha came to mean all monastics in all Buddhist traditions. In contemporary

usage it often means the whole of the Buddhist community, including all monastics, lay practitioners, benefactors, students, and teachers. At its heart, taking refuge in Sangha means finding noble friendship on the Path. When you value Buddhist friends who support you to embody the Buddhist teachings of ethics, kindness, and wisdom that is taking refuge in Sangha. In fact, it is not a stretch to say that we have all encountered Buddhism by taking refuge in Sangha. We found out about Buddhism through a person, a person who wrote a book, took a photo, sat in meditation, or experienced complete liberation. To take refuge in Sangha is to rely on friends who help us to lead lives of awakening, and that is truly noble.

When you take refuge in the Triple Treasure, the Path of awakening becomes the guiding principle of your life. Then your life is consciously expressing the principles of Dharma. The fact is that the principles of Dharma are always expressed through your life, were always expressed through your life, whether you knew it or not. However, with practice, you can make that fact observable and explicit. When you make the Dharma the central aspect of your life, it becomes the place of refuge. It becomes a touchstone, a place of sanity, a place that you can turn to for support and guidance, whether times are good or bad. It becomes deeply personal, as unique as you. When you make the Dharma the central aspect of your life, you become the Noble Path.

Just like the woman with the Buddha at the center of her home, when you take refuge in the Triple Gem, that is a rare and beautiful thing.

CONCLUSION



Giving brings the whole world together. It manifests as moments of the practice of *dana*, day in and day out. It manifests as people who are living the teachings of Buddhism by being in beneficial relationship to each other. In the suttas, the Buddha gives a teaching about relationships called “Sustaining” in which he says giving is “like a linchpin is to a moving chariot.” Giving shows us that we can and must work together.

Each of the stories in this book describes a time when the practice of giving was the vehicle for beneficial states of heart and mind.

The practice of giving and receiving *dana* diminishes greed. It takes us beyond our self concern, beyond our sense of separation to a place of greater generosity. It increases the confidence and joy of those who give, like the little girl

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in the sunflower hat, and it brings confidence and joy to those who receive. Giving highlights the ways in which we are interdependent. It reveals the fact that we are already in relationship to each other, and it shows us how sharing can support that sense of interconnection. As with the barber and me, the practice of dana helps us appreciate our differences and discover our similarities. Giving helps us realize how many gifts we already have. It is the practice of non-greed.

The practice of dana is also a form of respectful, intimate kindness. As the opportunity for giving becomes clearer, the practice of takuhatsu or pindapata easily overcomes personal boundaries, such as language barriers and physical distance. It builds bridges between our social positions, so that we recognize goodness in each other and in ourselves, just as the farmer did. It fosters beneficial action, even in the midst of differing spiritual and religious views. The practice of dana fosters a clearer understanding of karma. It helps us become attentive to the beneficial or harmful consequences that arise from our actions, as the hunter learned that day on the doorstep. Giving breeds non-hatred.

Also, the practice of giving and receiving dana is an act of wisdom that fosters even greater wisdom. As an embodied practice, it dispels confusion and provides supportive conditions for mindfulness and insight to arise, as I experienced on that day of truly seeing the rice paddy. The practice of dana appears in each of our lives as a pointer to the truth that, moment by moment, each of us makes a choice, to cling to delusion or to be the instrument of wisdom. It is an expression

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of taking refuge in the wisdom of the Buddha, as the woman with the home altar did. Giving is a wise practice. The practice of giving and receiving dana is non-delusion.

Importantly, the wisdom of this practice goes beyond individuals, as well. The traditional Japanese blessing chant when receiving dana during takuhatsu can be translated as, "The virtue of two kinds of offerings, the offering of material things and the offering of Dharma, is boundless. The Perfection [paramita] of generosity is complete, and it benefits all living beings in the entire dharma world." In my life I have been incredibly fortunate to encounter people who were making both of those kinds of offerings. They gave gifts of tea and tomatoes, gifts of money and honey, all the while giving the gift of embodying the Buddha Way. They are the real heroes of this book. The monastics and lay folks with whom I was training also gave gifts of Dharma and of material goods. They thereby also embodied the Way. Those many gifts have turned into goodness in the lives of each one of those people. Each of these folks who gave the gift of dana, and millions more like them, were and are the teachings in action. Moved by their encounters with the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, they chose to undertake the practice of giving. They chose, with intention, the beneficial action of giving, and that activity surely generates beneficial karmic effects.

That these effects are meaningful is also clear. Whether receiving yams or Yen, these gifts became the presence of the Dharma in the world beyond the individuals in these stories. They mattered, as all spiritual gifts matter because, in giving

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those gifts, the givers became the practice. And those gifts were turned into the activity of even more practice, even more Dharma manifesting as people and buildings and teachings all over the world. Takuhatsu and pindapata are statements about the nature of human life, and about each person's capacity for transcending suffering and discovering wisdom in their own experience. The gifts given and received have become goodness in the world. They are gifts greater than the oceans.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



One way that gratitude has been incorporated into the forms of practice is that when we return to the monastery, we reflect on the meal we will eat. We reflect on the way that the food has come to us, by donations from generous people. Our food has come to us by the hard work of folks who grew it, picked it, and stored it. It came through the efforts of those who drove it, flew it, shelved it, and rang it up. It is in our bowls due to the hard work of the cooks and the servers. Before that, it grew through the efforts of innumerable beings, including the worms and bees and hummingbirds that helped the plants to grow. There are so many beings to whom we can be grateful, and so many blessings they bring, that it is impossible to name even a fraction of the beings that deserve a mention here.

That said, I want to explicitly thank my late teacher Sekkei Harada Roshi for having been, and continuing to be a profound source of inspiration, Rev. Shosan Victoria Austin for showing

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Ritual Forms of Giving and Receiving Dana

Benefits of the Buddhist Practice of Giving

APPENDIX



This book is about the lived experience of these practices and what they can teach us, and not so much about the ritual forms that are used for giving and receiving dana. Nonetheless, it may be helpful to know a bit about how alms rounds are done, as background for the stories. In all of these forms, the dana is given to the monastery, not to the individuals. The monastery then uses the dana to support individual residents.

During the year and a half that I trained in Japan, I lived and practiced at only one monastery, Hosshinji. Thus, I speak from that experience, and I am not claiming that this is how it is done at all monasteries in Japan. However, since Hosshinji is one of a limited number of places designated as training monasteries for Soto Zen monastics in Japan, I believe that the forms that we practiced there are representative of traditional Japanese Soto Zen forms. Hosshinji is also the main temple for more than 25 sub-temples in a fairly rural part of the country. These are the

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forms that I practiced in those areas of Japan.

Generally, the practice of receiving dana, known as “takuhatsu” in Japan, is practiced by the monastics, who are referred to as nuns and monks. That said, lay people would occasionally be invited to participate as well, especially if they were on an extended visit to the monastery in order to consider entering monastic life. In fact, my first experiences of takuhatsu were as a lay person, when I had recently arrived at Hosshinji for a 90 day practice period in 2006.

There were four forms of takuhatsu in use when I was at Hosshinji. The first form involved the whole group of practitioners walking through the local town of Obama, in line, single file. We would walk directly from the Hosshinji front gate, across a neighboring field, and through the town. We followed one of two prescribed routes. Attentive to each house and business as we walked by, we would stop to receive dana from folks who stepped forward to make an offering, or we would sometimes simply bow in mutual appreciation. One monastic was designated to walk at the back of the line and chant the blessings for those who had given. All the while we chanted the word for Dharma, “ho” in Japanese. The group chanted ho continuously along the entire route, everyone joining in to create a unified sound. This flow of the sound of Dharma was accompanied by our hand bells, which we also rang continuously as we walked. Each person carried a bag for receiving donations but, in this form of takuhatsu, we held the largest of our eating bowls up high, in our left hand, to collect the cash that was offered. This was the most common form of alms collection at Hosshinji.

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The second form was the autumn takuhatsu, in which we went to visit the towns of each of the Hosshinji sub-temples. This form, too, involved walking. Traveling in small groups, the practitioners from Hosshinji walked through one or two towns each day, in the streets or on the sidewalks, calling out, "Hosshinji autumn takuhatsu." We rang our bells to let people know we were visiting their town. However, this form also involved stopping at each house to chant a sutra, an ancient buddhist text. We did this at each home, unless the house displayed the marker of belonging to another religious tradition. We chanted one of the foundational teachings of the Zen tradition, called the Heart Sutra, in Japanese on every doorstep, and we received the dana in a bag that hung over our neck. This form of alms collection had been practiced for many centuries, so folks knew that our presence was an invitation to offer either money or food. When food was offered, it was almost always uncooked rice. This visit was a once-a-year opportunity to connect with the residents of each of the small towns that were related to the main monastery.

The third form of takuhatsu that I experienced in Japan was the home visit. A family wanting to receive a blessing at their home altar and chat with the monastics would call the monastery to make an appointment. One or more monastics would go to the home, taking our small ceremonial bells and tiny drums with us. We would sit before the altar, chant blessings for the family and their relatives, deceased and living, and then usually we would receive a meal from the donors. This would be followed by informal chat. My Japanese is very poor, however, so the other folks did most of the talking. This form of

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takuhatsu felt very intimate because of being invited into the family home and having the opportunity to talk at some length with the monastery supporters.

The fourth form of takuhatsu was to stand in one location to collect alms. I never did this practice myself, but I occasionally saw a Zen monastic standing at a train station or other public area collecting donations. In this form, the formal deportment and rigorous training of the monastics contrasted sharply with the bustle of everyday life. It did not seem to be a very common practice in Japan during the time I was there.

For the past several years, I have been a practicing nun in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. The Theravada is informed by texts in the language of Pali, and the word for alms collection is "pindapata." Though I have not personally gone on alms collection rounds in a country in which the Theravada is predominant, I understand that there are at least two forms practiced. Walking through the town in the early morning single file, and sitting or standing for alms in one location, particularly for ceremonies, are both practiced by monastics in Thailand and Sri Lanka, for example. Theravada nuns and monks generally do not handle cash and do not cook. Thus, they do not receive cash or uncooked food donations during their alms rounds; they only receive cooked food. Typically Theravada monastics practice a formal style of pindapata in which they do not thank or talk to the donors. They understand that the donors are receiving their karmic rewards, and that the dana is not a personal gift.

In Northern California, the form that was adopted at Aloka

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Vihara was that one or two nuns went to the Farmers' Market, which was set along a public bicycle path or in a parking lot in downtown Placerville. If only one nun was able to go, we were accompanied by either an anāgārika or by one of our lay supporters. "Anāgārika" means "a homeless friend" and is the Pali word for a lay woman who dresses in white and is exploring the possibility of becoming a Theravada monastic. We stood in one location, but with less formality. We took off the lids that are used to cover our bowls so that folks knew that they could put food in them. We also talk with each other a bit, and with passersby. As is customary in the Theravada, we wore cinnamon-colored robes; an upper robe that looks like a jacket or a vest, a lower robe in the form of a long sarong, and an outer robe that is a large, rectangular piece of fabric sewn in the pattern of a rice paddy. When outside our monastery, we wore the outer robe in the traditional way that covers both shoulders. We received food, offered directly into our eating bowls, which are carried in a sling. Typically we receive raw vegetables and the occasional bit of bread. At times folks also offered flowers, water, or a beverage. Occasionally a donor offered us cash, but we explained that we cannot accept it, unless one of the lay supporters is present to receive it.

This form is traditional enough that folks understand it as a donation, but informal enough to encourage them to get to know more by talking to us or observing others give. We have chosen to practice pindapata a bit more informally, in part because we have found that many people want to talk to us about their lives, about why they are giving, or about what they are giving. Folks have sometimes cried as they gave. Others

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have regaled us with stories about their farm or with recipes for cooking the hot peppers they're offering. One person even played us an impromptu song on his guitar. Since this practice is so new in America, I believe that it's important that folks feel that they can connect with us in all these ways.



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