

The Joy of Giving

Generosity and the “instant karma” it generates

By [Gil Fronsdal](#)

If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would the stain of selfishness overcome their minds. Even if it were their last bite, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared, if there were someone to receive their gift.

—[Itivuttaka 26](#)

The practice of giving, or *dana* in Pali, has a preeminent place in the teachings of the Buddha. When he taught a graduated series of practices for people to engage in as they progress along the path, he always started by talking about the importance and benefits of the practice of generosity. Based on that foundation, he talked about the importance and benefits of the practice of ethics. Then he discussed the practices of calming the mind, and after that he described the insight practices, which, supported by a calm and stable mind, lead to enlightenment. Once a person had awakened, the Buddha often instructed him or her to go out to benefit others, to be of service. Service can be seen as an act of generosity, so the Buddhist path begins and ends with this virtue.

Dana refers to the act of giving and to the donation itself. The Buddha used the word *cage* to refer to the inner virtue of generosity that ensures that *dana* is connected to the Path. This use of *cage* is particularly significant because it also means “relinquishment” or “renunciation.” An act of generosity entails giving more than is required, customary, or expected relative to one’s resources and circumstances. Certainly it involves relinquishment of stinginess, clinging, and greed. In addition, generosity entails relinquishing some aspects of one’s self-interest, and thus is a giving of one’s self. The Buddha stressed that the spiritual efficacy of a gift is dependent not on the amount given but rather on the attitude with which it is given. A small donation that stretches a person of little means is considered of greater spiritual consequence than a large but personally insignificant donation from a wealthy person.

For laypeople, the Buddha considered the morally just acquisition of wealth and financial security to be a skilful source of happiness. However, he did not consider wealth to be an end in itself. Its value lay in the uses to which it was put. The Buddha likened a person who enjoyed wealth without sharing it with others to someone digging his own grave. The Buddha also compared the person who righteously earns wealth and gives it to the needy to a person with two eyes. The stingy person was compared to someone with only one eye.

The Buddha understood giving to be a powerful source of merit with long-term benefits both in this life and in lives to come. While the teachings on merit do not carry much meaning for many Western dharma practitioners, these teachings suggest unseen pathways by which consequences of our actions return to us.

One way that the giver sees his or her generosity return is found in “instant [karma](#),” the Buddhist idea that acts that you do have direct consequences on the state of your mind and heart, even as you do them. The consequences of giving are quite wonderful in the present moment; if we are present for them, we can receive these wonderful consequences during the act of giving.

The Buddha emphasised the joy of giving. Dana is not meant to be obligatory or done reluctantly. Rather, dana should be performed when the giver is “delighted before, during, and after giving.”

At its most basic level, dana in the Buddhist tradition means giving freely without expecting anything in return. The act of giving is purely out of compassion or goodwill, or the desire for someone else’s well-being. Perhaps dana is more about how we are than what we do. Through generosity, we cultivate a generous spirit. Generosity of spirit will usually lead to generosity of action, but being a generous person is more important than any particular act of giving. After all, it is possible to give without its being a generous act.

Although giving for the purposes of helping others is an important part of the motivation and joy of giving, the Buddha considered giving for the purpose of attaining nirvana as the highest motivation. For this purpose, “one gives gifts to adorn and beautify the mind.” Among these adornments are non clinging, lovingkindness, and concern for the well-being of others.



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