

## On Not Being Stingy

By Roshi Nancy Mujo Baker

The Eighth Zen Precept is about more than emptying your pockets.

Stingy—it's a funny word. Scrooge comes to mind. We usually think of "stingy" in terms of possessions and possessiveness—not sharing what we own, being tight with money. Notice that the word "tight" describes what it actually feels like to be stingy.

There are many ways of being stingy. For example, a friend of mine, someone I dearly love, is very stingy with the servings she gives to people whenever she is the hostess. It's noticeable to her guests—everything on their plates is very small. Rumi describes stinginess perfectly in his poem "Dervish at the Door":



A dervish knocked at a house  
to ask for a piece of dry bread  
or moist, it didn't matter.

"This is not a bakery," said the owner.

"Might I have a bit of gristle, then?"

"Does this look like a butcher shop?"

"A little flour?"

"Do you hear a grinding stone?"

"Some water?"

"This is not a well."

Whatever the dervish asked for,  
the man made some tired joke  
and refused to give him anything.

Finally the dervish ran into the house,  
lifted his robe and squatted  
as though to take a shit.

"Hey, hey!"

"Quiet, you sad man. A deserted place

is a fine spot to relieve oneself.  
and since there's no living thing here  
or means of living, it needs fertilizing.”

The dervish began his own list  
of questions and answers.

“What kind of bird are you? Not a falcon,  
trained for the royal hand, Not a peacock,  
painted with everyone's eyes, Not a parrot,  
that talks for sugar cubes, Not a nightingale,  
that sings like someone in love.  
Not a hoopoe that brings messages to Solomon.  
Or a stork that builds on a cliffside.

What exactly do you do?  
You are no known species.

You haggle and make jokes  
to keep what you own for yourself.

You have forgotten about the One  
who doesn't care about ownership,  
who doesn't try to turn a profit  
from every human exchange.”

(Translated by Coleman Barks, from *The Essential Rumi*)

The One, or Oneness, as we might say in Zen, never tries to turn a profit from anything at all. It wouldn't even make sense. We, on the other hand, are always trying to turn a profit from every human exchange. We are always trying to get something—admiration, love, recognition, praise, acknowledgment, even just staying connected. Think how we manipulate and bargain and negotiate to turn a profit from every interaction. Much of this is subtle, unconscious habit. Even when we give, or serve, or love, or pay attention, we're trying to get something. Sometimes it's just to get back some of what we give.

So what are we stingy with in all these cases? One of the things we're stingy with is one hundred percent. We're stingy with the possibility of doing something one hundred percent. Imagine loving one hundred percent. Imagine acknowledging someone one hundred percent, with no thought of getting something in return, which would take part of it away and make it seventy percent, or even twenty percent. We're also stingy with the truth, the truth of what's really going on in us—what we really want. We hold onto the truth, hold it back, withhold it. We play our cards close to the chest, covering the heart.

We also try to turn a profit in practice—to get something from it. We try to get better. We try to get enlightenment. We try to get seen for doing it right. What are we being stingy with here? Wholehearted surrender to the present moment or to what is. Think how stingy we are

with that. Think how tightly we hold on. We also imagine that in practicing, what we will “get” will be ours—which is, of course, the greatest delusion of all.

And then there is surrender. In addition to treating it as a bargaining tool—“I’ll surrender to the present moment and then get something back”—we imagine that surrender is something we can do. If it were wholehearted surrender, there wouldn’t be anyone there to do the surrendering. So how do we surrender? How do we do this nondoing? We have to be taken, if you will. We can only prepare the conditions for being taken. Taken by what? By the present moment, by Ultimate Reality, by the Absolute, by God. And the way we prepare those conditions is by staying here now, by giving up all our negotiations, our bargaining, our “getting.” Bargaining is something stingy people do all the time: “I’ll do this if you do that”; “I’ll do this in order to get that.” It’s always a kind of tit for tat—conditional. Think of the notion of unconditional love. It’s interesting that we usually think about how nice it would be to receive it.

We are stingy with anything we hold onto—any person, any situation, anything that’s going on in us that we are unwilling to open to. We are stingy when we’re not fully participating in what’s happening here and now. Imagine wholeheartedly being here, for whatever it is—a class, a meeting, a dinner, gardening, a fretting baby. We are stingy when we’re withholding anything about the truth of where we are. We are stingy when we don’t take risks. We are stingy when we’re not compassionate. We are stingy with our tears, with kind words, with openheartedness, with open-mindedness.

What else are we stingy with? What else do we hold onto? Security. Self-images. Pain. Suffering. Unwillingness to suffer. Being right. Truth. Love. Being a victim. Need for recognition. Time. Praise. Think of how we hang onto those things. We don’t give them away; we don’t share them. One of the important things that we’re stingy with is gratitude. It’s amazing how stingy we can be with “Thank you.” Think of the gratitude expressed in grace before meals. The Zen version begins, “Seventy-two labors brought us this food. We should know how it comes to us.” Are we wholehearted in knowing that—and expressing our gratitude—or are we stingy? I think Mary Oliver is reminding us of this wholehearted gratitude in her poem “Rice”:

It grew in the black mud,  
It grew under the tiger’s orange paws.  
Its stems thinner than candles, and as straight.  
Its leaves like the feathers of egrets, but green.  
The grains cresting, wanting to burst.  
O, blood of the tiger.

I don’t want you just to sit down at the table.  
I don’t want you just to eat, and be content.  
I want you to walk out into the fields  
where the water is shining, and the rice has risen.  
I want you to stand there, far from the white tablecloth.  
I want you to fill your hands with the mud, like a blessing.

(“Rice,” from *New and Selected Poems, Volume 1*, published by Beacon Press)

We can also be stingy with receiving gratitude. With receiving praise. I had a great lesson in this at age sixteen when my favorite teacher complimented me on a paper I'd written. I remember exactly where I was standing on the stairway. And I behaved like a stingy sixteen-year-old, embarrassed yet pleased at the compliment, wanting to hang onto it but making a mess of receiving it. The teacher grasped my forearm with her long, slender fingers and said, "Don't be so ungracious." I'll never forget it. It is a kind of stinginess to not be gracious, to not receive with gratitude what is given to us. Many of Mary Oliver's poems are about being grateful for, and graciously receiving, the world. In "Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches," she writes:

Do you think this world is only an entertainment for you?  
Never to enter the sea and notice how the water divides with perfect courtesy, to let you in!

Consider what the Japanese Zen master Eihei Dogen has to say about the Eighth Precept: "One phrase, one verse, ten thousand forms, one hundred grasses, one Dharma, one realization, all Buddhas. All teachers. Since the beginning there has never been Being Stingy." What he's talking about is Ultimate Reality, the Absolute, the Faceless One—the "One," as Rumi calls it. There is nothing stingy about the One. There can't be, because there's nothing "outside" it. Stinginess implies separation, but there is no separation here. When it comes to this world of multiplicity, it is manifested over and over and over again, from moment to moment—there is nothing stingy there. It is a gift, given to us constantly—alive, pulsating. Love, trees, fingers, the sea and its dividing water when we step in—everything is a gift. Another Zen master, Keizan, writes in the "Denkoroku":

The light of the Mind—moon, and colors of the eye-flower are splendid;  
Shining forth and blooming beyond time, who can appreciate them?

. . .

Sourceless stream from a ten-thousand-foot cliff,  
Washing out stones, scattering clouds, gushing forth.  
Brushing away the snow, making the flowers fly wildly—  
A length of pure white silk beyond the dust.

Look at the language here: "shining forth," "blooming," "gushing forth." That length of pure white silk beyond the dust displays no stinginess in its manifestation. Spring blossoms, sweeping, walking, Auschwitz, nuclear waste, life, death, our lives—all are gushing forth. Another verse from Master Keizan uses my favorite image:

That One whose whole life is extremely active and lively  
We call the One who raises the eyebrows and blinks.

That One, the Faceless One, who raises the eyebrows and blinks— what a wonderful image of this manifest world, this world of many-ness, that we live in, that we are. That One whose life is extremely active and lively—nothing stingy here.

What about my life? What about myself? To not be stingy with my life, with myself, is to fully express myself at every moment—fully express everything that I am. I'm not talking about "exercising my talents, my gifts." Exercising one's talents is not what "fully expressing

oneself ” means. When we are fully expressed from moment to moment, we are transparent. There is no one there to know whether talents are being exercised, much less my talents. Nor is it my life. Again, in “Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches,” Mary Oliver writes:

Listen, are you breathing just a little, and calling it a life? . . .  
For how long will you continue to listen to those dark shouters, caution and prudence?

And I would add stinginess.

Not being stingy with one’s life, with one’s self, with this precious short gift we’ve been given is often associated with voice, with finding one’s voice. Rumi writes:

Let your throat song be clear  
and strong enough  
To make an emperor fall full length  
suppliant at the door . . .

You that come to birth  
and bring the mysteries.  
Your voice thunder  
makes us happy.  
Roar lion of the heart  
and tear me open.

In Buddhism we have the lion’s roar. Mary Oliver expresses her own version of this in “West Wind”:

And the speck of my heart, in my shed of flesh  
and bone, began to sing out, the way the sun  
would sing if the sun could sing, if light had  
a mouth and tongue, if the sky had a throat . . .

Voice, our primary example of expression, shows up as a metaphor for the manifestation of the One, as well as in the notion that everything “preaches the dharma.” Dogen says in a little verse, “Are not even the sounds of the bustling marketplace, the preaching of the dharma?” No stinginess here. Everything preaches the dharma—nuclear waste, skunks, flowers, grass—and does so fully and completely. What is, is not stingy. There is nothing withheld.

So here we are, stingy in this way and that, wanting not to be. How do we work with this? The first thing is to not be stingy in discovering who we are in relation to stinginess. “Where am I stingy? About what? With whom?” we need to ask. Can we take a good, neutral look at ourselves, with no preferences? Can we compassionately allow what is, or who we are in the relative sense? Can we explore deeply enough to feel the withholding, the tightness, maybe even the fear? Can we feel safe enough, not-stingy enough, to express who we are, where we are, to another? Coming to terms with who I am in relation to stinginess—and doing so

with no judgment—is one thing, but being not-stingy enough to place my stinginess right out on the table before others takes the practice even deeper.

What are we doing when we do this? What is happening? Master Sosan, the author of the Zen poem that begins “The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences,” also says something in that poem about letting things “take their course.” It’s as if everything wants to liberate itself, to take its course, and we, out of our fear—out of our stinginess—prevent that from happening. Mary Oliver’s poem “The Kookaburras” is precisely about this:

In every heart there is a coward and a procrastinator.  
In every heart there is a god of flowers, just waiting  
to come out of its cloud and lift its wings.  
The kookaburras, kingfishers, pressed against the edge of their cage,  
they asked me to open the door.  
Years later I wake in the night and remember how I said to them,  
no, and walked away.  
They had the brown eyes of soft-hearted dogs.  
They didn’t want to do anything so extraordinary, only to fly  
home to their river.  
By now I suppose the great darkness has covered them.  
As for myself, I am not yet a god of even the palest flowers.  
Nothing else has changed either.  
Someone tosses their white bones to the dung-heap.  
The sun shines on the latch of their cage.  
I lie in the dark, my heart pounding.

(“The Kookaburras,” from *House of Light*, published by Beacon Press)

By opening that cage door, by letting out whatever we imprison inside us, we are letting things take their course. We are not being stingy with stinginess or who we are in regard to this or any of the other precepts. By letting the kookaburras fly away, we let them take their course and transform themselves. It is then that the precepts begin to manifest naturally. Dogen says of his enlightenment:

For fifty-four years  
Following the way of heaven,  
Now leaping beyond  
shattering every barrier.  
Amazing!  
To cast off all attachments  
While still alive!  
Plunging into the yellow spring!

This is the precept of not being stingy.