The Benefits Of Generosity

From a Buddhist perspective, generosity is a core value in the process of awakening. The Pali word for generosity is *dana*, (pronounced *dah-nah*). According to the Buddhist Dictionary, compiled by Nyanatiloka, on page 52: “Almsgiving or liberality (*dana*), constitutes the first kind of meritorious activity, the two others being morality (*sila*) and mental development (*bhavana*)”. Dana is the first of the Paramis, those qualities that are to be perfected during the process of full awakening. It is also considered to be one of the “Seven Treasures” described in the Angutttara Nikaya:

"And what is the treasure of generosity? There is the case of a disciple of the noble ones, his awareness cleansed of the stain of stinginess, living at home, freely generous, openhanded, delighting in being magnanimous, responsive to requests, delighting in the distribution of alms. This is called the treasure of generosity.”

Here is another quote, also from the Anguttara Nikaya, in the discourse on Seasonable Generosity:

"There are these five seasonable gifts. Which five? One gives to a newcomer. One gives to one going away. One gives to one who is ill. One gives in time of famine. One sets the first fruits of field & orchard in front of those who are virtuous. These are the five seasonable gifts."

In the commentaries, there are different levels of generosity: There is generosity motivated by the desire for recognition, which is beneficial, but still provides a boost to ego. The next level of is generosity motivated by benevolent intention, but is limited to those items that are not valuable to the giver, which is beneficial, but still fosters attachment. The finest level of generosity is motivated by unselfish intention, purely for the benefit of others who are in need. It doesn’t feed the ego building process and cultivates the Parami of renunciation, letting go of attachment.

Generosity can be material in the form of money and possessions. It can also manifest as generosity of spirit, that is, a willingness to provide attention and effort for the benefit of others. The term for this in Pali is *caga* (*cah-gah*), translated as *liberality*. In this context, liberality involves a flexibility motivated by kindness and compassion.

For me personally, generosity is motivated frequently by gratitude, through reflecting on how many times I have benefitted from the generosity of others, both materially and through liberality of spirit. These manifestations are part of the Buddhist path; other than the prominence of generosity in Buddhist doctrine, what real value comes from generosity?

We live in a culture which fosters values that in many ways are contrary to generosity. The essence of consumerism is acquisitiveness; I grew up hearing the phrase “In the end, whoever has the most toys wins”. Commercial ads foster greed and stinginess; I saw an ad recently involving a man refusing to share a jar of salsa with others. It was presented in a light-hearted way, in a party setting, but the message was clearly conveyed that something tasting so good shouldn’t be shared. These ads have been carefully researched to maximize their appeal to the consumer.

Another cultural trend involves perceiving groups of people who are disadvantaged educationally, financially and are generally perceived as lazy and lacking in motivation to succeed; therefore, any generosity extended in the form of welfare or Medicaid is unwarranted, because it will “keep them lazy”. These values are contrary to the ethical norms of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism as well as Buddhism.

A factor that fostered survivability among early human groupings involved sharing resources. As a species, humans are social animals; the social bonds fostered in families and tribes allowed the members to survive through hard times. When members of hunter-gathering tribes discovered food, it was often shared. One tribal member might excel at fashioning spear points, while another would use them to kill animals; all shared the results. Current cultural norms might be contrary to this social function; the value of sharing resources presented by the ethics of religious systems is set aside in the service of greed-based consumerism.

What is the value of generosity? How does generosity fit into the “survival of the fittest” mindset prevalent in many contemporary cultural beliefs? Contemporary research offers insights into the evolutionary and cultural benefits of generosity, which, in psychological terms, is called altruism. There is a growing database of research suggesting that giving things away reduces levels of cortisol in research participants. Additionally, workplace research suggests that generous sharing of resources and knowledge improves morale, decreases absenteeism and increases productivity. Volunteerism, particularly in the elder population, contributes to psychological and physical well-being.

How should we go about being generous? First of all, generosity emerges from a healthy sense of self, which is fostered by regular meditation practice, including lovingkindness, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity. Empathetic joy is the happiness that comes from resonating emotionally with the happiness of others. It is also suggested that generosity, although founded on concepts, works best when it emerges from a felt sense of “rightness”, that is, a feeling of openness to sharing with others. Because this is contrary to the consumerist custom, confusion and doubt may accompany a consideration towards generosity.

The more one cultivates internal clarity and serenity from regular meditation practice, the more clearly one can realize appropriate opportunities to practice generosity. Offers of generosity have mixed motivations, that is, there is likely to be some self-serving aspect from the act of generosity. If that is the case, practice noticing how that comes about, while still being generous—fake it till you make it!