

As If There Is Nothing to Lose

How giving comes from gratitude.

By [*Sallie Jiko Tisdale*](#)

Once I was young and poor—and generous. I shared an old house with several people and slept on the porch and owned nothing more valuable than my bicycle. I volunteered many hours every week at community organisations. One day, when I had only five dollars, I treated a friend to dinner, and afterward we laughed about my now total poverty. It was easy to give away what I had; I never doubted that the world would somehow provide for me in turn.

Now I have a house and a car and a savings account, and I am not so generous. I do give—my money, my time, my attention—but sometimes I give reluctantly, with a little worry. Sometimes I want a nicer house, a newer car. I wonder if I have enough money saved. I want more time to myself. It is not just a matter of youth and age. I have many more things now, and that means I have more things to lose.

When I had little, everything I had was important. If I found a sweater I liked at the Charity shop, it felt like my birthday. In a way, having nothing meant everything in the world was mine. Even a sandwich was cause for celebration, and nothing distracted me from enjoying it. Every gift was a delight, and I was grateful for everything I had.

Gratitude, the simple and profound feeling of being thankful, is the foundation of all generosity. I am generous when I believe that right now, right here, in this form and this place, I am myself being given what I need. Generosity requires that we relinquish something, and this is impossible if we are not glad for what we have. Otherwise the giving hand closes into a fist and won't let go.

This generosity, arising from abundance, is natural. We see it in the world around us all the time. Haya Akegarasu loved spring. “Young grasses,” he wrote, “I can't help it—I want to kiss you.” To him the spring grasses were

great teachers, because they made a “whole effort” to simply live their lives. “Their growth is a long, wide tongue that covers the whole world,” he said. I see a fearless generosity in the flowers and trees, in the way birds sing out at dawn, in the steady drumming of the rain. As I grew older and found I had things to protect, I forgot. I completely forgot that I had always had enough in the first place. Now I am trying to learn this once again—total abundance, nothing begrudged.

[Sallie Jiko Tisdale](#) is a lay dharma teacher at Dharma Rain Zen Center, and a dharma heir of Kyogen Carlson.