

Dāna - the paradigm of Ethic, Ritual and Liberation in Theravada Buddhism

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“If people knew as I know the results of giving and sharing,
they would not eat without having given nor would
the stain of miserliness persist in overpowering their minds.
Even if they were down to their last bit of food, they would not eat
without having shared it, if those to receive it were present.”
- *Itivuttaka* 26¹

Introduction

A central theme of Dāna – religious charity in Buddhism is caring for religious mendicants (monks and nuns) and their institutions. The donor motivated to give for religious reasons tend to be major supporter of temples, pagodas and similar organisations and also tend to back other worthy causes. They believe that they have an obligation to give charitable causes and, generally, do that with open fist. The religiously motive donors frequently looks at any other merits or rewards to giving as secondary. He or she gives simply for the sake of sharing his or her wealth and resources in the service of religious recluses and their institutions.

It is not the ethics but the rituals of dāna that grew over time into a complex understanding of behaviour at this interface that guides the ‘giving and receiving’ implicit as settlement hierarchies expand and differentiate throughout the Ganga Valley. This paper has been presented in the context of Theravada Buddhism—the school of thought practiced by the Buddhists in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar (Burma), Sri Lanka and Thailand—to reveal the socio-religious dynamics, the rituals and ethics associated with dāna.

Donor

In the Theravada Buddhism the donors are generally the lay people who are known as *dāyaka* (male) and *dāyika* (female). The Pali source says that the excellence of the dāna is determined by three factors: the state of mind of the donor, the object to be given and the recipient. The Anguttara Nikaya states that on each side of the gift negotiation, the two agents have three things to uphold in order to bring about the negotiation to a successful closure: the ideal giver is happy before giving, of peaceful heart while giving, and of uplifted (satisfied) mind after giving. Likewise, the ideal receiver is free of passion or becoming so, free of hatred or becoming so, and free of delusion or becoming so while receiving the gift [AN 3.336 in Findly 2003:214].

The various moments of feeling and thought that comprise a gift are elaborated in great detail, and pleasure and good feeling are to be presented throughout. A verse often quoted in Anguttara Nikaya reads thus: Velukantaki Nandamata was a devotee of the Buddha. She gave offerings to Sariputta and Moggallana. Referring to this the Buddha said:

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¹ *Itivuttaka*, *Khuddaka Nikaya*. From: <http://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/main.html>

"A giver must be pleased before he gives dāna;
his mind must be pleased while giving dāna and after giving dāna.
The receiver of the offering must be free from passion, hatred and delusion.
The consequence of such a gift is immeasurable".

Nandamata gave such a gift to Sariputta and Moggallana, and she obtained immeasurable consequence of the gift. [A.N., III, 336-337]²

We should keep in mind that the most important element that must be present for there to be dāna is *cetana* (volition) that need to be nurtured in the heart of the donor. Without the volition to give there can be no generosity. There are three positive form of volition that should be present in association with dāna. They are *Pubba cetana* (prior volition), *Munca cetana* (prevailing volition) and *Apara cetana* (post-charity volition).

The good volition which occurs while procuring and preparing for charity is *pubba cetana* (prior volition). Your *cetana* must be free from vain pride or selfishness such as, "I am the builder of this pagoda, I am the donor of this monastery; I am the donor" etc. While you are preparing for the charity you and members of your family must not indulge in quarrels and disagreements. You must not be hesitant in carrying on with the good deed once you have already decided. When you feel delighted and cheerful during our preparations throughout, you may then rest assured pure and sincere *pubbha cetana* will prevail.

Munca cetana (prevailing volition) means renunciation, or detachment. Therefore, in the act of giving charity you must renounce the offertories from your possession completely. In offering alms-food to a bhikkhu your thought should be "I renounce this alms-food from my possession" and then physically offer alms to the recipient. This is *munca cetana* (prevailing volition). While performing *kusala* (good) deeds, no *akusala* (bad) minds such as greed, pride, anger, or attachment to the recipient, etc. should interfere. You should not crave for future benefits. Just freely let go the offertory generously.

The third *cetana*, which occurs at the completion of the deed of the merit, is the bliss of accomplishment you enjoy for having done a virtuous act. You feel joyous for your accomplishment of the deed, recall it often and wish to repeat it soon. This is the burgeoning of your *apara cetana* (post-charity volition). However at a later time *apara cetana* can be contaminated if you feel dissatisfied at the loss of the property donated or if you feel disappointed with the monk for whom you have donated a monastery. Then you might ponder, "May be I should not have given that charity." If so, not only your *apara cetana* is spoiled but also you develop an evil attitude of dissatisfaction (*akusala dosa*).

Recipient

As an individual person a worthy recipient is rare and precious. The paradigmatic recipient is the sangha, in its instantiation in a monk and nun, but they recognize a hierarchy of recipients. The Buddhist treatises mention fourteen 'graded' recipients ranging from animals all the way to Perfectly Awakened Buddhas, gradually increasing in religious and moral qualities [For detail see Heim 2004:65].

The recipient monk is not individual monk as the donor specifies it is donated 'to the universal sangha headed by the Buddha'. So one should not see an individual monk, with all his own personal weaknesses and faults, but instead his presence should indicate an opportunity to give to the sangha. While in his casual interaction with the monk he may be treated as an individual, but in the ceremony of dāna, the monk was treated as an instantiation of an ideal.

² *Anguttara Nikaya*. From: <http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma3/women.html>

The lay people need monks and nuns in order to advance along their religious path. The recipients are deemed to be worthy is that they receive on behalf of the 'universal sangha headed by Buddha,' a reminder of the spiritual path and goal that they represent to others. The sangha, by its very definition, according to texts, cannot be immoral. By giving to the 'universal sangha headed by the Buddha,' a donor ensures that he or she gives true respect and that the receiver is purified by the good qualities of the sangha.

The removal from economic intercourse, with its patterns of give-and-take, generates the purity that allows the monks and nuns to receive gifts. They are the purest recipients who are the least eager to receive. The more ascetic and aloof from material support a monastic is, the closed he or she is to the spiritual goal, and so the gift is more fruitful for the donor. This is due not to any alleged poison or danger in the gift, but because of religious values about renunciation and asceticism. An ideal monk or nun should not in any way be greedy and attached to materialism. Ideally the renouncer cares little whether he receives or not, and never ask for anything. Ironically this leads to a curious structural tension between the donor and the receiver in that naturally the donor will want to give lavishly to such person, even though their accepting such largesse would threaten the very renunciation for which they are so highly esteemed.

The Gift Item

The degree of merit on the other hand also depends on the quality of the materials. In the Theravada tradition the gift items are the four basic necessities- food, robes, temple and medicine, and as well as the eight requisites (*attha-parikhara*)- the three sets of robes, bowl, belt, needle, water strainer and razor. However, as per the Tipitaka the gift items are mentioned variously and classified according to the *pitaka* which given below:

1. In the *Vinaya Pitakas*, four things are mentioned: food, robes, monasteries and medicine. Some people take this list to be exclusive. But it should rather be seen as the requisites that the Buddha allowed the Sangha.
2. In the *Abhidhamma Pitakas*, gifts are listed as of six sorts, corresponding to the six senses: visible, making sounds, odiferous, with taste, objects of touch, and mental objects. This list too is not a list to limit the types of Dāna but rather a way to analyse them.
3. In the various *Suttas Pitakas*, some people maintain, there are ten kinds of Dāna- food, drink, clothing, transportation, flowers, perfumed unguent or powder, ointment, bed, dwelling-place and light (*anna, pana, vattha, yana, mala, gandha, vilepana, seyya, avasatha & padipeyya*). But here again we should take this as a list of ten possible gifts, not a list of the only gifts to be given.

If the donor gives lower graded materials than he would use for himself then that dāna is *hina* (inferior) dāna. If he gives same quality materials then it is called *mijjhima* (medium) dāna, and if he give high quality things then it is called *panita* (superior) dāna. So to get high merits (i) the donor should be morally sound, (ii) the gift items should be acquired righteously and of high quality, and (iii) the recipients i.e. the monks should too be of higher spiritual footings. Such an approach might suggest that the dāna culture of the Theravada Buddhist are uninterested or unconcerned with the material aspects of dāna—specially the monetary value of the gift item.

Donation Process

In the Theravada religious functions, *sila* (five or eight precepts) are usually given to the lay people by a monk and the gift items are delivered to the monks thereafter. It is believed that to obtain higher *punya* (merits) from the donation the donor has to be morally clean and it is the reason behind why *sila* is taken prior to the presentation of gifts to the monks. Pali texts and literatures specifically stipulate that the donor is morally pure so as to make sure that the materials that are to be donated have been acquired righteously (*dhammiya ladda*).

A donation ceremony usually ends with the blessings of the monks while one (or some) of the lay people pour out water symbolising sharing of merits which is known as libation ceremony. The water is a symbol of life, purity and cleansing. As it is poured it represents the ‘fluid’ nature of generosity, how easy it is for this kindness is passed from one person to another. The elderly sits in front, slowly pour water into a plate or bowl, till the end of recitation by the monks. The water is then released outside into the soil or garden.

Rituals

This water pouring is a Brahmanic symbol, but the sharing of the merits that it represents is perfectly Buddhist. The donor invite his or her friends, family, *devas* etc living or dead, to share in the inner feeling of merit. However, the ending stanza of the blessing formula indicates, it calls the merit worshipers to the attention of Vasundhara – the goddess of earth and wealth – to stand witness of the donation ceremony so that she would remind the donor in the next rebirths – if he/ she unable to recollect the merits done in this occasion.

Here, the introduction of Vasundhara into the ritual blessings has cast doubt upon many critics as the people involved in the ceremony never really understood the rationality and the ethics behind it. Although little is known in ancient Buddhism, this goddess is known later in Theravada Buddhism and incorporated in the blessing formula recited by the monks on behalf of the donors. So the blessing formula that is recited throughout Bangladesh apparently has Bhramanic origin intertwined with a Buddhist parable. Once it is said that Vasundhara appeared as a woman when Buddha was confronted by Mara who asked for examples of his merit. Accordingly to lore, Vasundhara proves the Buddha’s symbolic merit by squeezing the water out of her long hair, which creates a flood that washed Mara away. The syncretic nature of Theravada Buddhism is more intriguing when Swaraswati (Hindu goddess of knowledge) is adored as ‘protector of the Tipitaka’ which are the scriptures that form the foundation of Theravada Buddhism. In the paradigm of socio-religious dynamics where the forces of rituals surpasses the ethics, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the libation ceremony or water pouring ceremony is a Buddhist rituals rather than of philosophy and ethics.

The procedure or etiquette of the gift, which is elaborate in all of the medieval treatises are in formal and in ritualistic term. Etiquette is a code for membership in moral and ideological communities. Gift ritual is a kind of religious aesthetics. How rituals and ethics could be related to (or opposed to) one another has opened a venue of scholarship. In an interesting way recent work on Buddhist ethics provides a good example of the view that ethics and rituals are in conflict. Gombrich makes an historical argument that the Buddha’s rejection of brahmanical ritualism was responsible for the ‘ethicisation of the world,’ which he regards as ‘a turning point in the history of civilisation’ [Gombrich 1996:51].

Ethics

Though most of the Buddhist material treats *dāna* as an ethical and ritual practice in the context of merit-making venture, but there are undercurrents that also suggest the only true interest is a desire for liberation. In one place the *Compendium of the Essence* says:

Whether there is something small such as a meritorious *dāna* of only a handful of vegetables, or something great such as the merit of the *dāna* of Vemāla [a famous and generous donor], if one desires success in rebirth (*samsara*), then it is established wrongly because it is connected to rebirth and one is able only to reach rebirth, not liberation. But if one is able to give with the desire for liberation [thinking]: “let my *dāna* lead to the extinction of the cankers,” then [this is] established correctly with respect to liberation, even Arahatsip, the knowledge of Solitary Buddha and Omniscience (the Fully Enlightened Buddha) [Sārasangaha:181].

The knowledgeable person would restrain from reciting those Pali words that are confusing and devoid of Dhammic value and the most preferred Pali verse that leads to ‘liberation from dāna are:

*iddhame dānam āsava khayam aham hotu;
iddhame puññam nibbānassa paccayo hotu.*

Let this dāna be the cause for the extinction of cankers;
Let this merit be the cause for the attainment of Nibbāna.

*sabbe satta sada hontu, avera sukhajivino.
katam punnaphalam mayham, sabbe bhagi bhavantu te*
May all living beings always live happily, free from animosity.
May all share in the blessings, springing from the good I have done.

Conclusion

Intriguingly a Buddhist tradition also indicates that in the final era of the decline of the Dhamma (Sanskrit: dharma) in their own cosmology, the only practice remaining is dāna [Lingat 1962:12]. This is referred to as Kali Yuga (Dark Age), the last of the four great epochs of time in traditional Hindu cosmology [for detail see Heim 2004:9].

A gift presented with proper attitude to an appropriate recipient will produce high merit, and although a small gift ‘given well’ may bring as rich a reward as a large one, happy indeed is the donor whose resources will allow him or her to emulate Anāthapindika and Visākha. Nonetheless, even the donor who gave on such a munificent scale as these two great examples during the Buddha’s time could not accomplish the final goal Nibbāna (Sanskrit Nirvana), during their lifetime. For all donors must supplement giving with self-control and other forms of established religio-moral and spiritual practice.

Gift given with the intention to derive the merit in the future worldly wealth and pleasures, and heavenly existences resulting suffering in the cycle of existences is called *vattanissita-dāna*. The other gift that is done for the liberation (Nibbāna) which is free from the suffering in the cycle of existence is called *vivattanissita-dāna*. It has been said that in order for the gift to become the foundation for Nibbāna (*vivatta-nissita*), one should not be casual or careless while making a gift nor should desire any particular stage of enlightenment either. Through wisdom he is free from "I-donating" and "my-donation" and through compassion he is free from lethargy and depression. In its most developed form, this would be a highest gift given while the donor develops insight into: ‘I am *anicca, dukkha and anattā* (impermanent, unsatisfactory and without self)’, ‘the receiver is *anicca, dukkha and anatta*’ and ‘the gift materials too are *anicca, dukkha and anatta*’.

A gift that is unaccompanied by wisdom is called *ñāna-vippayutta-dāna* such as a gift done by imitating others then it is unaccompanied by wisdom. While a gift accompanied by wisdom is called *ñāna-sammpayutta-dāna*. If one makes a donation while one is aware of volitional acts (*kamma*), their resultants (*vipakka*) and the path that would free him from *vipakka* then it is a gift accompanied by wisdom. In this connection, a brief explanation is necessary with respect to some exhortations about the path that is associated with *vipassana-ñāna* aspects and that would free him or her from *kilesas* (defilements). There are 10 defilements, thus called because they are themselves defiled, and because they defile the mental factors associated with *kamma* (including *dāna*). They are:

- (1) greed (*lobha*),
- (2) hate (*dosa*),
- (3) delusion (*moha*),
- (4) conceit (*māna*),
- (5) speculative views (*ditthi*),
- (6) skeptical doubt (*vicikicchā*),

- (7) mental torpor (*thīna*),
- (8) restlessness (*uddhacca*);
- (9) shamelessness (*ahirika*),
- (10) lack of moral dread or unconscientiousness (*anottappa*).

To conquer these ten defilements one need to apply *vipassana-ñāna* efficiently and this can only be cultured and developed through *vipassana* meditation. The more one could free him or her from these defilements one become more adept in shaping life including offering *dāna*. The One who has freed from all these defilements is called Arahāt (the worthy), One who has reached the final stage of spiritual progress. The kamma (deeds) that they perform including offering *dāna* is classified as *kiriya* (functional) which do not have the efficacy to produce *vipakka* (resultant) and this is *Vimutti* (Deliverance or Liberation, in Sanskrit: *Vimukti*), the other name for Nibbāna—the highest and ultimate goal of the Theravada Buddhism.

Recommendation

In this context it is worth mentioning some recommendation, that are warranted for the people who are yet to accomplish the high stage, while building monasteries, constructing pagodas, etc that are the *dāna* of great magnitude (*thāvara-dāna*). There is also *dāna* of less magnitude (*athivara-dāna*) when you offer alms or clothing or when you give food, water, etc; to the needy. In giving charity of a great magnitude, you are liable to encounter interference from within yourself as well as from malicious elements.

Therefore if you plan to perform *dāna* of great magnitude you should plan for yourself seeking good advice from friends and learned teachers. Only then you will get worthy recipients for your *dāna*. Choice of recipient is not so important in doing *dāna* of small magnitude; even feeding animals has its own merit. The crucial factor in doing *dāna* is to have the right mental attitude not the quantity of offerings. Try to invite four more than monks to perform ‘sangha-dāna’ whenever possible. Never be attached to the offertories you intend to donate. Let your mind be filled with complete renunciation of the material things that you have set aside for charity. This attitude is called *mutta cagi* (*mutta* means detachment, renunciation and *cagi* means one with generous habit). So the donors should bear in mind not to be attached to the recipient; not to be attached to the offertories; not to pray or long for worldly luxury in the abode of humans and devas; only to have the noble desire to attain the supreme bliss of Nibbānic peace. This will make you the ideal donor. I would like to conclude this paper by quoting a poem from Buddhādāsa, “Doing Good Like Water”:

Not asking for anything in return,
Just like water used in spinning and pouring a clay pot,
Or used in mixing and pouring concrete,
Which evaporates and dries up, until none is left
To ask for anything in return or seek praise.
Like bricks, stones, clays, and sand,
Let’s do good turns for each other without
Asking for anything in return, just like water. [Buddhadāsa:47]

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