

How to refrain from hoarding anything

An 18th-century Japanese Zen monk and poet named Ryōkan lived in a simple hut on a mountainside overlooking the Sea of Japan. He had few possessions. One night when the moon was full, a thief visited Ryōkan's hut. Ryōkan was not at home, so the thief went inside looking for something to steal.

Finding nothing of value inside, the thief was about to leave when Ryōkan arrived. "Welcome!" Ryōkan exclaimed; "You have come all the way out here and should not return empty handed. Here, take my clothes as a gift." He took off his clothes and gave them to the thief. The thief, bewildered, ran away with Ryōkan's clothes in his hand. Ryōkan stood naked in the moonlight and cried out, "Poor fellow, he didn't get much! I wish I could give him this beautiful full moon!"

Traditionally it is said that there are three kinds of giving: giving material things, giving fearlessness, and giving teachings. Ryōkan gave the thief a gift of material things: his clothes. Ryōkan gave the thief a gift of fearlessness: he didn't become angry at the thief, or try to scare the thief away, or threaten to report the thief to the police. Ryōkan wanted to give a gift of teaching: this is clear if we are told that the full moon is a symbol for unsurpassable complete awakening. Ryōkan wished that he could have given the thief awakening—but awakening, like the full moon, is not something that we can possess or steal or give. Others can help us, but we realize awakening through our own mental activity, and nobody else can do it for us; we see the moon through our own eyes, and nobody else can see it for us.

Since the thief ran off bewildered, we may doubt whether he learned anything from Ryōkan that would have led him to awakening. But by giving his only material things and giving fearlessness, Ryōkan also gave a gift of teaching: he taught how to refrain from hoarding anything.

Perhaps one day the thief would remember and put into practice Ryōkan's teaching of not hoarding anything, and would realize the awakening that Ryōkan wished for him. How can we, too, learn how to refrain from hoarding anything, especially teachings?

1. SEE AND ACKNOWLEDGE HOARDING

First, we notice the impulse to hoard anything, and we notice how that impulse arises. Hoarding is storing a great mass of stuff and hiding it from others. In places where winters are harsh, many animals—such as squirrels, chipmunks, or hamsters—will hoard excess food during the summer months so that they will have a supply of the stuff they need to continue living during the cold months when food is hard to find. We human beings may hoard stuff seasonally or temporarily for the same purposes as other animals: to ensure a sufficient supply of the stuff we need to continue living.

This simple kind of hoarding is merely an animal's way of adapting to the limitations of its environment and body. There is no great difference in principle between a stockpile of oil in a strategic petroleum reserve, a stockpile of food in a pantry, and a stockpile of wood in a beaver lodge. But for many human beings, hoarding means more than temporary storage. We human beings have larger brains than most other animals, and we are capable of mentally associating the act of hoarding with an idea, or with an emotion: notably, the idea of a separate self, or the emotion of craving or anxiety.

In other words, hoarding is a problem for us when it becomes not just an innocent provisioning strategy, but another symptom of our ignorant and illusory mental activity that prevents us from realizing the heart of **all our ethical principles**, our vow to live for the welfare of all others. Hoarding becomes a way of reinforcing our illusory ideas about ourselves and placating our disturbing emotions in an unskillful way. Because we believe in a separate self, we hoard, and our habit of

hoarding reinforces that belief; or because we feel craving or anxiety, we hoard, and hoarding temporarily placates that emotion while reinforcing our habit of using hoarding to placate that emotion.

At its worst, our habit of hoarding, driven by illusory ideas and disturbing emotions, leads to a pervasive stinginess or miserliness in our attitude. We won't give to others, and we give only the bare minimum to ourselves. We become incapable of charity in all senses of the word *charitable*: full of good will and benevolence, liberal in benefactions to the needy, and lenient and generous in judgment.

One way to notice hoarding is to see how we are not giving the three kinds of gifts. Instead of giving material things for the welfare of all others, we may habitually collect and store material things not because they are needed to continue living but because they reinforce a certain idea of self *I am wealthy because it is mine*, or *I am powerful because it is mine*, or *I am tasteful because it is mine*, and so on or because they placate a craving *I want to get control of it* or because they placate an anxiety (*I don't want to lose control of it*). It is the same if we habitually collect and store money to reinforce an idea of self or to placate cravings and anxieties. Instead of giving fearlessness for the welfare of all others, we may be too preoccupied with our ideas or disturbing emotions to give fearlessness to others, or too preoccupied even to give fearlessness to ourselves. Instead of giving teachings for the welfare of all others, we may try to acquire and retain teachings not because they are needed to promote the well being of all others but because they reinforce a certain idea of self *I am knowledgeable*, or *I am wise*, or *I am enlightened*, and so on or because they placate a craving *I want to know it* or because they placate an anxiety (*I don't want to forget it*).

Due to our confused mental activity, the three kinds of giving are replaced by three kinds of hoarding. If we are to refrain from hoarding, we must change our patterns of mental activity.

2. REALIZE THE NON-SEPARATION OF THE THREE WHEELS

Second, having noticed the impulse to hoard anything and having identified the root of that impulse in our illusory mental activity, we turn away from the idea of a separate self and, by implication, the idea of separate others and separate things and toward a vision of the non separation of the three wheels: giver, receiver, and gift.

“The non-separation of the three wheels” is a way of saying that there are no separate givers, receivers, or gifts—only an endless fabric into which we are all being inseparably woven through giving and receiving. Life is always giving and receiving at the same time. Giving and receiving are not separate acts that we can take credit for or feel worthy or unworthy of. When we see how giving happens through the activity of all others, we see that giving cannot be separated in terms of self and other, giver and receiver, teacher and student, speaker and listener, and so on. All others are giving themselves to themselves, which is all others giving themselves to you, which is you giving yourself to all others, which is you giving yourself to yourself. Life—giving and receiving, birth and death—is a ceaseless flow, and hoarding is an (ultimately futile) attempt to block the flow.

When we see this, we are healed of the illusions of separation and the disturbing emotions that drive our hoarding, and we see how to refrain from hoarding anything: by receiving what is given whenever it is offered and then by giving whatever we can when others may benefit from it, fully realizing the non-separation of the three wheels.

3. GIVE GENEROUSLY

Third, having noticed the impulse to hoard anything and having realized the non separation of the three wheels, we practice giving. The spontaneous and continuous practice of giving is the only way to refrain from hoarding anything.

The simplest, most basic practice of giving is the practice of giving thanks for what we receive. Thankfulness, gratitude, is a natural response to the realization that we are not separate selves producing our own bodies and our own mental activity; we are receiving this body, this mental activity, and this moment from all others. Every moment is a gift and an opportunity to practice gratitude for the gift. Therefore we practice feeling gratitude for everything that comes to us, and we practice expressing that gratitude in whichever way is most appropriate for the present situation. We can practice expressing our gratitude more than once: first, at the earliest possible moment after we receive a gift, and then again later when we remember the gift or when we find that we are still benefitting from it.

“A little touch of ceremony is never amiss in connection with giving and receiving, no matter how simple the gift or how expected.” Our ceremony of thanks may be as simple as a smiling, nodding, or bowing; or, when appropriate, prostrating or embracing. We may express our thanks verbally in a word, a sentence, a poem called a gatha, or a longer discourse. People have composed gathas expressing gratitude for nearly every moment of the day: waking up each day, taking the first step of the day, opening a window or door, looking in a mirror, using the toilet, turning on a water faucet, washing our hands, brushing our teeth, bathing, washing our feet, getting dressed, picking up a fruit, and so on until lying down in bed at the end of the day. We can gratefully notice how we are receiving gifts at all times. We can notice how we want give back in return for the immeasurable generosity of others that is everywhere at all times.

After giving thanks for what we receive, we visualize that is, we imagine) giving to others. Whatever we have received, we don't keep it to ourselves; we don't hoard it. Immediately we imagine giving it to all beings that could benefit from it, full of joy and warmth at the thought that others could receive it. We become not just a recipient

of generosity but a conduit for it; what we have received passes not to us but through us. In this way, we can practice giving even those gifts that we are physically incapable of giving, just as Ryōkan wished that he could give the full moon to a wandering thief. When we see a beautiful sight—the full moon, the sunset or sunrise, the vast blue sky or starry night, or innumerable other natural sights—we wish that others could see and appreciate the beauty that we see. When we pass a garden or a farm, we wish that the food grown there could nourish all living beings. When we enter a market or a commercial store, we wish that all of the goods sold there will be received by other living beings who need those goods. When we learn that someone has a hoard of excess money, we imagine that some of that money is given in a beneficial way to others who need it. In this way, we imagine giving whatever we see, hear, smell, taste, or touch that would be beneficial to others, including all our possessions and eventually even our whole body.

When we are ready, we can practice dedicating our whole body and all our physical, verbal, and mental actions to the service of others. The ancient Indian monk Shāntideva was an enthusiastic model of this practice when he exclaimed: “May I be a protector for those who are without protectors, a guide for travelers, and a boat, a bridge, and a ship for those who wish to cross over. May I be a lamp for those who seek light, a bed for those who seek rest, and may I be a servant for all beings who desire a servant.”

Whatever act we do for the benefit of others, we can imagine that act multiplied and extended to all beings who could benefit from it. When we serve someone food, we can imagine that we are serving food to all hungry beings. When we hug someone, we can imagine that we are embracing all beings who would like an embrace. When we are sweeping the floor, we can imagine that we are sweeping all floors everywhere that need to be swept. When we are planting trees

or other plants, we can imagine that we are planting trees or other plants in all places where they would benefit other beings.

Through the practice of giving, we realize that opportunities to give are as inexhaustible as the opportunities to receive what is given. Every day we practice finding ways to give the three kinds of gifts—material things, fearlessness, and teachings—without expecting anything in return. In every moment we practice asking: What is the most precious gift that could be given right now, and how can we give it? When we ask this question with total devotion, we find that there is always an answer.

The **previous grave precept**, *no elevating self*, taught an analytical process of equalizing and exchanging self and others. This grave precept, *no hoarding anything*, teaches the same aim through a more spontaneous and intuitive process: “The secret of successfully giving yourself away is not so much in calculated actions as in cultivating friendly, warm-hearted impulses. You have to train yourself to obey giving impulses on the instant before they get a chance to cool. When you give impulsively, something happens inside of you that makes you glow, sometimes for hours.” When Ryōkan gave his clothes to a wandering thief, and then wished to give him the full moon too, he was glowing with the spontaneity gained through long training in the practice of giving. By giving generously, we too can refrain from hoarding anything and realize the unsurpassable complete awakening that glows like the full moon over Ryōkan’s hut.

SOURCES

This guide to how to refrain from hoarding anything was rendered by Nathan Strait (nathanstrait.com) on the 1st of February of 2015. It is a meditation on the eighth grave precept of **the ethical principles of bodhisattvas**. The writing was inspired by Reb Anderson’s book *Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts*, Berkeley:

Rodmell Press, 2001; and by the collection of articles titled “Joyful Giving” in the January 2014 issue of *Shambhala Sun*. The classic story of Ryōkan and the thief is recounted in many books, including *Being Upright* although there it appears in the chapter on the second grave precept rather than the eighth grave precept. The three kinds of gifts are explained in *Being Upright* and in many other books from the Mahāyāna traditions. The words “A little touch of ceremony...” and “The secret of successfully giving...” are from David Dunn’s book *Try Giving Yourself Away: A Tonic for These Troubled Times*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970 (first published 1947). Examples of the gathas mentioned, and many others, can be found in Thich Nhat Hanh’s book *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment: Mindfulness Verses for Daily Living*, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990. Shāntideva’s words are from his book *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, translated into English by Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace, Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1997.