

# There's More to Giving Than We Think

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A number of years ago, I taught several workshops on the theme of generosity (*dāna*) as a spiritual practice. The audience was a group of volunteers at a community meditation center. It was a bit of a rude awakening for all of us to discover that only a few of the volunteers saw their service as an integral part of their spiritual practice. A majority of the volunteers said that they offered their time and energy because they didn't have much money and volunteering was a way to attend the meditation programs and retreats for free. In their minds, they emphasized what they were getting and not what they were giving. Others said that they volunteered because it fit in with their political philosophy. "Serving" was seen as the politically correct thing to do. They weren't particularly noticing how it felt. Still others didn't quite understand the relationship between the service they offered at the meditation center and *dāna* as a spiritual practice. They thought *dāna* simply meant offering money to teachers at the end of retreats.

One might be surprised at how these volunteers seemed to be missing their experience. It was as if the happiness of their giving lay hidden in the dark reaches of their minds waiting to be brought into their hearts—and enjoyed. But I think these apparent missed opportunities are completely understandable when we consider that, while intellectually we may know the importance of offering our time and energy to things we value, most of us are novices when it comes to taking these acts to heart.

And I suspect that few of us have given much thought to why generosity figures so prominently in the Buddha's teaching. We know that giving is a good idea and can give of ourselves when the need arises, but are we accurately reflecting on the significance of giving in terms of spiritual awakening? One renowned Theravada teacher said, "As worldliness pursues getting, which is the root of greed in action, so giving is the way to *nibbāna*."

*Dāna is not a tangent to the spiritual path; it is deeply fundamental.*

## Generosity as a Practice

When preaching to a newcomer, the Buddha always started on his graduated exposition of the Dhamma with generosity. And many believe that he placed it first on his list of spiritual perfections (*paramis*) because it is the basis for developing those that follow. Because it is listed first, I think there can be a tendency to downplay it, to see it as a preliminary practice, or to want to step over it completely so we can get to the good stuff. "Yeah, yeah, let's get on with it." But *dāna* is not a tangent to the spiritual path; it is deeply fundamental. It is the foundation upon which all else is built.

One of the senior monks in the Ajahn Chah lineage said that Buddha talked about *dāna* first because if someone didn't

understand the value of basic generosity, they weren't even teachable. If we don't have a sense of its significance, and don't have some degree of maturity in our experience of it, then other forms of practice—*sīla*, *bhāvanā*, *mettā*—won't even get off the ground. There has to be a malleability of heart, a softness, a diminished self-absorption, before the

engines can even get started! And this softness is developed largely through our increasingly mature direct experience of *dāna*.

It is not a stretch to suggest that correct understanding of generosity represents one of the first big hurdles we have to jump, however gently, along the path to freedom. One of three things abandoned at the first stage of enlightenment is clinging to rites and rituals, precepts and practices. When it comes to the practice of generosity, clinging to rites and rituals is taken to mean acting out of our conditioning or social values in such a way that we never get beyond the standards and habits of our culture or of our youth. It means getting so caught up in ideas and notions of giving, or acting so compulsively, that we go through the motions of generosity but fail to notice what is going on in our hearts. We never reflect on what *dāna* is all about; thus, we fail to experience what is possible through it.

*We seldom reflect on what dāna is all about; thus, we fail to experience what is possible through it.*

These are deep teachings. I think the Buddha is trying to help us see how clinging to views and ideas about giving can stand in the way of what we are endeavoring to realize on this path. On the one hand, we can get so heady about what we are doing that we miss our heartfelt motivations. Like the volunteers at the meditation center, we short-change ourselves. Or we cling to (and act upon!) superficial ideas of goodness, expecting that mere compliance, without deep investigation of the mind and heart, will set us free.

Ajahn Mun said that Dhamma would not serve us if all we do is comply with rules or follow directions. In other words, if we just follow the standards and practices of the people around us, or act compulsively without reflecting on what we are doing, we'll miss the great benefit to be derived from giving.

So how do we work with generosity as a spiritual practice? The answer is this: by being attuned to our motives for giving and learning from the experience itself.

### Being attuned to our motive

There are two suttas in the Anguttara Nikāya wherein the Buddha offers pointers to help us notice the ways we give and our reasons for giving. As presented, these suttas outline a broad range of means and motivations—some apparently less mature than others. But we want to take care when looking at such lists. Used incorrectly, we could easily feel deflated because our

giving may not be as clean and pure as we would like. The more skillful approach calls for an impartial examination of our actions and motivations in each act of giving. The idea is to notice our experience so that we can discover for ourselves what feels best, what makes us happy.

With generosity as a spiritual practice, we notice that sometimes we give with

### Ways of Giving (A 8.31)

There are, O monks, eight ways of giving. What eight?

1. One gives spontaneously;
2. or one gives out of fear;
3. or because of thinking, "He too has given me a gift";
4. or because of thinking, "He will give me a present, too";
5. or because of thinking that it is a good idea to give;
6. or because of thinking, "I cook, but they (being ascetics) do not; since I cook, it would not be proper for me to refuse giving a meal to those who do not cook";
7. or because of thinking, "By giving such a gift, I shall earn a good reputation";
8. or one gives because it ennobles the mind, adorns the mind.

annoyance, out of exasperation, or as a way of offending or insulting the recipient (such as to teach someone a lesson). If someone pesters us because they want something from us, for example, we may give in. “Here! Take it!”

We may give out of fear or shame, as was the case a number of years ago when, despite the fact that I had very little money at the time, I made a generous offering at the end of a retreat. I was too ashamed of my financial situation and tried to offset that with an offering that I could not afford.

Sometimes our giving has a tit-for-tat quality. For example, we may know that someone gave to us and so we give in return for the favor. This is quite common in social settings wherein we might invite someone to dinner because they invited us at an earlier time. It’s a pay back. Or, perhaps we are giving in hopes of getting something from them in return.

Sometimes our views come into play and we give because we “think” it’s a good idea. Look and see: this kind of giving is based more in the head than in the heart. We latch onto a good idea and don’t realize that we are actually clinging to an idea. In practice we notice that, relatively speaking, this identification with thought manifests as a shallow experience of giving.

Over the years, I have spent a significant amount of time at the monasteries in the lineage of Ajahn Chah, serving the monastic community. When I first went to the monastery, I had an automatic response to serving and supporting. You go to the monastery and this is what you do: you fix a meal, weed a garden, paint a building. I did all this without a flicker. Looking back, I can see that much of my actions were compulsive. For many years, I wasn’t paying attention to what was going on in this experience of offering. I was too focused on doing the right things, in the right ways.

Then about six years ago I had the opportunity to serve one of the members of the monastic community for a six-week retreat. It wasn’t until I served in this more solitary way, away from the hustle and bustle

of the monastery and the giddiness of giving, that I really began to learn about generosity. In this solitary context, I could more easily see what was driving my actions. I observed that I had a great appreciation and respect for the monks and nuns—people who had chosen to forego sensual pleasures in the interest of liberation—and I wanted to support that in any way I could. In this more solitary setting, I could more clearly see these beautiful motivations and observe what generosity was doing to my heart. It was a leap from compliance and compulsion to really taking my actions to heart, and it was lovely.

I think this is a good example of the genius of the Buddha. In setting up this special relationship between lay people and monastics, he put in place a structure that makes it possible to practice and examine our experience of generosity on a daily basis: the alms round. One would have to be emotionally insensitive or out of touch not to notice how good it feels to place food into the bowls of people who are worthy of such offerings. At the monastery, giving is an integral part of our daily routine.

*I could more clearly see what generosity was doing to my heart.*

#### **Reasons for Giving (A 8.33)**

There are, O monks, eight ways of giving. What eight?

1. People may give out of affection;
2. or in an angry mood;
3. or out of stupidity;
4. or out of fear;
5. or because of thinking: “Such gifts have been given before by my father and grandfather and it was done by them before; hence it would be unworthy of me to give up this old family tradition”;
6. or because of thinking, “By giving this gift, I shall be reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world, after death”;
7. or because of thinking, “When giving this gift, my heart will be glad, and happiness and joy will arise in me”;
8. or one gives because it ennobles and adorns the mind.

Sometimes we give to gain a good reputation. As if to encourage this, when I was a young girl our church made a point of publishing a list of parishioners and the dollar amount of their offerings at Christmas and Easter.

*At its best, dāna has to do with purification of the heart.*

The Buddha said that sometimes we give to gain heaven after death. This

can be tricky because he clearly encouraged giving as a way of ensuring a happy rebirth. In the *Cūlakammavibhanga Sutta* (M 135) he described the benefits of giving gifts to recluses and brahmins as a happy rebirth and/or prosperity in one's next human birth. But one wants to take care. Ajahn Chah often discouraged people from giving only for this reason. Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo said this kind of giving does not reach the essence of the virtue of generosity. It goes no further than simply clinging to beliefs, customs, and conventions.

We can give out of altruism, our sole intention being to help those in need. The Buddha noted that this kind of giving is one of the blessings of having enough wealth to share with others. But the Buddha said that the last item in the lists above is the most excellent motive for giving—that is, to beautify and ennoble the mind. Most other forms of giving contain some form of intention for gain or comfort. Even giving for altruistic purposes can be filled with views and craving. The Buddha said that at its best dāna has to do with purification of the heart. In order to enhance our ability for enlightenment, we rid the mind of the ugliness of greed and selfishness. He said that we should actually be doing it for that purpose. “Having given thus, not seeking his own profit, not with a mind attached [to reward], not seeking to store up for himself, ... but with the thought, ‘This is an ornament for the mind,’ ... [one] does not come back to this world.” (A 7.49) Literally, one is a non-returner.

There's a wonderful story in the Vinaya (*Mahāvagga 8:15*) about a very generous laywoman who lived at the time of the

Buddha. As the story goes, she wanted to give a large gift to the community—lifetime gifts of food, clothing and medicinal requisites. Before agreeing to receive this offering, the Buddha asked Visakhā why she wanted to make such a generous offering. Her reply may surprise you. She said that when she sees the monks and nuns she will know that they are wearing robes made out of the cloth that she offered, etc., and it will make her very happy. Thus, her mind will be calm and her meditation will go well. As if to say, “Yes, that's the right answer,” the Buddha accepted her gift.

### The fruitfulness of giving

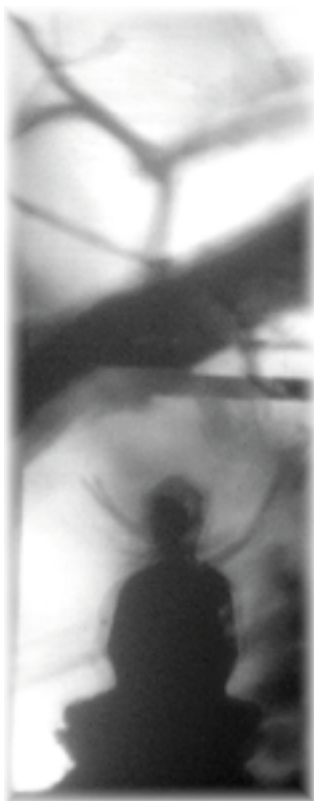
As we endeavor to understand dāna as a spiritual practice, we may also have to overcome ideas about who is most worthy of our gifts. According to the Buddhist teachings, the greatest benefit in giving comes from giving to those who are free from greed, hatred and delusion.

*Just as crops are ruined by weeds,  
People are ruined by wishes.  
Therefore it yields greatest fruit  
To give to those without wishes. (Dh 359)*

I declare that offerings made to the virtuous bring rich fruit, and not so much to those made to the immoral. (A 3.57)

You may be surprised to learn that it is more meritorious to give to a person who is highly developed than to those less developed. But we can understand this if we realize that what's most important is our state of mind in the act of giving. When giving to one who is less developed, too easily the state of mind can be one of conceit, arrogance, and even pity. These are not wholesome states, as they are filled with self-view. In the act of giving to one who is more developed, our hearts are less self-absorbed.

This does not mean, however, that we should not give to those who are less fortunate. All acts of generosity are considered positive acts. As the Buddha put it, “...Even if one throws away rinsings from



General Siha went to the Buddha and asked,  
*Is it possible, lord, to point out a fruit of generosity visible in the here and now?*

“It is possible, Siha,” replied the Buddha. “One who is generous, is dear and charming to people at large.... Furthermore, good people, people of integrity, admire one who is generous.... Furthermore, the fine reputation of one who is generous, a master of giving, is spread far and wide.... Furthermore, when one who is generous, approaches any assembly of people—noble warriors, brahmins, householders, or contemplatives—he does so confidently and without embarrassment.... Furthermore, at the break-up of the body, after death, one who is generous reappears in a good destination, the heavenly world.”  
—from the *Siha Sutta* (A 5.34)

a pot or cup into a village pool or pond, wishing that the living beings there may feed on them—even this would be a source of merit.” (A 3.57)

Elsewhere we learn that, while all gifts must be righteously obtained, it is not the gift itself that determines the benefit derived from giving: it is also the intention and state of mind of the giver and the purity of the receiver. If both the giver and the receiver are developed, the gift rises to its fullest benefit and fruition.

*When a virtuous person to a virtuous person gives  
With trusting heart a gift righteously obtained,  
Placing faith that the fruit of action is great,  
That gift, I say, will come to full fruition.*

(M 142)

The practice of generosity is not as simple as it may sound. The idea is to be attuned to the motive—whatever it is—and to learn from our direct experience. Ajahn Chah said we begin doing away with selfishness through giving. Selfishness leads to a sense of discontent, and yet people tend to be selfish without realizing how it affects them. A selfish heart takes us in the direction of self and separation from happiness. On the other hand, a selfless heart is one of the most powerful tools we have for overcoming the suffering states of greed, hatred and delusion. We override self-absorbed impulses and replace them with concern for the welfare of other people.

As a spiritual practice, *dāna* is about learning from the giving and from the holding back—to see for ourselves which feels best, to learn the subtle attachments

that cause us to hold back or to think only of ourselves, and to know the release of letting go.

*In this world, monks, there are three things  
[of value] for one who gives.  
What are these three things?*

*Before giving, the mind of the giver is happy.  
While giving, the mind of the giver is made peaceful.  
After having given, the mind of the giver is uplifted.*  
(A 3.6.37)

When we get into the groove of generosity it is as if we are getting in tune with a natural and innate human quality, working with it instead of against it.



This may be of particular value at the end of our lives. At the time of death, *dāna* sustains us. As Phra Khantipalo tells us, “The generous man will never regret his life as he lays dying nor will his mind be beset by fears regarding his future, for he can review all his generosity, all his kindness, all his support of what is good. The reviewing is called *cāgānussati*, the recollection of generosity. And when one recollects excellent conduct, even though it be a deed done many years ago, then the mind becomes quiet, peaceful and set in the way of Dhamma.”

*“We begin to do  
away with selfishness  
through giving.”*

—Ajahn Chah

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