

DANA
The Practice of Generosity
Teacher Support

Robert Beatty

*A human being is part of a whole called by us universe,
a part limited in time and space.
He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings
as something separated from the rest,
a kind of optical delusion of consciousness.
This delusion is a kind of prison for us,
I restricting us to our personal desires
and to affection for a few persons nearest to us.
Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison
by widening our circle of compassion
to embrace all living creatures
and the whole of nature in it's beauty.*

Albert Einstein

The practice of generosity (dana) is one leg of a tripod that supports a spiritual life. The other two legs are the practice of non-harming, and the development of the heart/mind through meditation. Practicing generosity helps us recognize and manifest our fundamental interconnectedness. Each act of sharing one's energy, material wealth or time enhances one's capacity of letting go of attachments resulting in freedom and happiness.

Since the time of the Buddha those who teach the Dharma have been supported directly by their community. In Asia, where it is understood that the practice of generosity forms the bedrock of spiritual practice, this tradition has evolved into a system where the interdependence of the teachers and their community is implicit. Individuals who devote themselves to teaching are held in great respect, and their communities undertake the reciprocal responsibility for supporting the teacher and the teachings. In turn, the teacher upholds the responsibility by doing their best to live an exemplary life, and makes teachings readily available. It is understood that to support the teacher is to support oneself and to help others have access to the teachings.

In Asia support of the teacher takes the form of preparing food, providing transportation and medical care, constructing and maintaining shelter and providing all the requisites of life for the teacher, including during their old age and death and. This allows the teacher to devote their life to teaching, practice, and continuing to refine their own understanding.

As we introduce Buddhism to the West, teacher support is evolving into different forms. Those who teach are frequently householders who support themselves,

and sometimes a family. Their community is often geographically dispersed. Teachers participate directly in the economy, taking care of their own needs. As householders, their teachings may be particularly relevant to us because they are living lives of the Dharma amidst questions of money, relationships, sexuality, and raising a family.

A “Dana Basket” is sometimes provided to give the community members the opportunity to practice generosity and to offer their teacher financial support. This basket receives the stored energy of your work in the form of money, and transforms it into the requisites of the teacher so that s/he can focus on teaching. This system of teacher support is radically different from that of most Western schools of training and personal growth where there is a fixed fee. The fact that there is no fee leaves the responsibility with the individual to decide what amount of support is appropriate for them. It also guarantees that the teachings are available to persons of all economic levels. Dana invites each individual to develop his/her own capacity to be generous in a context that directly assists his/her own spiritual growth.

People often ask for guidelines concerning dana. The Buddha’s Dharma is a priceless way of life and path of liberation so how can one possibly be guided? When the gift of the Dharma is experienced as precious there is a reciprocal opportunity to participate generously in the support of the teacher and teachings. One guideline is perhaps: “Give until your heart feels full”. Another is to decide what is a comfortable gift and then to give a little more in order to stretch one’s capacity of letting go.

It is common for our sense of personal worth to be tied to our financial situation. Wealth is one of the prime determinants of social status. Sometimes people experience shame or unworthiness because they cannot contribute what they think they “should”. This is more grist for the mill of awakening. People offer what they have to give: friendship, listening, an open heart, presence or a kind word. These are all aspects of manifesting the web of interconnection of which we are all an integral part.

There is no requirement to give at all. Dana is an opportunity and a spiritual practice. Each person practices from within the context of his or her own life. The size or shape of any gift is secondary to the intention and the openness of heart from which it springs.

Beyond the retreat, the practice of dana entails keeping our senses open to any opportunity to be generous. This begins with offering oneself some time daily to withdraw from activity and to nourish our inner life. By becoming peaceful we make our greatest possible contribution to world peace. Dana also manifests in the discovery that there are numerous opportunities every day to delight in perceiving a need and responding to it in a generous way. Attending to the needs and longings of others creates community and reveals our interdependence. It liberates us from the fear of not having enough. It also ends the suffering of selfishness and clinging. What before was experienced as MINE, becomes OURS and the web of life becomes rich and luminous.

The practice of dana invites us to reflect upon what is really important to us. When we have benefited from the teachings we may choose to direct some portion of our financial blessings to support the Dharma in order to provide a similar opportunity to others in the future. We are invited to transcend our fearful capitalist-materialist conditioning, which requires that we “get the best deal at the lowest possible price”. We learn to abandon the endless quest for happiness through the satisfaction of desires. Dana provides us the opportunity to realize true happiness by recognizing that we are already intimately connected with everything and everyone. Being kind and generous to another is caring for oneself.

As life gives generously to us, so we open-handedly give back to life. We belong to what we support, and what we support nourishes us.

