

No Strings Attached

THE BUDDHA'S CULTURE OF GENEROSITY

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

“How can I ever repay you for your teaching?”

Good meditation teachers often hear this question from their students, and the best answer I know for it is one that my teacher, Ajaan Fuang, gave every time:

“By being intent on practicing.”

Each time he gave this answer, I was struck by how noble and gracious it was. And it wasn't just a formality. He never tried to find opportunities to pressure his students for donations. Even when our monastery was poor, he never acted poor, never tried to take advantage of their gratitude and trust. This was a refreshing change from some of my previous experiences with run-of-the-mill village and city monks who were quick to drop hints about their need for donations from even stray or casual visitors.

Eventually I learned that Ajaan Fuang's behavior is common throughout the Forest Tradition. It's based on a passage in the Pali Canon where the Buddha on his deathbed states that the highest homage to him is not material homage, but the homage of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. In other words, the best way to repay a teacher is to take the Dhamma to heart and to practice it in a way that fulfills his or her compassionate purpose in teaching it. I was proud to be part of a tradition where the inner wealth of this noble idea was actually lived—where, as Ajaan Fuang often put it, we weren't reduced to hirelings, and the act of teaching the Dhamma was purely a gift.

So I was saddened when, on my return to America, I had my first encounters with the dana talk: the talk on giving and generosity that often comes at the end of a retreat. The context of the talk—and often the content—makes clear that it's not a disinterested exercise. It's aimed at generating gifts for the teacher or the organization sponsoring the retreat, and it places the burden of responsibility on the retreatants to ensure that future retreats can occur. The language of the talk is often smooth and encouraging, but when contrasted with Ajaan Fuang's answer, I found the sheer fact of the talk ill-mannered and demeaning. If the organizers and teachers really trusted the retreatants' good-heartedness, they wouldn't be giving the talk at all. To make matters worse, the typical dana talk—along with

its companion, the meditation-center fundraising letter—often cites the example of how monks and nuns are supported in Asia as justification for how dana is treated here in the West. But they're taking as their example the worst of the monks, and not the best.

I understand the reasoning behind the talk. Lay teachers here aspire to the ideal of teaching for free, but they still need to eat. And, unlike the monastics of Asia, they don't have a long-standing tradition of dana to fall back on. So the dana talk was devised as a means for establishing a culture of dana in a Western context. But as so often is the case when new customs are devised for Western Buddhism, the question is whether the dana talk skillfully translates Buddhist principles into the Western context or seriously distorts them. The best way to answer this question is to take a close look at those principles in their original context.

It's well known that dana lies at the beginning of Buddhist practice. Dana, quite literally, has kept the Dhamma alive. If it weren't for the Indian tradition of giving to mendicants, the Buddha would never have had the opportunity to explore and find the path to Awakening. The monastic sangha wouldn't have had the time and opportunity to follow his way. Dana is the first teaching in the graduated discourse: the list of topics the Buddha used to lead listeners step-by-step to an appreciation of the four noble truths, and often from there to their own first taste of Awakening. When stating the basic principles of karma, he would begin with the statement, "There is what is given."

What's less well known is that in making this statement, the Buddha was not dealing in obvious truths or generic platitudes, for the topic of giving was actually controversial in his time. For centuries, the brahmans of India had been extolling the virtue of giving—as long as the gifts were given to them. Not only that, gifts to brahmans were obligatory. People of other castes, if they didn't concede to the brahmans' demands for gifts, were neglecting their most essential social duty. By ignoring their duties in the present life, such people and their relatives would suffer hardship both now and after death.

As might be expected, this attitude produced a backlash. Several of the *samana*, or contemplative, movements of the Buddha's time countered the brahmans' claims by asserting that there was no virtue in giving at all. Their arguments fell into two camps. One camp claimed that giving carried no virtue because there was no afterlife. A person was nothing more than physical elements that, at death, returned to their respective spheres. That was it. Giving thus provided no long-term results. The other camp stated that there was no such thing as giving, for everything in the universe has been determined by fate. If a donor gives something to another person, it's not really a gift, for the donor has no choice or free will in the matter. Fate was simply working itself out.

So when the Buddha, in his introduction to the teaching on karma, began by saying that there is what is given, he was repudiating both camps. Giving *does* give results both now and on into the future, and it *is* the result of the donor's free choice. However, in contrast to the brahmins, the Buddha took the principle of freedom one step further. When asked where a gift should be given, he stated simply, "Wherever the mind feels inspired." In other words—aside from repaying one's debt to one's parents—there is no obligation to give. This means that the choice to give is an act of true freedom, and thus the perfect place to start the path to total release.

This is why the Buddha adopted dana as the context for practicing and teaching the Dhamma. But—to maintain the twin principles of freedom and fruitfulness in giving—he created a culture of dana that embodied particularly Buddhist ideals. To begin with, he defined dana not simply as material gifts. The practice of the precepts, he said, was also a type of dana—the gift of universal safety, protecting all beings from the harm of one's unskillful actions—as was the act of teaching the Dhamma. This meant that lavish giving was not just the prerogative of the rich. Secondly, he formulated a code of conduct to produce an attitude toward giving that would benefit both the donors and the recipients, keeping the practice of giving both fruitful and free.

We tend not to associate codes of conduct with the word "freedom," but that's because we forget that freedom, too, needs protection, especially from the attitude that wants to be free in its choices but feels insecure when others are free in theirs. The Buddha's codes of conduct are voluntary—he never coerced anyone into practicing his teachings—but once they are adopted, they require the cooperation of both sides to keep them effective and strong.

These codes are best understood in terms of the six factors that the Buddha said exemplified the ideal gift:

"The donor, before giving, is glad; while giving, his/her mind is inspired; and after giving, is gratified. These are the three factors of the donor....

"The recipients are free of passion or are practicing for the subduing of passion; free of aversion or practicing for the subduing of aversion; and free of delusion or practicing for the subduing of delusion. These are the three factors of the recipients." —*Anguttara Nikaya* 6:37

Although this passage seems to suggest that each side is responsible only for the factors on its side, the Buddha's larger etiquette for generosity shows that the responsibility for all six factors—and in particular, the three factors of the

donor—is shared. And this shared responsibility flourishes best in an atmosphere of mutual trust.

For the donors, this means that if they want to feel glad, inspired, and gratified at their gift, they should not see the gift as payment for personal services rendered by individual monks or nuns. That would turn the gift into wages, and deprive it of its emotional power. Instead, they'd be wise to look for trustworthy recipients: people who are training—or have trained—their minds to be cleaned and undefiled. They should also give their gift in a respectful way so that the act of giving will reinforce the gladness that inspired it, and will inspire the recipient to value their gift.

The responsibilities of the recipients, however, are even more stringent. To ensure that the donor feels glad before giving, monks and nuns are forbidden from pressuring the donor in any way. Except when ill or in situations where the donor has invited them to ask, they cannot ask for anything beyond the barest emergency necessities. They are not even allowed to give hints about what they'd like to receive. When asked where a prospective gift should be given, they are told to follow the Buddha's example and say, "Give wherever your gift would be used, or would be well-cared for, or would last long, or wherever your mind feels inspired." This conveys a sense of trust in the donor's discernment—which in itself is a gift that gladdens the donor's mind.

To ensure that a donor feels inspired while giving a gift, the monks and nuns are enjoined to receive gifts attentively and with an attitude of respect. To ensure that the donor feels gratified afterward, they should live frugally, care for the gift, and make sure it is used in an appropriate way. In other words, they should show that the donor's trust in them is well placed. And of course they must work on subduing their greed, anger, and delusion. In fact, this is a primary motivation for trying to attain arahantship: so that the gifts given to one will bear the donors great fruit.

By sharing these responsibilities in an atmosphere of trust, both sides protect the freedom of the donor. They also foster the conditions that will enable not only the practice of generosity but also the entire practice of Dhamma to flourish and grow.

The principles of freedom and fruitfulness also govern the code the Buddha formulated specifically for protecting the gift of Dhamma. Here again, the responsibilities are shared. To ensure that the teacher is glad, inspired, and gratified in teaching, the listeners are advised to listen with respect, to try to understand the teaching, and—once they're convinced that it's genuinely wise—to sincerely put it into practice so as to gain the desired results. Like a monk or

nun receiving a material gift, the recipient of the gift of Dhamma has the simple responsibility of treating the gift well.

The teacher, meanwhile, must make sure not to regard the act of teaching as a repayment of a debt. After all, monks and nuns repay their debt to their lay donors by trying to rid their minds of greed, aversion, and delusion. They are in no way obligated to teach, which means that the act of teaching is a gift free and clear. In addition, the Buddha insisted that the Dhamma be taught without expectation of material reward. When he was once offered a “teacher’s fee” for his teaching, he refused to accept it and told the donor to throw it away. He also established the precedent that when a monastic teaches the rewards of generosity, the teaching is given after a gift has been given, not before, so that the stain of hinting won’t sully what’s said.

All of these principles assume a high level of nobility and restraint on both sides of the equation, which is why people tried to find ways around them even while the Buddha was alive. The origin stories to the monastic discipline—the tales portraying the misbehavior that led the Buddha to formulate rules for the monks and nuns—often tell of monastics whose gift of Dhamma came with strings attached, and of lay people who gladly pulled those strings to get what they wanted out of the monastics: personal favors served with an ingratiating smile. The Buddha’s steady persistence in formulating rules to cut these strings shows how determined he was that the principle of Dhamma as a genuinely free gift not be an idle ideal. He wanted it to influence the way people actually behaved.

He never gave an extended explanation of why the act of teaching should always be a gift, but he did state in general terms that when his code of conduct became corrupt over time, that would corrupt the Dhamma as well. And in the case of the etiquette of generosity, this principle has been borne out frequently throughout Buddhist history.

A primary example is recorded in the Apadanas, which scholars believe were added to the Canon after King Asoka’s time. The Apadanas discuss the rewards of giving in a way that shows how eager the monks composing them were to receive lavish gifts. They promise that even a small gift will bear fruit as guaranteed arahantship many eons in the future, and that the path from now to then will always be filled with pleasure and prestige. Attainments of special distinction, though, require special donations. Some of these donations bear a symbolic resemblance to the desired distinction—a gift of lighted lamps, for instance, presages clairvoyance—but the preferred gift of distinction was a week’s worth of lavish meals for an entire monastery, or at least for the monks who teach.

It's obvious that the monks who composed the Apadanas were giving free rein to their greed, and were eager to tell their listeners what their listeners wanted to hear. The fact that these texts were recorded for posterity shows that the listeners, in fact, were pleased. Thus the teachers and their students, acting in collusion, skewed the culture of dana in the direction of their defilements. In so doing they distorted the Dhamma as well. If gift-giving guarantees Awakening, it supplants the noble eightfold path with the one-fold path of the gift. If the road to Awakening is always prestigious and joyful, the concept of right effort disappears. Yet once these ideas were introduced into the Buddhist tradition, they gained the stamp of authority and have affected Buddhist practice ever since. Throughout Buddhist Asia, people tend to give gifts with an eye to their symbolic promise of future reward; and the list of gifts extolled in the Apadanas reads like a catalog of the gifts placed on altars throughout Buddhist Asia even today.

Which goes to show that once the culture of dana gets distorted, it can distort the practice of Dhamma as a whole for many centuries. So if we're serious about bringing the culture of dana to the West, we should be very careful to ensure that our efforts honor the principles that make dana a genuinely Buddhist practice. This means no longer using the tactics of modern fundraising to encourage generosity among retreatants or Buddhists in general. It also means rethinking the dana talk, for on many counts it fails the test. In pressuring retreatants to give to teachers, it doesn't lead to gladness before giving, and instead sounds like a plea for a tip at the end of a meal. The frequent efforts to pull on the retreatants' heartstrings as a path to their purse strings betray a lack of trust in their thoughtfulness and leave a bad taste. And the entire way dana is handled for teachers doesn't escape the fact that it's payment for services rendered. Whether teachers think about this consciously or not, it pressures them subtly to tell their listeners what they think their listeners want to hear. The Dhamma can't help but suffer as a result.

The ideal solution would be to provide a framework whereby serious Dhamma practitioners could be supported whether or not they taught. That way, the act of teaching would be a genuine gift. In the meantime, though, a step in the direction of a genuine culture of dana would be to declare a moratorium on all dana talks at the end of retreats, and on references to the Buddhist tradition of dana in fundraising appeals, so as to give the word time to recover its dignity.

On retreats, dana could be discussed in a general way, in the context of the many Dhamma talks given on how best to integrate Dhamma practice in daily life. At the end of the retreat, a basket could be left out for donations, with a note

that the teacher hasn't been paid to teach the retreat. That's all. No appeals for mercy. No flashcards. Sensitive retreatants will be able to put two and two together, and will feel glad, inspired, and gratified that they were trusted to do the math for themselves.