

Lemon Cake Generosity

by Lisa Hoffman

I was visiting my mother in Ohio, when she suggested that I go next door because her neighbor had something for me. Frances is 87 years old and has such poor circulation from heart disease that her legs swell and it's hard for her to stand for very long. That condition is complicated by other health problems, including chronic back pain. Often all she can do is lie down and listen to books on tape -- she doesn't see very well.

I knocked on her door, and discovered that Frances had baked me a lemon pound cake. Her cozy little apartment, filled with photos of family and friends, was warm and fragrant like a bakery. She had even poked holes in the top of the batter and squeezed lemon juice into them. I could only imagine what this project had cost her physically, yet there she was with an affectionate smile. The words *you shouldn't have* arose in my mind, but caught on my tongue until they dissipated. I met her delight with my own, and we shared hot tea and steaming slices of lemon cake.

As I walked back to Mom's apartment, I wondered why I hadn't told Frances that she shouldn't have troubled her aching body so much. I feel protective toward her; she is one of those special beings who naturally touches hearts and open minds. And in that spirit, some part of me knew that her complete and wholehearted generosity had to be met with the same energy. How can there be generosity if a gift is not received? And who knows how many other acts of giving would have been lost had I not welcomed Frances' lemon pound cake with wide open arms? Generosity inspires its own unique karma, defined here as cause and effect. There is generative relationship when accepting Frances' gift moves me to pay it forward to others.

Generosity was one of the Buddha's first lessons, and it became known as Dana Paramita. Both words are Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language. Paramita means perfection, and a group of these teachings reveal how to cultivate freedom from suffering. They are specific practices for how we move through our lives and this world, how we treat ourselves and others, and whether we are helpful or cause pain. Dana is the first Paramita, and the other five are: shila or our actions; kshanti or patience and inclusiveness; virya or energy; dhyana or how and what we focus on; and prajna or wisdom -- do we create separation or connection?

It's easy to focus on things and money when looking at generosity. But my experience with Frances was about so much more than cake. That cake was energy, time and love. It represented the connection and the relationship between Frances and me. Receiving her gift was acknowledging her and that relationship. My teacher, Darlene Cohen, describes generosity as the flow of life itself -- what living offers right here, right now. Generosity is ceaseless giving and receiving, and by doing so we contribute to that flow continuously. It's described as a wheel that turns until, as Robert Aiken writes in [The Practice of Perfection](#), there is no giver, no gift, no receiver. It is our seamless participation in abundance that is all around. The air we breathe and the crisp apple we bite into are examples of this abundance.

I was in Ohio because my mother, Audrey, was being treated for MALT lymphoma cancer in her stomach, and I wanted to be with her, my brother Mike, sister-in-law Christina and my nieces Paige and Brittany, who live close by. The flow of Dana was obvious in so many ways in this situation. Mike and Christina were doing Mom's shopping, running errands, and helping around the house. Neighbors were keeping an eye on her. I was calling every day, doing what I could from San Francisco to be useful, and making extra cross-country trips during her treatment. But the reason it all flowed was because for the first time in her life, my strong and independent mother was accepting help. And one of her gifts in return was telling us how she really felt. Sometimes she was scared, sometimes she was angry, and always she was determined to fight what she called, "the alien within." She shared it all with us. Our help was met by her grateful acceptance and honesty. This life-threatening situation was opening our family further and drawing us closer. I could feel the wheel of Dana turning.

As the trip unfolded and I went with Mom to her daily radiation treatments, I realized that everything is Dana, because everything is the flow of our lives. Even things I didn't want -- Mom's cancer, my own chronic pain condition, a client I was sure delighted in torturing well-meaning nonprofit consultants. It was a startling recognition. And it is a challenge. How will I meet the unfolding of my life? How can I be part of the flow when it is painful? The Buddha taught wholeheartedness -- full engagement in the present moment. During that difficult time, I reflected on what this lesson meant. Did it mean always being positive and happy? Regarding everything and everyone as a gift?

For me, it meant sinking into experience completely, held by Buddha's teaching of impermanence. My siblings and I had emotions about Mom's cancer that were all over the map, from anxiety to determination. I saw that impermanence infused the flow of what was happening: fear, hope, reacting to cancer test results, and thinking the best or the worst arose and subsided, over and over. We could trust truth of change, even when we didn't like what it brought. That aversion is also part of the unending transformation that is moment-to-moment life. Embracing the flow meant embracing that aversion, holding it lightly, and seeing what would happen next.

The flow of life doesn't always feel good. My siblings and I certainly wouldn't have described our mother's cancer as a gift. Its entrance into our lives was a tidal wave that began with Mom hemorrhaging in the middle of the night, and continued with her near death during a three-day stay in intensive care. Once Mom was stabilized and diagnosed, there were months of treatment and not knowing. With every twist and turn of the cancer, we supported each other and cared for our mother. Her fight was inspiring, and her honesty allowed us to give what was needed, whether it was extra support during the hard weeks, and extra cheerleading during the good ones. We all became closer, and found that we were a strong team -- Team Audrey!

Mom and I have always had a deep connection, and it became stronger during and after our family's cancer journey. "One of the best things about getting cancer," she said to me one day, "is that your weekly calls have become daily calls!" I don't call her every day now that she is cancer free, more than a year later, but I do call her more frequently and that *is* a gift. It's often just a quick hello, but that connection means everything.

I'm tempted to say that the positive and obviously inspiring aspects of Mom's cancer are *the* examples of Dana. But I do feel that it's all Dana, the unstoppable flow of life. And without complete engagement, life feels like a narrow hallway I'm cautiously stepping through to avoid bumping into the walls. But the bumps are inevitable, and a lot easier to handle when I exit the hallway and simply freefall when I need to. And there's usually someone around to help me get up. I find that abundance and joy spill over from life that includes everything -- family and friends, cancer, impossible clients, and, yes, lemon cake.

Thanks, Frances. Thanks, Mom.

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