

# Dana and the Joy of Giving

Rev. Oswin

*Dana* is the Buddhist word in Pali and Sanskrit for almsgiving and generosity. It encompasses the practical support of our Order of Buddhist Contemplatives temples; the relationship between monastics and laity; and the attitude of mind and heart which the Buddhist trainee cultivates towards the universe and all existence.

The Priory and our monastic Order depend for their existence on the donations and gifts of the laity. The Buddha established this tradition, following the ancient Indian custom of householders providing material support for those who had left home to wander the land in search of spiritual Truth. Each morning the Buddhist monastics would walk from door to door in a village or town collecting food, alms, in their bowls for the day. The householders delighted to see them and have the opportunity to gain merit by contributing to the renunciates' practice. In a tropical climate mendicant truth-seekers could live out-of-doors under trees, in simple huts, or in buildings or parks donated to the sangha by royalty or wealthy landowners. Nowadays, and in a harsher climate and a society where begging is not acceptable, monastics depend on lay practitioners to bring their offerings to the temple, and the facilities for practice require more than a grove of trees. Yet we keep the spirit established by the Buddha – the voluntary support of the religious renunciate by those in the household life.

This practical arrangement expresses the spiritual relationship of mutual trust and interdependence between the monastic and lay practitioners. The lay person, living in the world with more opportunity to earn an income, gives generously to support the monk(s); the community of male and female monastics gives freely and generously of the Dharma, the fruit of their practice, to all who ask for it. Both parts of the sangha need and depend on each other. Together we make each other a success and rejoice in each other's training and contribution to the world.

This relationship within the sangha points to a deeper meaning of dana: liberality and generosity of spirit. As Buddhists intent on awakening, we cultivate this attitude of mind and heart in all we do and with all whom we meet. The bodhisattva continually makes offerings to assist all beings in their practice – to cross the sea of suffering and realize Nirvana. We do whatever we can, within our means and as is good, to help others, so that we may all cross over to the Other Shore together. Dana is the first of the six wisdoms that establish this foremost and essential wish of Mahayana practitioners. This compassionate and kind generosity softens and opens the heart and brings joy to self and other.

There are many forms of making offerings at the Priory as a way to cultivate this generosity of spirit. Human beings have four basic needs for health and survival: food, shelter, clothing (for warmth and modesty), and medicine. For monastics, these are known as "the four requisites," as they are the only items that one really needs in order to live.

These are the essentials that householders are asked to provide for the monastics, who in turn train themselves to be content with whatever is offered toward this end.

Food is the requisite where one can see *dana* most clearly at work. In Buddhist countries it is customary to bring food or other offerings whenever one comes to the temple or receives Dharma in any form. Here at the Priory we rely almost entirely on donated food for all our meals. Staples such as grains, beans, flour, bread, tofu products, and nuts, canned and frozen goods, and fresh produce are always suitable and valued. Prepared or frozen meals or dishes are especially appreciated as they allow residents time for other activities. As time, effort, and love have been spent in the preparation of such foods, they express the life of the donor in a direct and tangible way and become a part of the temple's life at a meal. So please keep this temple in mind when you grocery shop, cook, or plant a garden. Monks of our Order follow a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet and refrain when possible from eating garlic, raw onions, scallions, and horseradish—and of course, alcohol. And we are grateful for all offerings and make the very best use of them we can.

As noted above, “shelter” encompasses more than just a grove of trees in our contemporary world. It is usually provided through financial gifts and regular cash donations. At our temple these contributions enable land and septic loan repayments, utilities for heat and power, and maintenance, development, repair, and insuring of our buildings and grounds. In an automobile-dependent society in a technological age, “shelter” also includes car upkeep and insurance, as well as travel, telephone, and computer expenses. This last group of expenses, together with printing, postage, internet and website fees, are also necessary for spreading the Dharma in our modern times. Offering the Dharma is an essential part of a monk's life and is his or her way of giving *dana* to the congregation and to the world. Cash donations to the temple also provide for monastic robes and medical needs.

*Dana* offerings are not limited to material things or money. Many people contribute to the temple through their service and time. Some offer skills and experience: carpentry, electrical work, cabinetry, cooking, sewing, computer work, bookkeeping, accounting advice, publicity, medical help, and car care; others offer less skilled yet still essential help: cleaning, maintenance, grounds work, animal care, transportation, and shopping. Zen Buddhism has always valued work as complementary to formal meditation and an essential part of the practice. Great Master Dogen taught, “There is nothing which can be set aside as a worldly task,” and “All forms of industry are charity [*dana*] if they benefit others” (*Shushogi*). Dogen also emphasized that it is not the size of the gift that matters, but that we want to give and do: “Even a small coin or blade of grass can cause the arising of good” (*Shushogi*). Any task done in a selfless manner expresses the heart of a bodhisattva, one who trains for the benefit of all.

All *dana* is a form of merit. The Priory—and all life—depend on merit for their continuance and vitality. The greatest gift you can give is the merit of your daily meditation and training, practicing the Buddha's way. We often overlook or underestimate the value

of our own practice. Once when training in the monastery, too ill to have a regular responsibility, and wanting to contribute to the community, one of the senior masters suggested that I make it my job to transfer merit to the other monks. All of us can dedicate merit to others – all it requires is our heart's intent. I would say this kind of offering is essential in practicing the life of the bodhisattva, for if we do not care about others' welfare, why would we do any thing for them?

There are many ways to dedicate merit. One way in our local sangha is to offer the merit of your meditation to those on our transfer of merit notice board when you come to the Priory to sit. One monk I know keeps a small list of names posted near or on his private altar. You can also recite scriptures, offer incense, or dedicate the merit of a particular task. Some practitioners place on their altar or keep with them a photograph or some other reminder of the person they wish to remember. Training, especially in lay life, requires creativity and flexibility in finding the best way for each of us as individuals to offer merit as a form of dana.

Dana is the lifeblood of the sangha, of training, of all existence. We keep it flowing through pure meditation, by observing the precepts, by letting go of "me" and "mine," and giving generously. Doing these things awakens the Buddha Mind which already exists within us and awaits our attention. This kind of selfless training brings harmony to the world and joy to self and other. Let us all walk together in generosity of spirit towards the "all-encompassing Wisdom which *IS*," which is our True Life, True Home, True Self, and Perfect Giving.

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### Footnote on Generosity

Sometimes people enquire as to how much is generous? A recent story told to me by a fellow Soto Zen priest in Eugene gives one illustration as an answer to this question. My colleague's elderly master was the abbot of a small temple in Japan. Like other Buddhist temples in Japan, in the mid-1800's it had been assigned a group of parishioners who depended on the temple for funerals and burials. Part of each family's responsibility was to pay an annual fee for maintenance and upkeep of the cemetery and family graves. People often neglected this duty. In one case a householder came before the abbot rather sheepishly when a family member died and needed services and burial. The old abbot pulled out the record book and remarked on how much was owed in past fees, a considerable amount. The parishioner asked how much he should pay, and the abbot replied, "Be generous." To which the parishioner asked, "How much is generous?" With wonderful skill in means, the old master taught, "Decide what is fair, and then give just a little bit more."

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