

Reflections on the Art of Selfless Giving

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I. INTRODUCTION

I was able to attend Naropa University because of the generosity of others. There is no other way to say it. I would never have stepped onto Naropa's doorstep, never received my Master of Divinity from this Buddhist-inspired institution, if not for the funding of the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation. They supported my dream to become a Buddhist chaplain by awarding me the Lenz Merit Scholarship for 2010-13. This subsidy paid for the bulk of my education and allowed me to receive the necessary training for chaplaincy. Without this gift, I could never have achieved a fulltime residency position at a prestigious hospital.

It is a powerful practice to acknowledge that other people's time, energy, and donations have completely changed the course of your life. It brings the abstraction of 'dependent origination' down to a very real and pragmatic place. It is to say, with all sincerity, that I could not have done this alone; that my efforts rest on the gifts of others. My opportunities are a direct result of their contributions. As I start my career in chaplaincy, I am poignantly aware of this generosity and the network of individuals it represents. It connects their lives to mine and reiterates the effect we all have upon each other. On the whole, we spend our days under the illusion of separation. Our struggles and aspirations too often feel like ours alone. Yet the teachings of the Buddha reveal that we are unequivocally linked. From the moment we are born, we are sustained and bound by the attention, care, and affection of others. We exist, as Thich Nhat Hanh writes, in a

perpetual state of “inter-being”—sharing in our suffering, just as we share in our joy. As the foundation of the Second Noble Truth, ‘dependent origination’ is absolutely central to the Buddha’s message. It tells us that “all phenomena arise in dependence on causes and conditions and lack intrinsic being.”¹ In other words, nothing in life can exist in isolation or independent of the causal chain. It was this great insight that allowed the Buddha to trace the origin of our suffering and the path to its cessation.

I carried the impact of this scholarship close to my heart as I began to read about the life and work of Dr. Frederick P. Lenz, the founder and spiritual teacher of the Lenz Foundation. In this way, it is not surprising that I was most drawn to his teachings on generosity and service. There are many themes that run throughout Dr. Lenz’s prolific career, but it was his insights on the practice of “selfless giving” that I found most compelling, and indeed, most theologically incisive. His lectures on this topic spoke to me because of the remarkable gift I had received from the Foundation, but also because of my choice to pursue a career in chaplaincy. At its core, chaplaincy is about dedicating oneself to the care and wellbeing of others. It is to stand with another person in their darkest hour and offer fearlessness, partnership, and compassionate awareness. In chaplaincy, one’s very presence becomes the gift we have to offer. I am grateful to Dr. Lenz for exploring the rationale and logic of “selfless giving.” It has helped me understand the necessity of this type of practice, and why we must willingly choose it amidst the chaos of our daily lives.

¹ Damien Keon, *The Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 221.

II. NO SEPARATION

In my chaplaincy residency, we are challenged to stop and ask ourselves one question before entering the room of a patient: “*What brings me to this person’s door?*” Of course, one can respond to such an inquiry in many practical ways: it is my job here at the hospital, there is some kind of need I am attempting meet, or perhaps, I am simply filled with curiosity. Yet more to the point, we are being asked to think about our own personal theology as chaplains. What is driving my ministry at this moment? What motivation is hidden in my heart as I return, time and time again, to the suffering that so often lies on the other side of that door? To be sure, it is not an easy question to answer. It is about finding the web of meaning behind one’s actions, and somehow, learning how to articulate it. My supervisor encourages me to consider if such an inspiration can be captured by a simple word or phrase: *the love of God, a desire for community, a feeling of compassion*. She says that I am looking for a root concept to help encapsulate my understanding of the world. It is a way of naming what gives me strength and pushes me beyond the threshold of that door.

Whenever I think of this question, I hear the words of contemporary Buddhist Roshi Bernie Glassman: “If you were to ask me ‘What is the essence of Buddhism?’ I would answer that it’s to awaken. And the function of that awakening is learning to serve.”² Such an explanation certainly reflects my own experience of Buddhist theology and practice. The Buddha dared us to understand our own hearts and minds, to let our suffering inspire us toward personal liberation. But somewhere along the way, we begin

² Pamela Bloom, ed., *The Power of Compassion: Stories that Open the Heart, Heal the Soul, and Change the World* (Charlottesville: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc, 2000), 82.

to see that the function and purpose of that awakening is complete and utter dedication to others. We come to see that our own path is inextricably bound to the paths of others. This is the surprising truth of ‘dependent origination.’ The more we soften into our own suffering with acceptance and insight, the more we become tender to the pain and wellbeing of others. We become drawn to it, like an arrow shot from a bow.

In my experience, this is not a truth that is easy to intellectually understand. One might ask: what does my own personal struggle for happiness really have to do with happiness of others? Isn’t it practical to think that I should focus on liberating my own delusions and neurosis before turning to help others, if at all? Such tension can be found woven throughout the history and development of Buddhism. It underlies the disputed difference between the Arhat and the Bodhisattva, the solitary seeker and the servant to all. As Buddhists, we may even feel such tension when we try to choose between time spent in personal retreat and time spent practicing in the everyday modality of our lives—one turning inward, and the other, outward toward the benefit of others.

In an essay entitled, *Buddhism and Social Action*, meditation master Ken Jones asks: “Is not the Buddhist’s primary task to work on him-or-herself?” If so, what need do we have for social action, generosity, and service? To which, Jones poignantly responds:

The answer to these questions is both yes and no. This does not mean half-way between yes and no. It means yes and no. It means that the answer to these fundamental questions of Buddhist social action cannot ultimately be logical or rational. For the Buddhist Middle Way is not the middle between two extremes, but the Middle Way which transcends the two extremes in a "higher" unity.³

³ Ken Jones, "Buddhism and Social Action: An Exploration," *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/jones/wheel285.html> (accessed December 4, 2013).

In other words, as we begin to examine our selves and our experience in practice, we quickly see that the boundary between self and other is not as firm as we once thought. Insight into our own pain, naturally and spontaneously brings a desire to help others find similar relief. Of course, the inversion of this is also true. The more we dedicate ourselves to the wellbeing of another, the more we find wholeness and contentment growing within our own hearts. As Jones explains, the path of the Buddha is one that pushes us beyond extremes. It is not a choice between your happiness or mine, but a realization of unity and interconnectedness. Your pain *is* my pain; your joy, the budding of my own peace.

No separation. I have begun to wonder if this might be the phrase that underlies my ministry, the one I carry with me into the room of each and every patient. *No separation* between self and other, between your misery and mine. *No separation* on the journey of awakening.

III. THE PRACTICE OF SELFLESS GIVING

Bridging the gap between meditation and service is also Dr. Lenz's point of departure when discussing the art of selfless giving. In his unique rendering of American Buddhism, Dr. Lenz was famous for underscoring the importance of traditional seated meditation. He saw that intellectual truth was useless if it could not be embodied; if it could not be realized from the inside out. Indeed, one can talk for days about the esoteric doctrines of the Buddha, but practice will always be the meat and potatoes of the Buddhist path. It challenges us to step out of abstraction and bring real change to our lives. It helps us to realize an end to our suffering here and now, just as the Buddha intended. Dr. Lenz recognized this fact, and taught his followers to ground their

understanding of the Dharma in regular periods of seated meditation. He returned to this point repeatedly throughout his career, and the legacy of this emphasis continues through his students.

However, in many of his discussions on practice, Dr. Lenz also mentions the necessity of what he calls “the yoga selfless giving.” In fact, there are times in which Dr. Lenz goes so far as to say that sitting meditation alone will *not* bring one to enlightenment.⁴ It must always be coupled with acts of genuine selflessness—generosity, service, and dedication to others without thought of oneself. Selfless giving, he maintains, is to give without attachment to outcome or reward. It is to give for the joy and pleasure of the moment, to celebrate the happiness of another. He states:

In real self-giving we’re inspired. We don’t think about time or place or condition or practicality. We sense that we need to make a gesture, an offering. We give someone something; whether they acknowledge us or not is not important. We gain joy just from giving to fulfill ourselves. This is basic self-giving.⁵

Of course, there are many kinds of gifts in the world, many ways to offer oneself and one’s resources. The avenues of service are as endless as the moments we share together—our love always finding new ways to manifest and meet another’s need. Yet, in essence, selfless giving may be understood as a spontaneous and heartfelt gesture that rests solely on the longing for another being to find contentment and peace. Some part of us reaches forward and attempts to ease the malaise of another. We do this, not because we want something in return or because we have been told that it is morally correct, but because we have seen the face of their pain. We have felt it first hand, and our compassion has made a response self-evident and necessary. Even though such actions

⁴ Dr. Frederick P. Lenz, *Lakshmi Series* (United States: The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, 2007), 74.

⁵ *Ibid*, 65.

are rarely convenient or easy, we choose to do them anyway. As Dr. Lenz writes, we simply make a commitment to the welfare of another. In a very ordinary way, we begin to see their suffering and their joy as part of our own.

According to Dr. Lenz, the art of selfless giving can arise in any moment and in any context for “there is always someone to help, there’s always some way in which to perfect yourself through service to others.”⁶ Selfless giving is built upon the everyday materials of our lives. It can begin “right where you are now.”⁷ What is key is one’s basic intention or motivation. Dr. Lenz tells us that selfless giving is “not martyrdom” but inspiration; one feels moved or compelled.⁸ It is not the size of the act but the willingness to forget oneself and respond to the call of another. Perhaps most telling, Dr. Lenz explains that when we practice selfless giving, we become “unified” or “one with those [to] whom we give.”⁹ Illusions of separation fall away and the reality of interdependence is acknowledged and embraced.

While Dr. Lenz often contrasts selfless giving to traditional sitting meditation, I might argue that he is effectively employing it as *another form* of practice. In other words, selfless giving is *an extension of our work on the cushion*. It is meditation in action, a concerted effort to bring our insights to full fruition. In this way, sitting practice will always be incomplete if it does not come include the greater context of our lives, the relationships and network of influence in which we move. We begin with our own mind and the difficulties it presents, but it is only through acts of service and generosity that we avoid the trap of selfishness, and may at last bring liberation to all aspects of our

⁶ Lenz, *Lakshmi Series*, 71.

⁷ Ibid, 71.

⁸ Ibid, 67.

⁹ Ibid, 66.

experience. Where sitting meditation grounds us in the wisdom of *prajna*, selfless-giving works to counteract the ego's tendency for self-absorption and fixation. It pushes us beyond the confines of our own struggles, our own neurosis, and connects us to the hearts of others.

In fact, Dr. Lenz points out that these two practices tend to work together in one's overall development, each one bringing greater acuity and depth to the other. He writes:

So your spiritual journey and your spiritual welfare are really dependent, in my estimation on two primary factors: one, your ability to meditate well and two, your ability to give of yourself. You'll find the two go hand in hand. The more you meditate, the more you give of yourself, and your self-giving will take an ease and a form and a shape, a beauty and a knowledge, that will make it real self-giving. The more you give of yourself, the better you'll meditate.¹⁰

In the end, the yoga of selfless giving reminds us that the Buddhist path is more than just our journey on the cushion. It is about how we exist in the world; how we relate to others as a continuation of ourselves. It breaks down the boundaries between self and other; self and world. On a very fundamental level, selfless giving helps reorient our perception of the human condition around interdependence and mutuality. It encourages us to incorporate the view of dependent origination into our everyday actions and choices.

As I read Dr. Lenz's teachings on the relationship between meditation and service, I am apt to think of an old Zen story often told by Roshi Joan Halifax. In one of her essays on the work of caregivers and healers, she writes of a young Buddhist monk "struggling with his meditation practice. Each time he sat down to meditate, he saw a giant spider threatening him. After experiencing much anxiety and losing much sleep, he

¹⁰ Lenz, *Lakshmi Series*, 76.

finally decides to kill the creature.”¹¹ As the story goes, the monk enters the meditation hall bearing a sharp knife when his teacher stops him and inquires of his intentions. Distraught, the monk describes his situation and the desperation he feels in his practice.¹² With great compassion, the teacher encourages the monk to first mark the spider with a red X that he might know exactly where to place the blade and kill more humanely. The next day, the monk brings his calligraphy brush to the hall and carefully inscribes the spider with ink. But as he turns to bow before the creature, he sees “on the front of his robes a huge painted X. His laughter [is] heard everywhere.”¹³

This, too, is an explanation of interdependence, a story about the illusionary boundaries of mind. We take our seat upon the cushion to find a personal path to enlightenment, but soon realize that our journey cannot exclude those around us. The obstacles and creatures we meet are part of us, and we a part of them—our paths united, our struggles the same. Acts of genuine service and dedication to others acknowledge this fact. They work to reverse the belief in an independent and permanent self. They push our focus beyond our own private agenda and allow us to see that *being empty* of self also means *being filled* with the entirety of life. *No separation.*

IV. STEPS ON MY OWN PATH

I was nineteen when I attended my first meditation retreat. I was young, impulsive, and consumed by the experience of my own trials and tribulation. Having been raised in a primarily Christian household, I didn’t know the first thing about the

¹¹ Joan Halifax Roshi, “The Mind of Healing,” in *Healers on Healing*, ed. Richard Carlson and Benjamin Shield, 167-170 (New York: G.P Putnam’s Sons, 1989), 167.

¹² *Ibid*, 167.

¹³ Halifax, “The Mind of Healing,” 167.

Buddha or his teachings. Like many, I had come to the Dharma through the doorway of suffering. I arrived at the retreat center with the hope that perhaps meditation could change me, make me numb to the pain of my life, or give me some special insight into another reality—one that was free of hardship and loss. In this way, my focus was entirely on myself, and how I could become someone new and different. Yet, at the conclusion of those ten days, something surprising had happened. I was altered, but in a way I had not expected. Instead of feeling different, I had become more myself—more innately human—than I had ever been. I felt centered, grounded, and at home in my own skin. My pain and discomfort were not gone, but I had begun to soften into them with more acceptance and grace. I saw that it was possible to befriend my suffering as part of my journey. Yet, most astonishing was my experience of the world around me. Things were not foreign or far away, but deeply familiar. Life had become intimate and close. The drooping cypress tree outside my window, the fellow practitioner sitting next to me, even the falling sun in the distant horizon was brought near. If only for a moment, I could see that all the world was a part of me, and I was a part of it.

Zen Master Dogen writes: "To learn the way of the Buddha is to learn about oneself. To learn about oneself is to forget oneself. To forget oneself is to experience the world as pure object — to let fall one's own mind and body and the self-other mind and body."¹⁴ So it is that meditative practice helps us to turn toward our own experience. Quite naturally, our initial motives are often rooted in our own hopes and desires, our own need to alleviate the pain we feel. Yet, as Dogen suggests, it is ironic that the more we *learn* about ourselves with equanimity and kindness, the more we are inspired to

¹⁴ Jones, "Buddhism and Social Action: An Exploration," *Access to Insight* (accessed December 4, 2013).

forget ourselves—our own agenda becoming less and less relevant. Somehow, in turning inward, we find the pain and joy of the world peering back at us. Illusionary divisions of self and other, mind and body, begin to fall away. This is the Buddha’s fundamental teaching of interdependence. This is the connection between personal practice and service to others.

In the end, that first retreat did change me. It made me a Buddhist and a lifelong seeker of the Dharma. In the weeks and months that followed, I saw the impact of the insight I had gained. By softening into my own experience, I could no longer deny the experience of others. I felt filled with compassion and a desire to reach out to the hearts of those around me. As my practice deepened, my life became oriented around different avenues of selfless giving. I worked in prisons, hospitals, psychiatric facilities, elder care communities, and farms. With a focus in Islamic Studies, I even spent time serving the children of refugee families in a small Islamic grade school. Over the years, I became humbled by all the different faces of suffering in the world; the diversity with which our pain can manifest. In every setting, I did my best to hold this pain with spaciousness and loving-kindness. This was what the teaching of the Buddha had shown me through practice with my own grief and loss. After much searching, I ultimately found the path of Buddhist Chaplaincy. It unified all my divergent experiences into one, cohesive calling.

IV. THE THEOLOGICAL UNDERPININGS OF SELFLESS GIVING

As I enter the room of Mrs. Bergs, I see that her husband is weeping quietly at her side—his head resting gently in his hands, his body slumped and dejected. Mrs. Bergs is unconscious. The sound of her low and labored breathing is unavoidable. At five o’clock

in the morning, the sun is just coming up over the horizon so the room is filled with a pink brightness that makes the scene all the more poignant and surreal. While she seemed stable last night, Mr. Bergs has just learned that his wife will most likely die before the afternoon. This will be his last day with her. As he looks down at her closed eyes, he is panicked and grief stricken. He acknowledges my presence and says: “This feels impossible. I cannot bear it. It is the hardest thing I have ever had to do.” And so it begins. I sit with Mr. Bergs throughout the morning. I stay with him as he paces the room and cries out for a miracle. I stay with him as he falls quiet and reaches over to brush back the strands of his wife’s hair. I stay with him as he calls their children, one after another. Each phone call, another dagger to the heart.

By mid-day, the rest of the family has arrived, and Mrs. Bergs is coming closer to death. In a flurry of loved-ones that now surround the bed, Mr. Bergs turns to ask me: “How do you do this every day? Why in the world would you *choose* to this every day?” The directness of his inquiry startles me. I have been asked this type of question before by patients and family, but never with such candor. I stop to think for a moment. I want to grace his sincerity with an earnest reply: “As hard as this morning has been, it was an honor to be here with you and witness the love you have for your wife. You have taught me a great deal about living and dying this day. And truly, this is not something to be borne alone.”

As I utter these words, I realize how passionately I mean them. In Mr. Bergs’ grief and confusion, I have seen my own losses and fear, my own shock at the certainty of death. All morning, I have walked beside this man and given him whatever fearlessness and compassion I could muster. I chose to do this because it could just as

easily have been me in his place. At some other moment in time, I, too, will find myself staring into the dying eyes of a loved one whom I cannot bear to lose. I offer what I can as a way of acknowledging this connection, this shared experience of humanity. I tell Mr. Bergs that his wife's death is not hers alone; that we do this work together. We try our best to comfort and support her in any way that we can, and in return, she teaches us about the reality of change and loss. She reminds us of just how preciousness and fragile this life really is. Mr. Bergs seems heartened by this explanation. He whispers: "For thirty years my wife and I have faced things side-by-side. Yes, this is no different. We will do it together; thank you."

Why do we come to the aid of another? Thich Nhat Hanh often uses the analogy of fingers on a single hand when describing the doctrine of interdependence. Even though the digits may seem separate, they are united at the base. It would be ridiculous to think of one finger acting aggressively toward another, or refusing to ease another's pain. Their actions reflect the truth of their condition—their mutuality and shared dependence. Yet, we never think to ask why our fingers do this. It seems obvious and self-evident. Each finger simply experiences itself as being part of a greater whole.

What I love about this example is that it has absolutely nothing to do with intellectually discerning what is ethically right or wrong. The incentive comes from within and is already part of one's being. In recognizing and experiencing the truth of interdependence, we are moved to act accordingly. Serving the suffering of others becomes necessary and altogether natural. This is the point at which our meditative practice and everyday actions meet. On the cushion, we work toward realizing our own selflessness and interdependence. Off the cushion, we begin to feel this insight compel us forward into the

hearts and lives of others. In this way, our generosity is both inspired and fed by the truth of our condition.

Dr. Lenz takes a slightly different tack when exploring the theology behind service and selfless giving. In one of his most famous teachings on this topic, he poignantly opens with the question: “*Why aren’t you happy? Why aren’t all of you happy when there is so much to have and to be?*”¹⁵ This may seem like a rather surprising place to begin when speaking on generosity and service, but it is with great skillfulness that Dr. Lenz is turning our attention toward our motivations. He is reminding us of the single most defining aspiration of our existence: the longing for happiness and a life without suffering. Indeed, happiness is the one desire shared by all sentient beings, the driving force behind many of our choices. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama echoes this sentiment when he writes: “Our every intended action, in a sense our whole life—how we choose to live within the context of the limitations imposed by our circumstances—can be seen as our answer to the great question which confronts us all: ‘How am I to be happy?’”¹⁶ According to Dr. Lenz there are two basic responses to this universal question, two options that are essentially “the north and south poles of our existence.”¹⁷

On one hand, we may decide to pursue happiness by simply following the dictum of our own personal wants and desires. What we believe will make us satisfied is what we seek—pure and simple. We alone are the fulcrum of our own existence. Dr. Lenz states: “One choice in life is to fulfill ourselves, the limited self, to do the things that make us feel better, to do the things that give us pleasure and not pain, to fulfill our

¹⁵ Lenz, *Lakshmi Series*, 59 (emphasis added).

¹⁶ H.H. the Dalai Lama, *Ethics For the New Millennium* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1999), 4.

¹⁷ Lenz, *Lakshmi Series*, 59.

desires, to get the things we want each day, each year, to make ourselves happy.”¹⁸ As Dr. Lenz goes on to explain, this certainly seems to be the most direct and sensible path to follow. How am I to be happy? By seeking out the things I enjoy. It is a perfectly reasonable conclusion to draw. Why shouldn't I do the activities I prefer; surround myself with the people that make me feel content? Why, indeed.

On the other hand, we may to forego our own personal happiness in order help manifest the joy and satisfaction of others. This is the other end of the spectrum, the path of service and selfless giving. It is to take the time and energy we would normally dedicate to ourselves and offer it to the welfare of another. As Dr. Lenz acknowledges, this option may appear like complete insanity:

It would seem that the hours and hours spent in service to others would be drudgery, that we would become a slave of another person, that there would be very little fulfillment in always working for others... Strangely enough the opposite is true. And if you don't believe me, look at the world and look at its people... There is only a small group of persons in this world who live in a transcendent awareness and are really happy from the depths of their soul. These are persons who elected, at some point in their existence, to take their existence and give it to God, to give it away, to give it to eternity. They are happy—happy in their self-giving.¹⁹

In his bold and provocative style, Dr. Lenz is daring us to evaluate the state of our own happiness. He is challenging us to see that actions based solely upon our own wants and desires tend to produce a rather “superficial” and fleeting form of satisfaction. It is happiness that is “worldly” and short-lived. Much like the Buddha who said, look and see for yourself, Dr. Lenz is daring us to notice that the individuals who are most content in the world seem to be those who have rooted their lives in the art of selfless giving. Theirs is a happiness that is authentic and true, lasting and transcendent. Of course, Dr. Lenz is

¹⁸ Lenz, *Lakshmi Series*, 59.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 60.

quick to point out how paradoxical this all seems. It is a rather “strange state of affairs” to believe that, by focusing on the happiness of another, we may at last find it for ourselves.²⁰

Much like Thich Nhat Hanh, Dr. Lenz’s answer to this conundrum rests on the notion of interdependence. Referencing the heart of Buddhist theology, Dr. Lenz tells us that the single, identifiable ‘self’ we are trying so desperately to satisfy is, in fact, a complete illusion—a façade that ultimately cannot be found. Meditative practice allows us to turn toward the ‘self’ and examine it with spaciousness and equanimity. Indeed, practice dares us to look at the boundaries the ‘self’ has created—the places where ‘I’ end and ‘you’ begin. When we do so, we see just how fragile and transient such divisions really are. We come to realize that the ‘self’ is neither separate nor distinct from the world in which it arises.

By analogy, Dr. Lenz argues that human lives are like sandcastles built upon a sea of sand. Each one may seem solid and unique, separate and divided, but when the winds and waves begin to rise, their true nature is revealed. Each castle is composed of the same white and yellow sand reaching out in all directions. So it is that within each “sense of self”—each “I-ness”—the entirety of all abides.²¹ This is what it means to be *empty* of self but *filled* with the whole of life. Dr. Lenz writes: “As you progress in your self-realization, you’ll discover that there isn’t really anything that you aren’t... You have no fixed self. This is only an illusion and this is what causes you to feel pain and suffering, sorrow frustration and despair.”²² Where selfish actions reinforce the illusion of

²⁰ Lenz, *Lakshmi Series*, 60.

²¹ *Ibid*, 61.

²² *Ibid*, 61-62.

separateness and perpetuate our suffering, selfless giving brings us closer to the truth of our condition. It shows us just how connected and interdependent we really are. In the end, the narrow habits of the ‘limited self’ make it seem as though individual contentment lies in vying for oneself, when the exact opposite is in fact the case. Dependent origination dictates that genuine happiness can only be realized in thinking of others first.

IV. ŚĀNTIDEVA & SELFLESS GIVING

As I reflect on Dr. Lenz’s explanation of selfless giving and the rich theology that supports it, I am reminded of a teaching by 8th century Buddhist scholar Śāntideva: “All the joy the world contains/ Has come through wishing happiness for others. All the misery the world contains/ Has come through wanting pleasure for oneself.”²³ His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama is famous for quoting this enigmatic bit of text. Some say it is his favorite passage; four lines that capture the essence of the Buddhist path. When I first heard this teaching, I thought: “Yes, this is the way the world works.” Images of those closest to me came to mind, and I felt my heart ache with love for them. Surely I would give my life for their happiness.

Then a friend was bold enough to ask, “But *why* is this true exactly? Can you explain it to me? How could all the world’s misery come from selfishness alone? What does my own personal happiness really have to do with the welfare of others?” Honestly, I could not say. I was completely taken aback. At that moment, I saw the depth of this teaching and the challenge that it poses. Its profundity lies in the fact that, while it speaks

²³ Pema Chödrön, *No Time To Lose: A Timely Guide to the Way of the Bodhisattva* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2005), 319.

the language of our hearts, it is entirely counter-intuitive. As Dr. Lenz points out, if we look to the practical ways in which we conduct our lives, we see that the vast majority of our thoughts and actions are about ourselves—what will make *us* happy, what will increase our *own* pleasure. Indeed, this seems to be the most logical path to personal contentment. As shocking as her questions were, my friend was right. We must be courageous enough to ask ourselves *why* this teaching rings true, but feels almost impossible to implement; why its logic seems to contradict the everyday ways in which we conduct ourselves. To be sure, this is the Buddhist path—the practice that must be woven throughout our lives.

Again, in the succinctness of this teaching by Śāntideva, we hear the whispers of ‘dependent origination.’ Like the Second Noble Truth, this passage speaks of origins. It boldly conjectures the cause of both our suffering and our happiness. Śāntideva is using the Buddha’s fundamental principle of interdependence to remind us that there is nothing in the world that is self-sustained or self-existent. All of life co-arises and co-ceases in a constant exchange of mutuality.²⁴ What is surprising, and somewhat difficult to believe, is that this *includes* our own pleasure and pain. As individualized and private as these experiences may feel, they are *always* born in relationship. It is in giving that we receive, quite literally. It is in reaching out to meet the needs of others, that we come to share in true joy.

Referencing Dr. Lenz’s explanation, we must remember that if interdependence reflects the true nature of this world—the mechanism by which life arises, abides, and

²⁴ Masao Abe, “The Problem of Evil in Christianity and Buddhism,” in *Buddhist-Christianity Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed. Paul O. Ingram and Fredrick J Streng, 139-154 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 145.

passes away—then notions of isolation work against the natural order. This is what Śāntideva means when he says that all the world’s misery, treachery, and violence originate in selfishness. They begin with the simple notion of separation, the illusion that I am separate from you and you are separate from me. Where the doctrine of interdependence broadens our perspective to include all of life, thoughts of separation narrow and shrink our vantage. They prevent us from seeing that it is fundamentally impossible to make oneself happy at the cost or detriment of another. While it may seem quite daring to say that *all* the world’s happiness comes from the simple longing that another being find joy, Śāntideva means this quite literally. This teaching is not a platitude, but a fact of life—a reality that cannot be avoided. Our own contentment is unequivocally bound to our ability to manifest empathy and generosity for others.

V. THE CHOICE OF SELFLESS GIVING

I am walking down the hallway of the ICU with a six-year old named Millie Anderson. Millie’s mother has just died in one of the operating rooms from an unexpected complication in surgery. As the rest of her family grieves at the bedside, Millie’s father has asked me to take his daughter into the reception area. I feel honored by this request and wait as Millie bravely says goodbye to her mom. When she is done, she reaches up to take my hand.

Millie and I spend the better part of an hour sitting together on a blanket she has brought from home. On it, she has arranged a small tea party with plastic cups and several misshapen stuffed animals. During our time together, Millie tells me about her and her mom—some of their favorite games and TV shows, the way she reads to her at

night. There are moments when Millie weeps uncontrollably, the reality of the situation never far from her mind. “I just wish she could stay here with me,” she confides poignantly, “I don’t want her to leave.” “I wish that too,” I say. Millie tells me just how angry she feels. The confusion and shock of the afternoon is etched upon her face. But mostly, we just sit quietly together amidst the bustle and noise of the hospital waiting room.

When Millie’s family finally returns, she opens her backpack and pulls out a small Tupperware container of chocolate brownies. With great seriousness, Millie decides to lift one out and give it to me. Our eyes meet. I know how important this brownie is to her. It is one of the last things that she made with her mom before the surgery. It is a great memento of their love and the gesture leaves me speechless. I think of how this simple gift connects her heart to mine, unites us in our shared humanity. I think of her mother and my mother, and all the children who have loved and lost at so young an age. *No separation*, I say to myself, but to her I whisper: “Thank you, Millie, thank you.”

In his most famous lecture on the art of selfless giving, Dr. Lenz concludes that ultimately, “the yoga of selfless-giving is the yoga of *choice*.”²⁵ It asks that we make a conscious decision to recognize and act upon the truth of our interdependence, that we willingly move beyond our own agenda in the name of another. Such a choice is not easy. Indeed, there are times when it seems to make no sense at all. Yet with persistence and a commitment to meditative practice, we can learn to give courageously and joyously so that our happiness becomes lasting and deep. I have seen how daily life is full of such

²⁵ Lenz, *Lakshmi Series*, 65 (emphasis added).

opportunities. Even the most ordinary of moments can offer countless different ways to in which to act with compassion. No gift is ever too small or insignificant to change the course of another's life. In the end, Dr. Lenz was right. Selfless giving is a choice we must continue to make each and every day until the habits of the 'limited self' are worn thin and may at last be shed.

I am indebted to the many individuals at the Lenz Foundation who chose to donate their financial support to me, and who believed in my dream to become a Buddhist Chaplain. May their generosity be repaid by the faces and hearts of those I serve in my ministry. I am sure Dr. Lenz would agree that the best way to honor a selfless gift is to turn and give selflessly to another.

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