



# GENEROSITY — A KEY TO HAPPINESS

by Andrew Marshall

An article examining generosity as a way to self-growth

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**I**t is hard to be generous – really generous – and yet it is the key to much happiness. Generosity only arises when we feel free to give and most people have a limit to the extent of that sense of freedom. If we think for a moment of those areas in life where there is a sense of being able to give freely as lighter in nature, it can pay us to see why we also have some darker areas. Many people can be generous towards those whom they love but, even when a need is clearly seen elsewhere, may find it difficult to express generosity outside that restricted circle. When we are like that, it is as though part of us is closed off; the shutters are down, the windows closed and the blinds drawn. Although being that way may seem to be the easiest option, the fact is that in closing ourselves off to others we engage in an act of self-deception, because in that moment we deny our true nature, which is boundless. So often we justify why we shouldn't give – for example “charity begins at home” is often quoted as a reason for not giving to a cause which is outside one's own community – when really what is happening is that deep down the thought of giving is making us feel uncomfortable.

## *Finding the light switch*

Using terms such as light and dark to indicate freely flowing generosity on the

one hand and its opposite on the other can be helpful because, as we shall see, the darker area is simply suffering from a lack of illumination – the light of understanding is absent. Joy comes, though, in the realisation that this is easily remedied; we simply have to find the light switch and use it. That is what this article is about; in itself it won't switch on anyone's light because we have to do that for ourselves – it has to be an act of self-discovery. But it can be useful sometimes to be reminded that there is a switch and where it might be found.

## *Holding back*

When we feel unable or reluctant to give, it is useful to understand what is going on with our internal reactions. After all, the sun gives off its energy in an expression of abundant radiance, so why shouldn't we? In a sense, we are a little like the sun – each of us is an energy system and we radiate energy all the time. It would seem totally bizarre if the sun chose to withdraw its light and warmth on a whim, yet there is something in our internal mechanism that causes us to act on whims and to discriminate by favouring some people over others. You might say, and many would say, that it simply wouldn't be practical to give equally to all, and of course that is true when we are talking about limited resources. But generosity has more to do with how we *are* rather than how we deal with resources of a physical nature. How we deal with physical resources is affected by our outlook but it is our attitude that needs to be remedied first, then everything else follows. If our outlook on others and on the world is pinched or restrictive, everything we think, say and do is

hampered as a consequence. We will not be feeling comfortable and certainly not radiant; at some level, we will know that we are cheating or depriving ourselves, even though we might not be able to say why. That's the bad news; however, the good news is that the converse is equally true – an abundant and selfless attitude will enhance our thoughts, speech, actions and well-being.

### *Our nature is boundless*

It is helpful – some would say vital – to understand that when our giving nature is subdued or even obliterated, it is a reflection of the way we see ourselves. That doesn't mean that we have failed to see ourselves as generous but that our view of our true nature is wrong. Instead of understanding fully and completely that our true nature is in fact boundless and totally unrestricted, we see ourselves as “me” – and “me”, by definition, is restricted. “Me” is not boundless; on the contrary, the concept of “me” creates boundaries – between “me” and “you” and “them”. Quite understandably, we think in terms of “my” property, resources, money and so on and so forth. Members of religious orders are allowed very few possessions to help train them not to see things as “mine” but most of us living in the world have at least some possessions, or a stake in them, because, by and large, that is how the material world operates. Nevertheless, it is possible to change our view so that we have a happier and freer state of mind.

### *Nothing is owned*

If we see ourselves as boundless in nature, it becomes obvious that there is nothing to own because the little sense of “me”

dissolves and with it so does the notion of “mine”. Just as important, if not more so, is the fact that if our own nature is boundless, so is that of everyone; indeed, everything is included in that boundless state. Every material thing is just an aspect of the universe that appears for a while before it changes into something else; nothing is permanent. For the sake of orderly human conduct, there is the custom of regarding things as property and of there being someone, or some group, to whom that property is attached. The deeper reality, though, is that there is nothing that can be owned nor is there any permanent entity that can claim ownership. Now, if we realise that it is not possible to own anything because there is no “me” and no “other”, we can enjoy a wonderful sense of freedom. If we don't really own anything, then we need have no fear of losing anything. Rather than feeling that we *own* things, we can enjoy life much more and feel less restricted by taking the view that we have *responsibility for managing* things which are temporarily in our care. And if we are interested in our spiritual well-being, in the sense of living our real potential, we will know that having responsibility for things requires us to use them for the highest good.

### *Two opposing laws in harmony*

Some people may take the view that someone who speaks of generosity has lost touch with reality and is advocating that we should all give everything away to lead lives of poverty and destitution. That is so far from the case. There are said to be two opposing natural laws – abundance and economy. The first may be thought of as outgoing or yang and the other as restrictive or yin. Rather than seeing them

as opposing laws, is better to see them as complementary. The law of economy requires that resources are sometimes conserved and the law of abundance demands that sometimes they should be used. In general, most people tend towards economy more than abundance but really there should be a healthy balance. Economy may be thought of as an inward moving force that enables the maintenance of structure, and abundance as radiance that comes from the centre. Generosity is not about giving things away willy-nilly but about being responsibly abundant – allowing our natural radiance to come from within so that we give out warmth in all that we say and do. It means being fearless with what we have – knowing with full confidence when it is right to give and also when it is right to conserve; when it is right to speak and when to remain silent, when to act and when to refrain from action. Those who practise t'ai chi will recognise the same principles applying to their art – fully giving and fully yielding can only happen when inside there is fearlessness and a total letting go of all tension and attachment. Only then can one's essence manifest as the soft but boundless energy of chi; to be able to do that takes many years, if not decades, of application and training but, as in all things, all we have to do is make a start.

### *Money*

Being able to handle money happily and responsibly is part of generosity but there is more to having an abundant attitude to life than dealing with cash. Nevertheless, money needs to be mentioned because currency represents energy. A coin or a note is almost worthless in itself; it is what

it represents that gives it value. That is why most movement of money now occurs without actual cash changing hands. If money circulates, energy circulates, usually in the form of goods or services of one description or another. It is one medium for the working out of the law of cause and effect. If we withhold money when we should give it, we are causing energy to stagnate and if we spend it when we should conserve it, we are dissipating energy needlessly. The human world is very unbalanced in terms of wealth – that is common knowledge – and the causes for that state of affairs are very complex. As individuals, we cannot organise a cure for this imbalance because it requires a collective effort that can only follow on from collective thought; however, we can contribute to that collective thought by dealing with money as responsibly and generously as we can.

### *Learning a better way*

Apart from money, what is there that we can or should do? Generosity is about energy and is about self-expression; one can only be generous by giving of oneself. When we feel ourselves holding back or avoiding doing something, it is a moment to examine ourselves honestly. The simple question is - is holding back the best thing I can do? Sometimes the answer will be yes, but often we will know that there is a better way of being and acting. If someone is talking to us, how fully are we listening? Listening with our full presence is an act of generosity; putting on an appearance of listening while the mind wanders elsewhere is not. Helping someone and wishing we were doing something else is not generosity; doing it

fully and willingly without wanting any reward or recognition is.

Until we are able to maintain the view of boundlessness, which may take many years of meditation and living mindfully to establish, we can cultivate an attitude of generosity by developing kindness. By expressing kindness to all whom we meet and by thinking kindly of other people instead of judging them, gradually the “juices of the heart” will start to flow and, as they do, our sense of well-being, happiness and inner freedom will grow. Then we will be able to act with spontaneity rather than with contrivance or calculation; we will act naturally and with ease. As a result, we will become better human beings and there is nothing the world needs more than that.

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