

# The Eighth Applied Precept

**I bear witness to the reality of possessiveness and the withholding of love and resources, in myself and in the world, and aspire to give generously and appropriately.**

## **Traditionally: Not Being Stingy, Not Sparing the Dharma Assets**

*Bodhidharma said, "Self-nature is subtle and mysterious. In the genuine, all-pervading Dharma, not being stingy about a single thing is called the Precept of Not Sparing the Dharma Assets."*

*Dogen Zenji said, "One phrase, one verse — that is the ten thousand things and one hundred grasses; one dharma, one realization — that is all Buddhas and Ancestral Teachers. Therefore, from the beginning, there has been no stinginess at all."*

This Eighth Precept is obviously connected strongly with the Second ('Greed and Inequality'). It asks us to look not at our greed and the way we *take* things that are not ours, but at the way we *hold onto* things reflexively and defensively. Traditionally, our 'stinginess'. But what counts as 'stingy'? What are the Dharma Assets referred to? 'Stingy' is such a particularly English word: does it really translate the Sanskrit/Chinese/Japanese understandings of the original? 'Dharma' we know well, and well enough to know we can't ever contain or exhaust its meanings. 'Assets' sound like something we keep in the bank, maybe my share or property portfolio (as if...). Clearly, we are in the minefield of translation/mistranslation here! For reasons that will become apparent, I think we'll take *withholding* and *generosity* as our central concerns here. So let's begin by asking about *withholding*: what am I hanging onto in a way that harms myself or others, and how does this relate to *separate* and *not-separate*? From the work we have already done, the beginnings of an answer are pretty obvious. Withholding relates to all that I do in my life as it is that insists on my separateness, on my *defending* self against relationship, whether that's in my inability to 'commit' to a partner or to a cause, or in my *ignore-ance* of others. It's both a way of being in the world — the mindset, self-understanding, assumptions and reactions — *and* the practical outcomes that result from it. But as always in Zen, there's the question of 'the chicken and the egg': we have to see how the way in which our world is structured brings about and confirms in us a withholding way of being in the world, and how that in turn solidifies those structures further. Back to the traditional Buddhist idea of the Five *skandhas*, the component 'heaps' of self of which the fourth are the *samskaras*, the 'mental formations' both *formed by*, and *forming* our perceptions and ideas about the world. It's to disrupt this circular process that the precept asks us to consider 'giving generously and appropriately', so taking us straight to the also traditional First *Pāramitā* or 'Perfection' of Buddhist Practice: *Dāna*: 'Generosity'.

In Mahayana Buddhism generally, *Dāna* is talked about as a quality we deliberately cultivate, a habit we encourage ourselves to develop. Generosity is seen almost as a muscle we need to strengthen, because we aren't used to using it all that much. By being generous we experience greater connection with other people and with the world, and we develop more fully the realisation that I'm not alone, that there is more to life than attempting to be an individual and isolated self striving to be completely in control of its environment. It's also stressed that giving may not only involve material things...money, food, or whatever, but may also be giving our time, attention, love, compassion, or even our life itself. There are the *Jātaka* tales of the previous lives of the Buddha, in which the *Bodhisatta* (as he is then known) freely gives himself to be eaten by starving tiger cubs, or gives up his body parts to those who ask for them (without even the question of any 'need' on their part).

Generosity also relates to the *Brahmavihārā*, the 'Divine Abidings' better known from Theravada Buddhism and insight meditation. Cultivating feelings of *Mettā* (friendliness, kindness) towards others, and *Muditā* (happiness at their successes), show us different aspects of being giving rather than withholding. *Muditā* specifically addresses the life-as-competition 'dog-eat-dog' approach that our economics and media tell us life has to be. If we really all did take this attitude all the time then society would collapse instantly: life is not a zero-sum game, and we live and thrive only through connection with and the care of others. The practice of *Muditā* helps us experience this better. Developing *Karunā* (compassion/care), the third of the *Brahmavihārā*, encourages us to be more actively empathetic towards others. All of these practices are *intentional* in a way foreign to Zen, and in particular to Ordinary Mind, though *Mettā* practice does seem to be becoming more popular generally among Zen students in the West. The example of how insight meditation treats the *Brahmavihārā* offers us a bridge to a more Ordinary Mind approach to them: by using these practices as opportunities to orient our awareness (exactly what bodily sensations, what feelings and thoughts arise as I am reciting and then sit with these words?) we can use them as an opportunity for 'investigation' in our usual way, opening to how we embrace and/or resist these states of mind. The real test as always is how these show up (or not!) as actions in our everyday lives, in the years and decades to come.

The major danger with trying to cultivate generosity *actively* is that it gives us a big incentive to *not* be honest, to blank out the feelings we'd rather not be having, or even to revel in the self hatred of fixating on them. As we have noted before, every positive intention we frame invites us to self-dishonesty both as *pretence* (I really *do* feel so much compassion for the world...), and as *self-shaming* (I *don't* love other people at all, and I get so jealous, how *awful* am I!) No judgement here, of course... from the Ordinary Mind perspective this is all just more to investigate and work with. In fact, in terms of non-separation, I *don't* want to separate off from my stinginess, my withholding, my possessiveness. As always, our practice is awareness. I become aware of these qualities as I display them, as I recognise them in me and as me. I recognise my reactions to them also, how I feel when I'm showing my possessiveness, for example. And how I feel about feeling that way... am I judgemental, or justifying myself to myself? But to do this we need the *willingness* to be aware, and some self honesty about what we *are* really feeling. This is actually showing generosity to myself, allowing honest awareness, *allowing it to be*

*ok to feel what I feel.* Not to be *afraid* of what I feel...this is the gift of non-fear that Avalokiteśvara/Kannon offers as the Heart Sutra, and also the gift the Buddha offers in the *abhaya mudra* (the raised hand with palm outward) as it's seen in so much sculpture.

Fear can reveal itself too in how we receive gifts. My mother, a woman of modest means and very modest tastes, was always embarrassed by receiving any gift she could think of as being 'posh' or significantly generous. I've met many students who are similarly unhappy when receiving gifts. There's always the thought lurking for them of...where's the catch? What's the comeback? What's expected in return? This is a different kind of withholding, of stinginess. Again, the cause is fear. To imagine yourself as being in someone's debt (if only in imagination) is to make yourself vulnerable. For so many of us this is a very basic fear, and one we all too often look to Buddhism to save us from by having the fantasy of our practice making us invulnerable to life's problems.

It's very significant that our discussion of *withholding*, as with previous precepts, turns towards fear. As the Heart Sutra points out: if we live without the walls of separation — both those 'in our mind' and those in the physical world — then we can live without fear. Without the fear that underlies and expresses itself as our *withholding*, our lives become 'generous' engagement with the world. Understanding the relation between withholding and fear offers us the basis for a more generous idea of 'generosity' than the naive Judaeo-Christian ethic of seeing a polarity of *selfish* and *selfless* as the basic measure of our actions, so displaying the good or bad motivations upon which we will be judged. Whether directly or indirectly emerging from our fear, withholding is rarely our simple 'bad intention'. Withholding is *closure*, generosity is *openness*. Withholding is our fixity of judgement, our failure to treat or talk of others 'with openness and possibility'. Withholding is what happens when we find ourselves locked within a spiral of personal shame. Withholding is our fear of relationship with others, but also with ourselves. Withholding is our *ignorance*, both in our active turning away and in our unconscious dissociation from what is actually in front of us or only barely beyond our gaze. Withholding is my fear of impermanence, and so always feeling the need to 'hold on'. Withholding is my sense that only in my separation is there safety, a separation from others, from aspects of myself, and even from my own body. Withholding is my fear-based failure to recognise the other as not-separate: as their being both like me and different from me, and in fact as their being the condition of my own existence: *I am* because *you are*.

Barry Magid tells a story about a scatological comment made many years ago by a visiting senior Japanese teacher. Standing at the back of the lecture hall, trying to listen to the teacher's halting and thickly accented English, all Barry could make out was "...what more important... *sit*... or *shit*?" (...a pause...) "I tell you: *shit* more important!" I think this pretty much sums up this precept: you can sit all you like, but at a certain point you have to *let go*, release your hold, soften your intention and the need to retain control, let go your image of yourself, and of the mask you show others, abandon your need of the illusion of being *separate*. '*Shit*' recognises the needs of this body, and that my actual life is more important than either my good intentions or my dignity. To sit to shit is to expose myself, to make myself vulnerable, to show that I am 'nothing special'. That I simply *am* this life.

This *letting go* is actually much easier said than done. As the *releasing* of our need to hold on and so to control, letting go often gets talked about in terms of *grace* or *surrender*. That salvation was not a reward to be *earned* of God, and that the best we may hope for is that God might freely grant us his *grace*, was the founding principle of the Lutheran Reformation. In relation to our conscious intention and struggle, of course, our Zen practice reminds us over and again that our determination to retain control, to subject the world or even the course of our own lives to our separate *will* is at best fantasy, and as one of Joko's key teachings asks us: 'If it's me versus the world — who do you think is going to win?' So in one sense there is nothing, has never been anything at all in the world *except* 'grace': the infinite gift of this world to itself as the interconnection and mutual care of all beings. As Dogen says: 'Therefore, from the beginning, there has been no stinginess at all.' The more we 'realise' this in all senses — understand, experience, and show through our actions — the more our life simply becomes one of generosity.

*Surrender*, like some aspects of letting go, is something that 'happens' to us, rather than something we actively 'do'. And surrender requires that our faith in life, the universe, or however else we choose to phrase it, has in this sense become total: we rest in the *care* of the universe. If, in one sense, surrender is the abandonment of 'self' — of aspects of our intention and individual will — then would the ideal of generosity instead be just to give, give, give, without question or reserve? Barry Magid, writing in *Nothing is Hidden* (2013), points to analyst Emanuel Ghent's important distinction between *surrender* and *submission* that is very relevant here. Ghent argues that we too often *mistake* submission for surrender, that the 'longing for liberation inherent in genuine surrender lies behind the maladaptive compromises involved in submission and masochism. (Ghent)... went so far as to call masochism a 'perversion' of surrender, a way in which our longing for genuine release at the deepest level is hijacked by submission to another person's will.' (NIH, p.173) If in our terms *surrender* is the experiencing of a state of grace in relation to the universe, and hence lacks either subject or object, then my *submission* can only ever be *as* an object, it *makes of me* an object, and my submission is always *to* someone or something. Surrender opens onto new experience and possibility, submission closes the door on it. In surrender I own my vulnerability, in submission my vulnerability owns me. So when I read and hear in discussions of this precept the suggestion that it's about asking us to 'imagine simply loving 100% without reserve or conditions...' then alarm bells sound. In a sense, of course, what a wonderful fantasy that feels, and which of us would not want both to offer and to receive such a love! Give, give, give! But...BANG! There's the exact problem. Even an idea such as 'Love' is a dangerous master. To *submit* to a person, even and perhaps especially the object of our love, is to open the door to exploitation and coercion or worse (this of course is how grooming and coercive control operate... 'of course you want to do this for me'... and in a sense, you do...) But the same applies too to fidelity to 'The Party', or to those who claim to represent God or Country, and potentially extends of course, to 'devotion' to my own Buddhist practice. Giving one's own flesh to feed starving tiger cubs is a nice story, and as a demonstration of the future Buddha's utter dedication to the fulfilment of his spiritual task, it makes sense. But it is emphatically not a plan for any kind of life in the world, and especially not a life shared with others. The Jātaka tales themselves make this clear: in another story he is perfectly happy to 'give away' his wife

and children to be effectively slaves, because it serves the same 'higher' spiritual purpose. One might also speak of the voluntary submission of the Buddhist monastic to their abbot's authority, and with it the renunciation of both material objects and of self-determination. For the monastic their practicing generosity is contained and constrained within their way of life, itself offering a kind of safety that we in the world have to live without: as Barry Magid, quoting Bob Dylan is fond of saying, 'when you got nothing, you got nothing to lose'.

Surrender, by contrast, and the generosity that comes with it are not limitation, but to feel seen by the universe and to dance with it, and so to be at ease with our vulnerability and our inescapable not-knowing. Surrender is not fusion or merger, it does not erase difference. So what of generosity in the wider sense? Generosity is our *curiosity*, it is our active engagement with others and the things of the world. Generosity is our Bearing Witness to our own suffering and the suffering of others, and to the causes of that suffering. Generosity is my commitment to non-violence. Generosity is immersion in life: in the minutiae of my day to day, and my simultaneous awareness of 'the bigger picture'. Generosity is relationship, and generosity is the actual care that I offer to those nearest to me, and also my care for 'All Beings'. Generosity is my love for the world. Generosity is my vulnerability, and my embracing and living at ease with that vulnerability.

It's as non-separation that The *Prajñāpāramitā* Sutras (the *Diamond Sutra* among others) talk of 'no giver, nothing given, and no-one given to'. What does this actually mean? Too easy — though it's often presented this way — to say this refers to the fundamental unreality of all things, or even that this is something to do with the lack of all distinction in the Absolute. It's actually a teaching on emptiness *as* non-separation as we experience it directly in each moment. That gift, giver and given-to presuppose each other, and so are intrinsically not-separate, and so exist as separate *only conventionally*, relatively. What is considered a gift, what kind of 'giving' counts as such and what kind of receiving, are all defined within our culture, and such definitions change from place to place and time to time. What remains — though always changing its form — is the flow of interconnection and interdependence, *Interbeing*. So we can talk about the 'spirit' in which we give, not as good or bad motives (though it's often discussed as such), but rather as a question of how we just respond to the needs of others without the need to justify or praise ourselves, or feel the recipient should be grateful, or the gift reciprocated. This is the opposite of the great acts of *philanthropy* that gift a museum wing or endow a hospital department in the donor's name. We might even think there's more of a Marxist tone to it... from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs. The French have a descriptive phrase that fits... *c'est normale*... that's just the way it should be, no worries, no big deal. The left hand helps out the right... why wouldn't it? We just do what's needed, what's appropriate. Appropriate is an important word in Zen, as we'll come back to with the Tenth Precept. It's to say that Zen is always situational, a question of what's needed or helpful here and now, in this unique context. That's one sense in which Zen is a transmission 'outside the sutras'. It's not that we don't read them, we just don't expect to find any fixed answers written down there. What answers there are, are *here, now*.

Vital to understand though that if in one sense all this is 'spontaneous', that it 'just happens' this in no way means that our generosity in life is somehow confined to what happens *apart* from our thought, and so without intention, reflection, *planning* on our part. Nor does it mean that our generosity is without its own resistance, and in the experiencing of *that* resistance we are back at the heart of our practice — being aware in each moment of the reality (including the complexity) of our feelings, thoughts and emotions. We might even say that within Ordinary Mind this simple awareness even forms the core of our practice of generosity, and whatever spontaneous, intentional or even organisational forms that generosity takes. The parable of Mu-Shin that forms the last section of Joko Beck's *Everyday Zen* is an object lesson here: what Mu-Shin finds while 'waiting at the station for enlightenment' is a life of generosity as non-separation from others, a surrender to life in simply taking the next step, and the step after that. Joko can seem a little classically anti-intellectual at times in her Zen, but here in her story Mu-Shin is organising activities and construction, diagnosing what his community needs and how to meet those needs.

### Mickey

I'll finish with a story of my own, 'true' in its essentials... This Eighth Precept is the mirror of the Second, the traditional wording of which is not 'taking things not freely given'. It was the systematic taking of things not freely given that led to Mickey being sent to prison. Raised in Birmingham's criminal underworld he joined a gang of armed bank robbers: "I didn't care who I hurt, or how badly. I didn't enjoy the violence, but if they got in my way..." In the final robbery before he was caught a bank employee was shot dead, and Mickey got a life sentence. He had already been 'inside' for thirty years when I met him, and so disillusioned with the criminal justice system that he had become despairing about convincing the parole board that it would now be safe to release him.

In prison Mickey had always been the 'hard man', exceptionally fit, exceptionally strong, and used to long periods in solitary confinement resulting from the (many) conflicts he got into with the prison authorities. A decade into his sentence, his two teenage sons had died in drugs-related violence. He was devastated. Knowing of Buddhism from his martial arts training he started going to the prison Sangha, slowly gravitating towards Zen, and practicing his meditation as hard as his gym work, always wanting to go deeper, higher, further towards the always elusive goal of enlightenment. Along the way he began to develop a genuine empathy for all human and animal suffering which brought with it a strong sense of ethics, both for himself personally and about how his prison community functioned. Over time he became effectively the father figure for whichever prison wing he was on, making sure that those potentially vulnerable prisoners — those new to prison or to the wing, or the very young — were not picked on or taken advantage of, including sexually. He became the person to whom anyone short of shower gel or coffee could go, the person you could ask for help if you found yourself on the wrong side of another prisoner or even a member of staff. He gained this role because while being the 'hard man' he could be trusted absolutely, and was himself very generous with his time and few possessions, and his offer of protection on the wing came entirely without strings. Of course 'protection' in prison is itself synonymous with extortion, coercion and abuse, but Mickey really was on the level, and the staff who knew him well all recognised that he

used his talents and status to make the wing run far more smoothly and compassionately than it would have done without him. When I met him he had a huge ring-binder file of thank you letters from those he'd met and helped during their time in prison, some staying in touch for years afterwards.

However caring he was towards others, this did not extend to himself. In Barry Magid's terms, he was on a mission 'to save all beings minus one'. Part of being the hard man was the idea that "I'm fine here, it doesn't matter if I never get out of this place, I'm not going begging to those bastards on the parole board... I'd happily do the rest of my life in solitary if that's what it takes, I don't need possessions, don't need anyone..." This despite the obvious fact that relationship, in the widest sense, was what had sustained and nourished him over the decades inside, primarily through the help he'd been able to offer other people. To challenge his own hard man image, I gave him a book of the teachings of the seventeenth century Zen teacher Bankei, who had himself started out as the 'hard man's hard man' of monks. No-one ever practiced with more rigour, determination, or lack of regard for their health or well-being than Bankei. And yet his great insight came when he realised that this approach was precisely the problem, and from the beginning had been unnecessary. Just act like the Buddha you already are! Bankei's teaching hit Mickey like a brick, and stopped him joyfully dead in his tracks. "When I sit now I don't try to do anything... I don't strain... I just sit... it's never made sense like this before!" Nothing to do, nowhere to go, everything perfect, just as it is.

It was this insight that now helped him to experience fully for the first time his continued feelings for his ex-wife. She had divorced him early on in his sentence, but they had more-or-less kept in touch. And now, more than twenty years later, they met again, wrote, phoned, and kept up regular and increasingly warm contact. There was suddenly the excitement of a possible future, of reconciliation. Wonderful, and also terrifying for someone in Mickey's position, to find he now had a reason to *want*, to *need* to be released. Mickey had been developing his generosity towards others for two decades, but now he was finally able to show himself the same generosity by admitting to and experiencing his own need for relationship, his *own* vulnerability... which was of course the precondition for any renewed relationship with his wife, one which I assume would have involved finally processing together their grief at the tragic death of both their sons.

### **Perfectly Vulnerable**

What Mickey found through his practice, what we may ourselves be lucky enough to find, is that without recognising our own vulnerability — which doesn't necessarily mean anything fancy, but just being prepared to actually experience that vulnerability and be ok with that experiencing — there's no possibility of real relationship to another person, or even relationship with the whole of myself.

So, insofar as I am able, I offer you the gift of *my* vulnerability. Seeing it, how will you respond? Attack me, to see what you can get? Dismiss me, because seeing me as vulnerable shows you that I have nothing you might want or need to shore your 'self' up?

And if I show you my vulnerability and I happen to be a teacher? What will you do? Attack, to see what of the Dharma you can force out of me? (Or perhaps to sit in my place?) Recoil in disgust, because that vulnerability is not what you wanted to see in a teacher, (when what you really wanted was to have them be perfect and invulnerable)? Or do we sit down together and simply see what happens... relationship, perhaps....? I offer you the gift of my vulnerability — this is perhaps the most or even *all* I have to offer, and in its way is also the gift of non-fear — this is not sparing the Dharma Assets.

In their short commentaries both Dogen and Bodhidharma point to the reality and universality of non-separation. Bodhidharma talks of the 'all pervading Dharma'... everywhere, without distinction. So our practice is just recognising this, and that this is still the case whether we recognise it or not. Not to manifest stinginess, not to delude oneself in separation, is not to spare the Dharma Assets. Dogen takes this a step further, which can be useful in understanding the difficult idea of the identity of practice and realisation. As non-separation, 'one phrase, one verse' are all things. One period sitting zazen is awakening, enlightenment. Of the whole world, already. Therefore, as there is nothing to gain, nothing to do, from the very beginning there has been no stinginess.

It's good to understand that there is generosity, perfection in everything. But this does not cancel the reality of our need, our lack, our suffering, nor (perhaps especially) the suffering of others. This is not wish-fulfilment, not ignore-ance. Giving appropriately may be very simple. The Atonement Gatha (At-One-Ment Gatha) points to the offering that is each period of zazen we sit. Just turning up at Sangha, offering my presence, and my full attention. Finding you've just cooked and washed up without any problem, because your partner looked tired, even though it was 'their' turn. (Or doing it *despite* feeling too tired, too crabby, too put upon, but doing it anyway...and working with those feelings of resistance.) Playing that game with the children although there are more pressing things to do. Helping out, volunteering, going on the demonstration, writing to a friend. Founding an NGO or a liberation movement... *Whatever*... Using the unique 'assets' I have through being *this* person in *this* place. Skills, relationships. All I can offer. All of this is the Dharma, all is the recognition of our non-separation: the recognition that we *are* this world, this life.