The Dance of Reciprocity

How a Zen nun discovered generosity in receiving

By Melina Bondy

Illustration by Carmen Segovia

It's funny where we find the most important things sometimes, like in a grocery store. I had biked into town for some veggie burgers. I couldn't find them in the freezer, so I asked a clerk for help and was told to wait for someone from the natural foods section. As I stood between the vitamins and the energy drinks, grateful for the air-conditioning, a young man, 18 years old at most, came to help me. After some searching, he told me that the brand I was looking for had been discontinued.

He kept looking at me, and I figured he was confused about my shaved head and the long robe, something that happens in places like grocery stores. I paused and waited for his question, ready to tell him a bit about

the haircut and the clothes. With a look of sympathy and remorse, he leaned over and asked me, “Did you have cancer?”

I was so surprised by the question that I almost laughed; usually people ask, “Are you a Hare Krishna?” “Do you know the Dalai Lama?” or simply “What are you?” I took a breath and replied with a hesitant “Yes.” I had been in remission for over a decade at that point, but I had never been through chemotherapy; the shaved head was simply my choice. I was tempted to explain all of this to him but then he said, “My mom had cancer. She died a year ago.” I caught my breath and was so glad I hadn’t laughed or explained anything to him. I had also lost my mother to cancer, and my father, too, when I was a child. My heart trembled in resonant grief, and tears welled up in my eyes. “I’m so sorry,” I said.

“So I know about chemo and all that,” he continued, nodding, his eyes on the ground. He reached his right hand into his shirt pocket and took out a sticker. “Here,” he said, putting a neon orange circle marked “50% off” on the cheese I was holding. My tongue got stuck between wanting to explain and not wanting to mislead him. Then I realised that getting to do something for another person might be exactly what he needed in that moment. It wasn’t about me at all. I just happened to be there, so I accepted the offering. Looking in his eyes, I silently wished him the courage to keep growing up through the inescapable pain of losing a parent at such a young age. “Thank you,” I said. He told me to come find him if I ever needed anything again, and he went back to stocking the shelves, while I went off to find some olives.

I was surprised to see him again in the checkout line. He came directly to me and said, “I want to pay for your groceries.” The inner conflict arose again, the urge to explain that I wasn’t going through chemotherapy. Yet it was completely appropriate for me as a monastic to receive an offering of food. I took a deep breath, relaxed my body, and opened myself to receive again. We had a few minutes together in the line, so I asked about his mother. He told me she had been an artist and a great mom. He missed her. Though his eyes were heavy, he seemed to grow taller when he spoke about her. I asked about his dad and whether they could talk together about her death. He shrank back and said no, they didn’t really talk about things. He dreamed of joining the military and had promised his mom to follow

through with it after she died. He had applied to a program I had never heard of, but he looked proud as he told me.

We reached the checkout counter, and he looked down into my basket. There lay the discounted cheddar cheese, a plastic container of olives, and a can of black beans. He seemed a little disappointed, as if he wanted to offer more. Then he confidently pulled out his employee discount card and paid for the food, all $8.36 of it. We never even exchanged names; it didn't seem necessary. Another "Thank you," a silent blessing, and another tender "Goodbye." I left the store, tied up my robes for the bike ride, and rode off into the heat reflecting upon the many ways to practice *dana*—giving or generosity.

Despite the emphasis on sitting meditation in much of Western Buddhism, the Buddha actually began his teachings to new practitioners with a discussion of the value of dana, for it gladdens the mind and prepares one to face *dukkha*—suffering or dissatisfaction. This may be why dana leads the list of the *paramis* (Pali; Skt. *paramitas*)— the spiritual perfections. It is much more than simply a prerequisite to the "real" teachings, as some assume.

The Buddha used two words in association with the practice of generosity — *dana* and *caga*. Dana refers to the act of giving—food, money, time, kindness, or the dharma. *Caga*, on the other hand, refers to the inward disposition that gives rise to the action. In the discourse *To Mahanama*, the Buddha tells us that generosity allows us to "dwell at home with a mind devoid of the stain of miserliness, freely generous, openhanded, delighting in relinquishment, devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing."

When I first took up the practice of generosity, I focused on understanding my motivation for giving. Sometimes it was openhanded and brought delight, while at other times it came from a sense of obligation and left me feeling resentful. I started asking myself, "Can I find an openhanded motivation here?" The questioning itself helped me to get in touch with *caga* even when forces such as greed or fear were at play. Later I found that changing my inner dialogue—replacing language like "have to" or "should" with something like "get to" made the shift to caga even easier. "I have to go to this meeting" became "I get to go to this meeting,"

reminding me that even something I dreaded could become an opportunity to give when I remembered.

In the end, it's not so important who gives and who receives. What matters is what takes us beyond our separation.

My biggest lesson in generosity, however, came when I had cancer. I was diagnosed in the last months of my twenties. Even though I had a good relationship with my mother, it was hard to move back in with her and receive her care, because I was so much more comfortable giving care than receiving it. It took months for the pangs of resistance and thoughts of "I can take care of myself!" to subside, because I couldn't. I was horribly anemic, completely broke, and facing overwhelming decisions and medical procedures. It was a blessing and a privilege to be able to turn to my mother for support, even though I didn't want it.

A turning point finally came when I received an email from a friend thanking me for sharing my journey with her. She was grateful to get to offer her care through prayers and well-wishes. Staring at the computer screen, it dawned on me that if I wanted others to enjoy giving as much as I did, then I would have to take my turn receiving, too. I looked at my mother with new eyes, able to see how she enjoyed caring for me. From that point on I released my resistance, and cancer became one big lesson in receiving: my mother's care, the prayers and love of friends and family, and even the skill of a surgeon and the height of medical technology. I had thought that self-sufficiency would protect me, but really it was receiving that healed me.

Over a decade has passed, yet I still find it hard to accept simple things like help with a suitcase, a compliment, or even the offerings made to me as a monastic. My first impulse is to say, "No, I'm okay. I don't need anything." I have had to learn to bite my tongue when the habit to refuse arises, because this kind of refusal arises from the delusion of separateness. This compulsive self-sufficiency is as miserly as holding on to something that could be shared. The perfection of generosity, however, breaks down the barriers of self and other and frees me from the pain of holding back.

In the end, it's not so important who gives and who receives. What matters is cultivating the openhandedness that takes us beyond clinging to our

separation and into an awareness that all is given and received. This is why I have added to my translation of *dana* the word *reciprocity*, which derives from a Latin verb meaning "to move forward and backward." Reciprocity is a dance like life itself. The air we breathe, the food we eat, the wounds we carry, and the love we share are all given and received. Reciprocity reminds us to look beyond roles to relationship. When we give without differentiating self from other, and when we receive without differentiating it from the giving, then we can find the gift of dana everywhere.

Melina Bondy (formerly Sister Ocean) is a queer, white settler honored to live on the colonized land originally named Tkaronto who was ordained by Thich Nhat Hanh in 2012 and returned to lay life in 2021. They blend Insight and Plum Village practices with a focus on social justice, creative process and radical gratitude. To learn more go to www.melinabondy.com