

HOW TO GIVE (DĀNA)

By Lisa Knight, International Buddhist Society of Pennsylvania

Dāna, meaning generosity or charity, is not just an element of basic Buddhist practice (dāna, sīla and bhavana) but also is one of the Paramis, Perfections, that can be developed to higher levels as our life progresses. The more we practice generosity, and the better we practice it, the more we can overcome greed, attachment and egoism (feeling of “I” and “mine”). How do we practice it better, develop it to a higher level? Lord Buddha advises us, *a true man gives a gift carefully, gives it with his own hand, gives it showing respect, gives a valuable gift, gives it with the view that something will come of it.* Majjhima Nikaya 110:12, 23.

To give a gift carefully, one gives it with attention and discretion, determining whether the gift is appropriate for the recipient and an appropriate time to give it, and with some understanding of the recipient’s needs and desires, and ensuring that it would not adversely affect the recipient, oneself or others. As the Buddha said, *a person of integrity gives a gift with a sense of conviction . . . attentively . . . in season . . . with an empathetic heart . . . without adversely affecting himself or others.* Anguttara Nikaya 5:148. However, one should be ever alert to any signs of stinginess in making these determinations. For example, it is very easy to avoid giving for fear of “adversely affecting” one’s comfortable bank account. One should also be alert to avoid encouraging or giving in to exploitation or intimidation, which can adversely affect anyone involved.

To give a gift with one’s own hand, one can give with mindfulness, more meaningfully, and with a clear sense of conviction, rather than by delegating someone else to give the gift. But, in some circumstances, such as when there is an opportunity to lead a person toward being generous by example, or to prevent a recipient from feeling indebted, it is appropriate to share the act of giving with another person by having him or her hand over the gift. Giving a gift with respect, one avoids any arrogance, contempt or indifference toward the recipient.

Of course, giving a more valuable gift is more of a sacrifice, decreasing our stinginess. But it should not be given with intention of competing with another person’s gift, to show one’s status, or merely from a sense of obligation. Giving a less valuable gift or even one with no value to us also can be meritorious. As the Buddha said, *“Even if a person throws rinsings of his cup to a pond, thinking “may whatever animals live here feed on this,” that would be a source of merit.* Anguttara Nikaya 3:57. It is the intention and volition which are very important in giving a gift. The awareness of others’ needs and the intention of metta (loving-kindness) and compassion toward other beings even by a very small or insignificant offering helps purify our mind.

“Giving a gift with a view that something will come of it” does not mean hoping for worldly gain, favors or to encourage a personal relationship. The view that the gift will result in material gains in the future or in future births may offer an inducement to be generous for persons who are just starting to overcome stinginess, and does lead to a good result. However, it is not an ideal interpretation of the Buddha’s words. The Buddha explains the increasing levels of purity in thought while giving as follows. *Having given this gift [to a priest or contemplative] seeking his own profit, [with the thought] “I will enjoy this after death” . . . after*

death he reappears in the company of the Four Great Kings [a lower heaven-world, and]. . . having exhausted that action . . . com[es] back to this world . . . Having given this gift [to a priest or contemplative] with the thought “Giving is good” . . . after death he reappears in the company of the Devas of the Thirty Three [the next higher heaven-world]. . . [A] gift with the thought [of following family custom] . . . after death he reappears in the company of the Devas of the Hours [the next higher heaven-world]. . .

[A] gift with the thought “I am well-off, they are not well-off” . . . after death he reappears in the company of the Contented Devas . . .

[A] gift with the thought. . . of the great sacrifices of great sages of the past . . . after death he reappears in the company of the Devas Who Delight in Creation . . .

[A] gift with the thought, when this gift is given it makes the mind serene, with gratification and joy . . . after death he reappears in the company of the Devas With Power Over Others’ Creations . . . [A gift] with the thought “this is an ornament for the mind, a support for the mind” . . . after death he appears in the world of Brahma . . . a non-returner. Anguttara Nikaya 7:49. This is a gift given without any attachment or association with the world or even with pleasant mental states.

When a gift is given carefully, mindfully, respectfully, and with more pure thoughts, as described above, then one can give with conviction and confidence, so that, as the Buddha says, *the donor before giving is glad, while giving his mind is bright and clear, and after giving is gratified.* Anguttara Nikaya 6:37. These are three aspects of the ideal way of giving.

We notice that the Buddha’s explanation of the levels of purity in thought refer to gifts to “a priest or contemplative.” The Buddha emphasizes the increased merit of giving to a person who is pure or striving to purify his mind. For example, he teaches that a donation with the three ideal aspects mentioned above, plus the following three, has immeasurable merit: *[the] recipients are free of craving or are practicing for the subduing of greed, free of aversion or are practicing for the subduing of aversion, free of delusion or are practicing for the subduing of delusion.* Anguttara Nikaya 6:37. The Buddha especially focuses on gifts to the Buddhist Sangha. He says, *In no way is a gift to a person individually ever more fruitful than an offering made to the Sangha.* Majjhima Nikaya 142:8. That is, the intention of offering must be to the entire Sangha as a whole, present and past, and not on a personal basis to a particular monk or nun, or based on his or her personal qualities. The Buddha emphasizes the importance of offering to the Sangha the four physical requisites (food, medicine, robes and shelter), which supports the longevity of the teaching of Dharma over the ages, and which ultimately results in so many people practicing it, purifying their minds and securing the welfare of the world.

We may not have numerous opportunities to provide for the Sangha, as they are renunciants and thus do not have many needs. But there are many other opportunities for giving which are very beneficial for our spiritual progress. Even a gift to an immoral or evil person is a great merit (it repays a thousandfold) or a gift to an animal (it repays a hundredfold). The Buddha explains, *There are, Ānanda, four kinds of purification of offering. What four? There is the offering that is purified by the giver, not by the receiver. There is the offering that is purified by the receiver, not by the giver. There is the offering that is purified neither by the giver nor by the receiver. There is the offering that is purified both by the giver and by the receiver.* The Buddha explains that a gift is purified by the virtue and good character of either the giver or

receiver or both. Where both giver and receiver are of virtue and good character, the gift “is the best of worldly gifts.” Majjhima Nikaya 142:9-14.