

On Not Taking What Isn't Freely Given

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The past couple of months, I have been looking for ways to come at a fundamental issue: how should I be in the world? Suddenly, very late in life, I'm realizing that I've never, directly, addressed that question. I've looked at what who I am and what I'm trying to get done in my life, and I've attended to self-improvement, but I haven't given serious attention to my basic posture or stance as a human being, including—it's the focus here—toward other people.

In this regard, I've become intrigued with Four Nobel Truths of Buddhism. I'm not getting into them here, but take this as a recommendation that you investigate them as a possible basic personal orientation. They focus on how to how to deal with the hard realities that life inevitably involves suffering, that nothing is permanent, and that, for all of us, there's going to illness, aging, and death. These facts of human existence are really bearing in on me now at eighty.

The Fourth Nobel Truth is what's called the Eightfold Path, eight basic principles to guide one's thoughts and actions in the world, moment-to-moment, day-to-day. They include right thought, right action, right speech, right livelihood, and mindfulness. A book I have found helpful and recommend is *The Beginner's Guide to Walking the Buddhist Eightfold Path* by Jean Smith (Bell Tower, 2002).

This week, I was reading the Smith book and a precept jumped out at me. *Don't take anything that isn't freely given.* I can't remember the context—where it fit into Smith's discussion of the Eightfold Path. For me, it was a stand-alone idea that has gotten me thinking.

Looking over my life, I've spent a lot of time and energy trying to get things that weren't being readily offered or given. That's been the case in every context of my life: in my family, with friends, with love interests, with my children, and in work. I tried to get people

to think about me in certain ways, and be with me in certain ways, and give me certain things, when to a greater or lesser extent, they would rather not.

Taking, or trying to take, what wasn't being freely given hasn't been good for me or the other people. Pushing people to give me what they haven't offered me and would just as soon not give me has been draining, self-demeaning, self-defeating, and unrewarding. I've decided that being around people who grudgingly or dutifully give you what you coax or coerce out of them at best provides transitory and unsatisfying payoffs and, on balance, brings you down because you feel like an exploiter, which, really, you are. Begging for table scraps to be tossed your way simply isn't an honorable way to be. Continuing that metaphor, you're an eager dog wiggling and wagging its tail; there's no dignity in that. I've done a lot of wiggling and wagging in my life. And in some cases, I've barked and growled to get what I had decided I wanted or needed, and that's bullying people, there's no virtue in that.

It's understandable that we might try to get something out of somebody who would rather not give it to us. We may have the idea that nobody wants to give anything to us, and thus if we are going to get anything from anybody, we'll have to extract it from them. Or we may be in a circumstance where coaxing, pleading, threatening, coercing, et al., is part of the accepted way to go about things. I spent my working life in teaching, at the high school and college levels. Those jobs--at least as they are conventionally conceived--involve trying to get students to like something and do something--math, let's say--when they don't like it and would rather not do it. More, teaching involves getting students to like and admire you the teacher when that doesn't square with their take on you. Five or ten or thirty or forty years of playing your act to an uninterested, and even hostile, audience can turn you to drink and large bags of Fritos to get through your day. Even if you are, or get, good at winning students over--teacher of the year awards big enrollments, admiring nods--you feel like an aging open-mike comic doing your Robin Williams act (and look how he wound up).

More to be said, which I'm not up to doing. I'll end this with a couple suggested rules to live by:

Quit taking anything that isn't freely given, cut it out. It's not good for you and it's not good for--and not fair to--the other person. Quit pestering people and trying to control them.

Put your energy into getting around people that freely give to you. If for whatever reason you can't manage that, take a nice warm shower, wash your hair, put on clean clothes and find a good book to read, take a leisurely walk, or whatever it is that gives you dignity and peace. You'll feel better about yourself and your life doing that rather than chasing after the uninterested and resistant, and you'll get to sleep tonight with no meds at all.