

Dana: Giving in the Pali Canon

as edited by

David Dale Holmes

My late, respected friend and colleague, Professor Lily de Silva, wrote one of the most expert explanations of the Buddhist (Pali) term *dana* (giving) which I wish to share with you by quoting from one of her well-known essays: (Lily de Sylva 1-4, 1990)

“*Dana*, giving, is extolled in the Pali Canon as a great virtue. It is, in fact, the beginning of the path to liberation.

When the Buddha preaches to a newcomer he starts his graduated sermon with an exposition on the virtues of giving (*danakatha*, Vin.i,15,18).

Of the three bases for the performance of meritorious deeds (*punnakiriyavatthu*), giving is the first, the other two being virtue and mental culture (A.iv,241).

It is also the first of the ten *paramita* perfected by a Buddha. Therefore, on the march towards liberation as an Arahant or a Buddha, one initially has to practice *dana*.

The Function of Giving

Giving is of prime importance in the Buddhist scheme of mental purification because it is the best weapon against greed (*lobha*), the first of the three unwholesome motivational roots (*akusalamula*).

Greed is wrapt up with egoism and selfishness, since we hold our personalities and our possessions as 'I' and 'mine.' Giving helps make

egoism thaw: it is the antidote to cure the illness of egoism and greed. "Overcome the taint of greed and practice giving," exhorts the Devatasamyutta (S.i,18)...

It is difficult to exercise this virtue of giving proportionate to the intensity of one's greed and selfishness. As such the Devatasamyutta equates giving to a battle (*danan ca yuddhan ca samanam ahu*, S.i,20). One has to fight the evil forces of greed before one can make up one's mind to give away something dear and useful to oneself.

The Latukikopama Sutta illustrates how a man lacking in spiritual strength finds it hard to give up a thing he has been used to (M.i, 449). A small quail can come to death when it gets entangled even in a useless rotten creeper. Though weak, a rotten creeper is a great bond for the small bird. But even an iron chain is not too big a bond for a strong elephant. Similarly, a poor wretched man of weak character would find it difficult to part with his shabby meager belongings, while a strong-charactered king will even give up a kingdom once convinced of the dangers of greed.

Miserliness is not the only hindrance to giving. Carelessness and ignorance of the working of kamma and survival after death are equally valid causes (*macchera ca pamada ca evam danam na diyati*, S.i,18). If one knows the moral advantages of giving, one will be vigilant to seize opportunities to practice this great virtue.

Once the Buddha said that if people only knew the value of giving as he does, they would not take a single meal without sharing their food with others (It.p,18).

Qualities of the Donor

The suttas (e.g. D.i,137) employ a number of terms to describe the qualities of a donor. He is a man with faith (*saddha*), he has faith in the nobility of a morally sound life, in the teachings of kamma and

survival after death. He believes in the possibility of the moral and spiritual perfection of man. In short, he is not a materialist, and he has faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha.

He is not merely a giver (*dayako*), he is a lordly giver (*danapati*). The commentary explains the concept of "lordly giver" in the following words: "He who himself enjoys delicious things but gives to others what is not delicious is a donor who is a slave to the gifts he gives. He who gives things of the same quality as he himself enjoys is one who is like a friend of the gift. He who satisfies himself with whatever he can get but gives delicacies to others is a lordly giver, a senior and a master of the gifts given."

The donor is also described as one who keeps an open house for the needy (*anavatadvaro*). He is like a wellspring (*opanabhuto*) for recluses, brahmins, the destitute, wayfarers, wanderers and beggars. Being such a one, he does meritorious deeds. He is munificent (*muttacago*) and is interested in sharing his blessings with others (*danasamvibhagarato*). He is a philanthropist who understands the difficulties of the poor (*vadannu*). He is open-handed and is ready to comply with another's request (*payatapani*). He is one fit to be asked from (*yacayogo*).

A noble giver is one who is happy before, during and after giving (A.iii,336). Before giving, he is happy anticipating the opportunity to exercise his generosity. While giving he is happy that he is making another happy by fulfilling a need. After giving he is satisfied that he has done a good deed.

The suttas list generosity as one of the important qualities that go to make a gentleman (A.iv,220). The Buddha compares the man who righteously earns his wealth and gives of it to the needy to a man who has both eyes, whereas the one who only earns wealth but does no merit is like a one-eyed man (A.i,129-30). The wealthy man who enjoys his riches by himself without sharing is said to be digging his

own grave (Sn. 102).

The Donations

Practically anything useful can be given as a gift. The Niddesa (ND.2, 523) gives a list of fourteen items that are fit to be given for charity. They are robes, almsfood, dwelling places, medicine and other requisites for the sick, food, drink, cloths, vehicles, garlands, perfume, unguent, beds, houses and lamps. It is not necessary to have much to practice generosity, for one can give according to one's means.

Gifts given from one's meager resources are considered very valuable (*appasma dakkhina dinna sahasena samam mita*, S.i,18; *dajjappasmim pi yacito*, Dhp. 224).

If a person leads a righteous life even though he ekes out a bare existence on gleanings, looks after his family according to his means, but makes it a point to give from his limited stores, his generosity is worth more than a thousand sacrifices (S.i, 19-20).

Alms given from wealth righteously earned is greatly praised by the Buddha (A.iii,354; It.p.66; A.iii,45-46). A householder who does so is said to be one who is lucky here and hereafter...

Even if one gives a small amount with a heart full of faith one can gain happiness hereafter. The Vimanavattha supplies ample examples. According to the Acamadayikavimanavatthu, the alms given consisted of a little rice crust, but as it was given with great devotion to an eminent Arahant, the reward was rebirth in a magnificent celestial mansion.

The Dakkhainavibhanga Sutta states that an offering is purified on account of the giver when the giver is virtuous, on account of the recipient when the recipient is virtuous, on account of both the giver and the recipient if both are virtuous, by none if both happen to be impious.

Dhammadana, the dissemination of the knowledge of the Dhamma, is said to excel all other forms of giving (*sabbadanam dhammadanam jinati*, Dhp.354).”

Reference

Bhikkhu Bodhi (ed).1990. *Dana: The Practice of Giving - Selected*