



The Delights of Dana

By Venerable Ajahn Pasanno

On retreat a lot of emphasis is put on various insight practices, the goal and philosophy of meditation. We don't think very much about the foundation that sustains the mind and the heart in a way that opens them to the way things truly are. Dana is that foundation.

Exactly what is dana? How do we cultivate this quality of giving, generosity, liberality and munificence? There are many different translations of the word dana. It is the quality of generosity that gives physically *and* from the heart. Hearts with dana are generous, open-handed, and liberal in terms of willingness to give, share, to be present and to help. All of those qualities take us away from *me* and *my needs*, *me* and *my necessities*, *me* and *my demands*, *me* and *my expectations*, *me* and *my essential fixed residence* in the middle of the universe. That *me* and *mine* position which demands that we be recognized and noted for our importance, takes over everything. It all gets very tiring.

Ajahn Sumedho has said, "Whenever I think of myself I feel depressed." It's such a great line. When dana is the center of life, instead of *me* and *my needs*, there is no need to be depressed. There is relief and release rather than anxiety and obsession. Dana is a dramatically different focal point. The perspective changes to "What can I give?"

In Thailand, generosity and giving are the first things you learn about Buddhism when you're growing up. Pregnant women go to the temple, offer food and dedicate merit. "May my child be healthy and happy." After birth, mothers continue to take their

children to the temple, so giving becomes an integral part of their lives and continues through the lifespan.

When children are little, they get up early with their family to make offerings to the monks on alms rounds. Even when they are quite young, children are encouraged to give. They don't really know what they are doing because they're only two or three years old or even younger. Someone helps the child put a spoonful of rice in the monk's bowl. As the rice drops in the bowl, everyone claps and says "great." Children get the idea, "wow, giving is good." They grow up with that pleasant feeling associated with generosity. It's very natural because there is a cultural value placed on generosity and sharing.

It's not just giving to monks and to the monastery that is part of the Thai culture. I noticed how natural it is for Thais to share. When we'd go to a dana, for a blessing ceremony in a village, we would usually be offered a Pepsi or Coke. After taking a few sips, we'd give the rest of bottle to one of the kids. Even if the child was little, he or she always shared it with friends. The adults do the same. The kids see generosity in their every day lives, so it gets reinforced. To grab the bottle, go off in the corner and gulp it down on your own doesn't really happen. The impulse is to share and to experience the joy and happiness that comes from generosity. As a result, a special sense of connection is created and sustained.

A lot of the separation and isolation in Western society is not just because Westerners tend to have so many psychological problems. The basic values in the West are not oriented toward sharing or giving. There is an absence of habits and qualities which make a connection between people. It's important to be attentive to that.

Just before coming into the hall I was telling Lance and Nick about going on alms round in the northeast of Thailand. Even though the area is very poor, people share what they have. You can get some pretty strange foods but it's what they eat, and it's what they are willing to share. There is always enough in that sense. The perception of lack is oftentimes just a perception. Giving is not

about resources and materials. In fact, you don't need a lot in order to give. At the root of generosity is the perception that there is always something, and enough to share.

During one of the first years that we were establishing Wat Pah Nanachat, the forest monastery Ajahn Chah set up for foreigners, the villagers would come and help build the place and set things up. One of the main villagers who helped out said, "I really don't have any money, but I'm not poor." He was referring to the fact that poverty is a state of mind. It's not about what we actually have in terms of material resources. Sometimes we have a lot but we feel it's not enough so we have to protect what's there. We don't even think about sharing what we have. That's a state of lack and of being poor. On the other hand, giving and sharing come from a place of wealth. There is always enough.

How does one measure what's enough? Once again, that measurement is a state of mind. The desire mind never has enough. What you desire doesn't really matter. Whether it is food, clothing, money or property, it's never enough. That's just the nature of desire. Its nature is to always be seeking more or something else. The quality of dana, of generosity cuts through that desire mind. It allows us to come to that place of openness and giving, the heart at ease because it has enough.

There are many ways we can come to that place. We can work on generosity and learn to appreciate what it offers. We can consciously go against the desire mind by generating more generosity in our lives. We focus on turning to giving, relying on it, appreciating and delighting in it. In terms of practice, we cultivate and sustain generosity so that we don't get pulled back into the desire mind or the mind of jealousy and comparison. It is so satisfying to feel there is enough and take joy and delight in that.

The desire mind not only operates in wanting more material possessions, it operates in spiritual practice as well. When we're meditating, do we ever feel there is enough concentration or enough peace? The desire mind seeks more concentration, more

tranquility, more peacefulness, *more* whatever. When there is a lack of peacefulness, we feel we need more. The feeling is justified because the scriptures say there must be peaceful states of mind in order to have wisdom, for insight to arise. So we redouble our efforts to get *more* peace and the result is often frustration and misery. “Where is *my* peace of mind?”

Similarly, when do we ever have enough wisdom? The desire mind also needs more wisdom, more refined insight into anicca, dukkha, anatta, so “*I* can finally get rid of *my* defilements and experience freedom.” There is no end to the desire mind, needing more, getting more or having to have. Ajahn Chah described the mind and heart of *tanha*, as the mouth that never closes. The desire mind goes around with an open mouth looking to consume and gather things in. You can actually feel that in your mind. It is the feeling of leaning towards things, on the lookout for the next thing to consume, possess and experience. It’s not a restful place at all.

Generosity is the opposite of this misery. Giving provides a base of contentment, joy and delight. A few years ago, we put a little notice in the Abhayagiri newsletter before I went to Thailand. We announced that there is a tradition of offering gold, silver, jewelry and other valuables to melt down and put into the Buddha image. And since we were pouring a Buddha image for the monastery, we wanted the community to know about this opportunity to make offerings. From a completely materialistic, practical, utilitarian perspective, it’s really stupid to do this. What a waste. From the perspective of generosity, it’s a wonderful thing to do. To give something of value that’s put into an object of reverence and devotion is very precious and delightful. We received packages from all over the States. In some cases, we couldn’t figure out how some people heard about what we were doing. Even a Christian monk sent things for us. People not only sent jewelry, someone sent gold teeth! I ended up carrying almost 8 pounds of gold and silver to Thailand. Explaining to customs officials and security guards why I had all of this was quite interesting.

At the actual ceremony, even more valuables were offered. It is hard to say exactly how much more. Those who were there said it was a lot. The day of the Buddha pouring was steeped in goodness and generosity. About a thousand people were present. There was such excitement that a Buddha image was being made and then shipped to America. People came to create goodness together which ultimately turned into a physical form that would be present in the world. Giving and delight lays a foundation. It's the entry point into the Dhamma, before virtue, precepts and meditation. This is how Buddhism is taught in Thailand and in other Buddhist cultures. Generosity is the foundation, the place from which we begin the practice.

In the West, we start by learning how to meditate and after a while we think maybe "I'd better get some Precepts." Then toward the end, especially at the end of a 10 day retreat, generosity and dana are mentioned. Actually, it doesn't really matter when we pick it up. It is a matter of realizing that generosity is the foundation of the heart that feels free and unencumbered. One of the doorways out of suffering is generosity. As I said earlier, it's important to realize that's it's not just about material giving. It also involves service and keeping ones eyes open for what needs to be done and asking "How can I help? Who is in need of assistance?"

There is a lot of weight given to individualism and self-sufficiency in the West. We shrink back from helping each other. But of course, nothing is absolutely black or white. For example, Thai and Western children are treated and raised very differently. I oftentimes tease Thais about this. I remember seeing my sister's tiny children holding a spoon and going after their food with gusto. Before they learn to speak, they learn to use a spoon to get food into their mouths. In Thailand, you see six year old kids wandering around with a nanny or their mother trailing behind trying to feed them with a spoon. The kids haven't figured out how to feed themselves yet.

In order to feel comfortable helping others, we have to leap over the hurdle of self, of *me* and *mine*. We put ourselves in a vulnerable position by helping others; it can be frightening or trigger our vulnerability. Acts of service invite us to step out of the boundaries that we set up for ourselves. Whenever those boundaries are jostled in any way, we feel uncomfortable or threatened. These boundaries are totally conditioned and part of the conventional realm. We need to be able to consciously stretch our boundaries from time to time. Helping others and offering service are ways of stepping beyond the boundaries of our imaginary self. This gives us a lot of confidence in negotiating the human realm instead of getting bogged down in the protected areas of our being that are easily threatened. A sense of ease and well-being in any situation is one of the best gifts we can offer to ourselves and to others.

Abhayadana is another traditional way of giving dana. *Abhaya* is part of the name *Abhayagiri*. In Thai, *abhaya* is usually translated as forgiveness. We give forgiveness by not holding a grudge, ill-will or aversion. This kind of giving is considered a higher form of dana than material giving because it is a lot harder to forgive than it is to give material things.

Opening the heart to forgiveness, kindness and acceptance are really quite exalted states of mind. A lot of joy enters the heart when forgiveness is cultivated. It becomes second nature. And even if one can't offer forgiveness, at least there is recognition, "That's a good thing to do. I've got to figure out a way to open my heart to this person who really bugs me."

Fearless Mountain is the English translation of the name *Abhayagiri*. This fearlessness is an offering of security and trust when actions are motivated by goodness, generosity and virtue. We are not threatened, nor are we threatening. We don't generate fear and suspicion. We feel at ease and secure with any one. To be able to consistently live this way and give that to other human beings is a wonderful gift. As we continue to practice and the mind becomes increasingly aware of what motivates us, we can see how

much fear we carry. If we act this out, the human realm ends up filled with fear, competition and about getting what one can in a “dog eat dog” kind of way.

In Thailand dogs are not treated like they are in the West. In one monastery where I lived, all of the leftovers were mixed together and then put in a tire which had been cut in half. Even though there was plenty of room for all of the dogs to eat, there was fighting, biting and chaos everyday. Every dog was out to get the most. The mind that is in a competitive fear realm is always worrying about getting “enough.” It’s a miserable state of mind. Our commitment is to create a human realm from within based on dana, trust and truth.

There’s an old story about the difference between heaven and hell. The hell realms are filled with people who sit at long banquet tables piled high with all sorts of delicious foods and drinks. But everyone is completely miserable and hungry, because the utensils are too long to maneuver. No matter how hard they try, they can’t put the food in their mouths. The nourishment is there, but nobody can get to it. The heavenly realm is the same: the tables are laden with the same delicious food and with the identical utensils that look impossible to maneuver. But the people are happy and bright because they are using the utensils to feed one another. There is no hunger or frustration, only fullness and well-being, within the identical conditions. Giving and sharing is what turns a hell realm into a heavenly one. There is a sense of security and trust that people are there to help one another, which is why abhayadana is a higher form of dana. With practice and spiritual maturity, different forms of dana become integrated and ultimately, inform each other.

The highest form of dana is *Dhammadana*, which means the giving of Dhamma and of the teachings. Traditionally, making teachings available to others by helping to print Dhamma books is one of the highest forms of giving. There are many other ways that Dhammadana can be offered in daily life. People think they need to be a monastic or an Ajahn to give teachings. But this is not so.

Any kind of advice that is grounded in Right View and Right Understanding that is given with an open heart and good intentions is Dhammadana.

The offering of Dhammadana is so powerful that even if it's ignored or trashed, it is still the highest form of dana. Dhamma books used as doorstops or coasters cannot destroy or diminish this pure and priceless gift.

Ajahn Chah encouraged people to share their experiences. They didn't have to be anything exalted or obtuse. Helping people be more at ease and to suffer less was one of his basic teachings. In fact, Ajahn Chah said that to practice Dhammadana, you didn't have to teach or to say anything at all. "It's enough to set good examples and follow the Precepts."

Ajahn Chah frequently referred to Sariputta's introduction to the Buddha's teaching. He emphasized the essence of the story to monks and to anybody who practiced Dhamma: the way we live gives more weight than spoken words. Sariputta became interested in the Holy Life when he saw one of the first disciples of the Buddha walking on alms-round. The dignity, composure and the clarity that was involved in the simple activity of walking inspired a lot of faith in Sariputta. He then requested teachings from this monk who humbly replied, "I'm newly ordained and don't know much." But Sariputta insisted on hearing the Dhamma from him. The monk, Assaji said, "All things that arise, arise from a cause, and all things end because the causes have ended." Although he offered the gift of Dhamma through words and deeds, it was the monk's noble presence that first inspired Sariputta. So Ajahn Chah always reminded us that actions speak louder than words.

Parents often asked Ajahn Chah what they should teach their children. Ajahn Chah would turn the question right back to the parents. "It doesn't matter what *I* say, what do *you* say? What do *you* do?" If there is a tree way over there and a tree close by and a vine starts growing which tree will it climb? The closest one, of course. It's the same with parents. Their example has a bigger effect than anyone else. The examples we set in the monastery,

within society or within families are all aspects of Dhammadana. The gift of giving virtuous conduct and of living a life with Dhamma at its center has an extraordinarily powerful effect.

When you think of the people who have had the biggest positive impact in our life, they embody integrity in some way. It's not because of the kind of cars they own or the vacations they've taken. We value them because they have been trustworthy, kind and patient with us. They've made us feel good, no matter how badly we feel about ourselves. This kind of giving is not beyond the capacity of anybody. Increasing well-being and decreasing dukkha are gifts we can all give.

Generosity feeds and flows into everything we do. We can even bring an attitude of sharing into our meditation practice while sitting alone in our kutis. Meditation is not just about *me*. Sharing it with those we care about and with all beings has a different effect. This kind of giving transforms the heart by taking us out of the capsule of self and of *me*. We quickly realize that the *me* and *mine* universe is terribly cramped and crowded. When we can turn our attention to the world that is outside of that, we realize the world is spacious and expansive. There are so many opportunities for sharing, giving, and for living in accordance with Dhamma. Embracing these opportunities allows petty concerns and ways we perpetuate suffering to drop away.

I offer these reflections to you this evening.

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A Dhamma Compass
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