

## Dana, Giving, Generosity



Traditional considerations regarding Dana

### 1. To whom a gift is given

- To one's own friends and relations
- To those in most need, including animals
- To those leading a religious life (without income)

### 2. What is given

- Food, shelter, clothing
- Fearlessness / confidence
- Education
- One's life(!)
- One's merit
- The Dharma

### 3. How is it given

- Courteously
- Happily
- Promptly
- Without regret
- To 'friend and foe alike'
- Everywhere and at all times observing due proportion

### 4. Why is it given

- To overcome greed and clinging

We can consider giving in connection with the positive expressions of the first two Buddhist Precepts:

With deeds of loving kindness I purify my body  
With open handed generosity I purify my body

In order to give to others there needs to be an element of receptivity, actually connecting with other human beings and becoming aware of what it is that they need. We may not always be able to do this, it is unlikely that we will always have the emotional resources or the time to take in fully all those in need who we come into contact with but where it is possible we should strive to do so.

This raises an important point, what we need to learn to avoid becoming anxious and overwhelmed by the fact that we cannot do all that we would like to do or aspire to do to help others. Although the aspiration to help is of course positive, negative mental states relating to judgement of one's abilities to do so are not helpful at all.

One way of avoiding negativity in this respect is to become positively aware of what it is that we as an individual can give and not measure ourselves against others and dwell on what we cannot give.

We all have individual talents; we may be a good and patient listener, we may be good at fixing things around the house, good at organisation, good at dealing with organisations such as social services, the NHS or businesses, good at raising our children, good at rustling up a tasty meal, good at teaching certain skills, good at boosting people's confidence, good company, a good friend.

When we consider giving in this way we may realise that it is a much broader practice than we might initially think and it becomes apparent that we are most likely giving and receiving all the time in many ways so we are indeed already practising. What we can begin to do now, in the light of the Dharma, is to bring awareness and reflection to our giving and receiving.

For instance do we express gratitude when we are the recipient? How do we feel when we have helped someone out and feel that they haven't expressed gratitude? The point of this is not to dwell upon the rights and wrongs of other people's behaviour, rather it is to be aware of our own feelings in such instances and the underlying views that they stem from, identifying the 'I', 'me' conceit and lessening its hold upon our thinking.

We may also consider; do we give graciously or grudgingly, do we give what we are best able to give or is there a sense of tension because we are giving what we feel that we ought to, are we happy to give to some but not to others? Again the point is not to sit in judgment upon one's self but to become aware of our underlying views and tendencies, could we behave in a more enlightened manner?

We can reflect on all that we have been given in our lives and bear those who have given valuable gifts to us in mind. Reflecting on all that we have received and all that we do have, food, shelter, material things, skills, friends, opportunities and so on, is far more positive than dwelling upon the things that we would like and feel that we need to have before we can be happy and may help us toward a sense of contentment (part of the positive expression of the third Precept).

So we can consider Dana, giving and generosity far more broadly than say making charitable donations, we can consider it in terms of what we bring to the world and to other living beings, and also in terms of everything that has been given to us. In this way, Dana becomes a practical starting point for our practice of the Dharma and a key to the wisdom that happiness lies in the direction of less clinging to self and a greater sense of connection with all that lives.

To paraphrase Sangharakshita, we may not be able to meditate very well (yet!), we may struggle with ethics in some areas of our life or with studying the Dharma but we can give, and bring awareness and Metta to our giving, and in doing so we begin to erode self-clinging and craving.

*Saddhabhaya*