

Dana in the Theravada Buddhist Tradition

A. Teachings on Dana

“And what is the accomplishment of generosity? Here, a noble disciple dwells at home with a mind free from stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in relinquishment, one devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing.”

The Buddha

The practice of giving or dana (*dāna* in Pali) has a pre-eminent place in the teachings of the Buddha. When the Buddha gave what is called a “graduated discourse” on the Dhamma, dana was the first topic he taught. The practice appears first in many important lists, e.g. in 10 “perfections” (*paramis*), the 10 karmically fruitful actions, and the three meritorious actions. It also is considered one of the essential attributes of a mature person (*sappurisa*), the others being faith, morality, learning, and wisdom. Dana can be said to serve both as a traditional entry to the Buddhist path and as the basis for further spiritual development. By stressing the importance of generosity as a preliminary aspect of the practice, the Buddha was insuring that Buddhist practice remains rooted in healthy relationships with others.

While *dāna* refers to the act of giving and to the donation itself, the Buddha used the word *caga* to refer to the inner virtue of generosity which insures that dana is connected to the Path. This use of *caga* is particularly significant because it also means “relinquishment” or “renunciation”. An act of generosity entails giving more than is required, customary, or expected relative to one’s resources and circumstances. Certainly it involves renunciation of stinginess, clinging, and greed. But even when these are not present, generosity entails some giving of one’s self and of one’s self-interest. Because of this, the Buddha stressed that spiritual efficacy of a gift is not dependent on the amount given but rather the attitude with which it is given. A small donation that stretches a person of little means is considered to have greater spiritual consequence than a large but personally insignificant donation from a wealthy person.

The Buddha emphasized the joy of giving. Dana is not meant to be obligatory or done reluctantly. Rather dana should be performed when the giver is “delighted before, during, and after giving.” Although giving for the purposes of helping others is an important part of the motivation and joy of giving, the Buddha considered giving for the purpose of attaining *Nibbana* as the highest motivation. For this latter purpose “one gives gifts to adorn and beautify the

mind.” Among these adornments are non-clinging, loving-kindness, and concern for the well being of others.

For lay people, the Buddha considered the morally just acquisition of wealth and financial security to be a desirable source of happiness. However, he did not consider wealth to be an end in itself. Rather its value lay in uses to which it was put. The Buddha likened a person who enjoyed wealth without sharing it with others to someone digging one’s own grave. The Buddha also compared the person who righteously earns wealth and gives it to the needy to a person who has two eyes. The stingy person who does not share his or her wealth was compared to someone with only one eye.

Finally, the Buddha understood that giving can be a powerfully significant source of merit with long term benefits both in this life and in lives to come. While the teachings on merit do not carry much meaning for many Western Dharma practitioners, these teachings suggest that there are unseen pathways by which consequences of our actions return to us. Dana is one of the ways we can take care of this unseen world.

In its form as a “perfection” or *parami*, dana is clearly linked to the practice of liberation. The ten perfections are the inner forces or dispositions of generosity, virtue, renunciation, wisdom, strength, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity. These need to be developed sufficiently to provide the strength of character to walk the path of practice to its culmination. In order for each of these qualities to be a perfection it needs to be joined with both with compassion and with an understanding of how it can be a support for one’s own Awakening. The beauty of the perfections is the way that compassion toward others and one’s own spiritual development are seen as inclusive of each other. As the first perfection, generosity is foundation upon which the other perfections are developed.

The Buddha specifically set up the monastic way of life to exist in dependence on dana from lay supporters. This is to encourage humility and renunciation among the monks and nuns, and to ensure that the monastics do not become isolated from the laity. The traditional donations to the monastics are alms-food, robes, medicine, and places in which to live. In exchange, the monastics give teachings and the example of their practice-based life. It is said that “the gift of the *dhamma* excels all gifts.” However, in giving instruction on how the Dharma should be taught the Buddha specifically taught that “One should not teach for the sake of material gain.” In other words, the teachings were meant to be given without concern for financial rewards. This is usually interpreted that the teaching should be offered freely.

Down through the ages the monastic community has been the primary vehicle that has safeguarded and transmitted the liberation teachings of the Buddha. This means that the preservation of the Dharma in the Theravada tradition has historically been very much dependent on the dana monastics receive from lay supporters. However, it is important to remember that this dana was

given within a well-developed system of reciprocal relationships. Precise responsibilities and regulations governed how the monastics received dana and used it, and how they used it, and how they made themselves worthy to receive it.

B. Dana in the Western Insight Meditation Movement

From the time of the first residential Vipassana retreats in 1974, the Insight Meditation teachers have been firmly committed to offering teachings freely. This has meant that retreats and sitting groups have been taught on a dana basis. Whereas retreatants pay for the expenses of putting on a retreat, the teachers are not compensated from the retreat fees. Rather, if they wish, the retreatants offer donations to the teachers and staff, often anonymously.

For more than a quarter of a century the generous and inspired donations of countless individuals have supported and nourished the growth of the Insight Meditation community. This goodwill has taken concrete form in the retreat centers of IMS and Spirit Rock, the publishing of the *Inquiring Mind*, the Dhammadana publications of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, and recently the work of Dharma Seed Tape Catalog. Some 70 plus teachers travel around the country offering over 100 residential retreats a year, all on dana. Many, many people have donated their time and labor in innumerable acts of service to the Dharma. Every person who has participated in an Insight Meditation retreat has been the recipient of other people's generosity of money, time, talent and encouragement.

Within Theravada Buddhism the Dharma has traditionally been taught freely, with teachers supported by dana. What is new within the Western Insight Meditation Movement is that the teachers are almost all lay people including a sizable number of householders supporting families. There have been lay teachers in Asia, however these were few in numbers and they never taught within a self-contained network of fellow lay teachers.

In the early years of teaching in the West, retreat dana was small. Retreat staff served out of love of the Dharma and service, with no or little expectation of financial compensation. Teachers lived frugally, often with not enough money to pay for health insurance. At times, some of the IMS teachers have felt that they would have to stop a life of full time Dharma teaching because of financial pressures.

If there were no dana or any other means of support, most teachers would not be able to teach more than a minimal amount. Teaching takes up a lot of time, not all of which is obvious to retreatants. In addition to the actual time teaching, there can time spent traveling, arranging for logistical details, study preparations

for Dharma talks, and follow-up counseling for some retreatants. In addition, teaching retreats is intensely demanding, often requiring time to recover. Not a few teachers find themselves torn between wanting to give themselves to teachings and financial considerations allowing them to do so.

Those teachers whose primary means of support has been teaching are relying on an economic system that is radically different from that of most conventional careers. The dana system has no provisions for health and disability insurance, retirement benefits, sick leave, social security, or paid time for vacation and sabbatical. The dana system is based on trust rather than any institutional form of security. A common Dharma slogan that supports this trust has been “The Dharma protects those who protect the Dharma.” Many factors support this trust. A teacher’s integrity is important because dana offers a clear opportunity for feedback. In addition, the teaching charisma (*parami*) of individual teachers can have some bearing on the amount of dana they receive.

Teaching on a dana basis as lay teachers seems to have inherent tensions. In a 1990 article in *Inquiring Mind*, Sharon Salzberg discussed some of these:

At this year’s teacher meeting in California, we talked extensively about money. The dana system is part of our heritage. I personally can’t contemplate changing it: we get so much more than money through it. Yet, in reality we are caught between many different and perhaps opposing forces – wanting to teach a lot, wanting to maintain our own study and practice, wanting to teach rather than devote ourselves to other means of livelihood, and wanting to lead household lives with some security.

Teaching on a dana basis also has inherent joys and benefits for both giver and recipients. For the teacher, the act of teaching is itself a form of dana. It helps create a field of generosity, trust, goodwill, gratitude, and the creation of a sense of community. There is an assurance that the cost of the teaching is not limiting anyone’s access to them. A number of teachers have reported they value the freedom the dana system provides. If they were to teach for a fee or salary, they feel it would come with obligations and expectations for their time and services. As the practice of generosity is a significant spiritual practice in its own right, the dana system encourages people to engage themselves with this practice. The question of how much to give in dana prompts many people to reflect deeply on their values, fears, and generosity.

Within the Insight Meditation movement it is common to claim that the Dharma has been maintained down through the centuries through the dana of people supporting it. This claim suggests, perhaps, that dana is the most common economic basis for teaching Buddhism. However, in the context of the rest of Buddhism in the West, the dana system is the exception rather than the rule. Zen Centers have membership dues and charge for retreats and classes. Tibetan Buddhist teachings are usually offered at a cost, sometimes a quite high cost.

