

# Giving in the Pali Canon

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*Dana*, giving, is extolled in the Pali canon as a great virtue. It is, in fact, the beginning of the path to liberation. When the Buddha preaches to a newcomer he starts his graduated sermon with an exposition on the virtues of giving (*danakatha*, Vin.i,15,18). Of the three bases for the performance of meritorious deeds (*punnakiriyavatthu*), giving is the first, the other two being virtue and mental culture (A.iv,241). It is also the first of the ten *paramita* perfected by a Buddha. Therefore, on the march towards liberation as an arahant or a Buddha, one initially has to practice *dana*.

## Function of Giving

Giving is of prime importance in the Buddhist scheme of mental purification because it is the best weapon against greed (*lobha*), the first of the three unwholesome motivational roots (*akusalamula*). Greed is wrapt up with egoism and selfishness, since we hold our personalities and our possessions as "I" and "mine". Giving helps make egoism thaw: it is the antidote to cure the illness of egoism and greed. "Overcome the taint of greed and practice giving," exhorts the Devatasamyutta (S.i,18). The Dhammapada admonishes us to conquer miserliness with generosity (*jine kadariyam danena*, Dhp. 223).

It is difficult to exercise this virtue of giving proportionate to the intensity of one's greed and selfishness. As such the Devatasamyutta equates giving to a battle (*danan ca yuddhan ca samanam ahu*, S.i,20). One has to fight the evil forces of greed before one can make up one's mind to give away something dear and useful to oneself. The Latukikopama Sutta illustrates how a man lacking in spiritual strength finds it hard to give up a thing he has been used to (M.i, 449). A small quail can come to death when it gets entangled even in a useless rotten creeper. Though weak, a rotten creeper is a great bond for the small bird. But even an iron chain is not too big a bond for a strong elephant. Similarly, a poor wretched man of weak character would find it difficult to part with his shabby meager belongings, while a strong-charactered king will even give up a kingdom once convinced of the dangers of greed.

Miserliness is not the only hindrance to giving. Carelessness and ignorance of the working of kamma and survival after death are equally valid causes (*macchera ca pamada ca evam danam na diyati*, S.i,18). If one knows the moral advantages of giving, one will be vigilant to seize opportunities to practice this great virtue. Once the Buddha said that if people only knew the value of giving as he does, they would not take a single meal without sharing their food with others (It.p,18).

## Qualities of the Donor

The suttas (e.g., D.i,137) employ a number of terms to describe the qualities of a donor. He is a man with faith (*saddha*), he has faith in the nobility of a morally sound life, in the

teachings of kamma and survival after death. He believes in the possibility of the moral and spiritual perfection of man. In short, he is not a materialist, and he has faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. He is not merely a giver (*dayako*), he is a lordly giver (*danapati*). The commentary explains the concept of "lordly giver" in the following words: "He who himself enjoys delicious things but gives to others what is not delicious is a donor who is a slave to the gifts he gives. He who gives things of the same quality as he himself enjoys is one who is like a friend of the gift. He who satisfies himself with whatever he can get but gives delicacies to others is a lordly giver, a senior and a master of the gifts given."

The donor is also described as one who keeps an open house for the needy (*anavatadvaro*). He is like a wellspring (*opanabhuto*) for recluses, brahmins, the destitute, wayfarers, wanderers and beggars. Being such a one he does meritorious deeds. He is munificent (*muttacago*) and is interested in sharing his blessings with others (*danasamvibhagarato*). He is a philanthropist who understands the difficulties of the poor (*vadannu*). He is open-handed and is ready to comply with another's request (*payatapani*). He is one fit to be asked from (*yacayogo*). He takes delight in distributing gifts to the needy (*vossaggarato*), and has a heart bent on giving (*cagaparibhavitacitto*). Such are the epithets used in the suttas to describe the qualities of the liberal-minded.

A noble giver is one who is happy before, during and after giving (A.iii,336). Before giving he is happy anticipating the opportunity to exercise his generosity. While giving he is happy that he is making another happy by fulfilling a need. After giving he is satisfied that he has done a good deed. The suttas list generosity as one of the important qualities that go to make a gentleman (A.iv,220). The Buddha compares the man who righteously earns his wealth and gives of it to the needy to a man who has both eyes, whereas the one who only earns wealth but does no merit is like a one-eyed man (A.i,129-30). The wealthy man who enjoys his riches by himself without sharing is said to be digging his own grave (Sn. 102).

## The Donations

Practically anything useful can be given as a gift. The Niddesa (ND.2, 523) gives a list of fourteen items that are fit to be given for charity. They are robes, almsfood, dwelling places, medicine and other requisites for the sick, food, drink, cloths, vehicles, garlands, perfume, unguent, beds, houses and lamps. It is not necessary to have much to practice generosity, for one can give according to one's means. Gifts given from one's meager resources are considered very valuable (*appasma dakkhina dinna sahasena samam mita*, S.i,18; *dajjappasmim pi yacito*, Dh.p. 224). If a person leads a righteous life even though he ekes out a bare existence on gleanings, looks after his family according to his means, but makes it a point to give from his limited stores, his generosity is worth more than a thousand sacrifices (S.i, 19-20). Alms given from wealth righteously earned is greatly praised by the Buddha (A.iii,354; It.p.66; A.iii,45-46). A householder who does so is said to be one who is lucky here and hereafter. In the Magha Sutta of the Sutta Nipata (Sn.p.87) the Buddha highly appreciates Magha who says that he earns through righteous means and liberally gives of it to the needy.

Even if one gives a small amount with a heart full of faith one can gain happiness hereafter. The Vimanavattha supplies ample examples. According to the Acamadayikavimanavatthu, the alms given consisted of a little rice crust, but as it was given with great devotion to an eminent arahant, the reward was rebirth in a magnificent celestial mansion. The Dakkhainavibhanga Sutta states that an offering is purified on account of the giver when the giver is virtuous, on account of the recipient when the recipient is virtuous, on account of both the giver and the recipient if both are virtuous, by none if both happen to be impious. *Dhammadana*, the dissemination of the knowledge of the Dhamma, is said to excel all other forms of giving (*sabbadanam dhammadanam jinati*, Dh.354).

The Anguttara Nikaya mentions five great gifts which have been held in high esteem by noble-minded men from ancient times (A.iv,246). Their value was not doubted in ancient times, it is not doubted at present, nor will it be doubted in the future. The wise recluses and brahmins had the highest respect for them. These great givings comprise the meticulous observance of the Five Precepts. By doing so one gives fearlessness, love and benevolence to all beings. If one human being can give security and freedom from fear to others by his behavior, that is the highest form of *dana* one can give, not only to mankind, but to all living beings.

## The Donee

The suttas also describe the person to whom alms should be given (A.iii, 41). Guests, travelers and the sick should be treated with hospitality and due consideration. During famines the needy should be liberally entertained. The virtuous should be first entertained with the first fruits of fresh crops. There is a recurrent phrase in the suttas (D.i, 137; ii,354; iii,76) describing those who are particularly in need of public generosity. They are recluses (*samana*), brahmins (*brahmana*), destitutes (*kapana*), wayfarers (*addhika*), wanderers (*vanibbaka*) and beggars (*yacaka*). The recluses and brahmins are religious persons who do not earn wages. They give spiritual guidance to the laity and the laity is expected to support them. The poor need the help of the rich to survive and the rich become spiritually richer by helping the poor. At a time when transport facilities were meager and amenities for travelers were not adequately organized, the public had to step in to help the wayfarer. Buddhism considers it a person's moral obligation to give assistance to all these types of people.

In the Anguttara Nikaya the Buddha describes, with sacrificial terminology, three types of fires that should be tended with care and honor (A.iv,44). They are *ahuneyyaggi*, *gahapataggi* and *dakkhineyyaggi*. The Buddha explained that *ahuneyyaggi* means one's parents, and they should be honored and cared for. *Gahapataggi* means one's wife and children, employees and dependents. *Dakkhineyyaggi* represents religious persons who have either attained the goal of arahantship or have embarked on a course of training for the elimination of negative mental traits. All these should be cared for and looked after as one would tend a sacrificial fire. According to the Maha-mangala Sutta, offering hospitality to one's relatives is one of the great auspicious deeds a layperson can perform (Sn. 262-63).

King Kosala once asked the Buddha to whom alms should be given (S.i,98). The Buddha replied that alms should be given to those by giving to whom one becomes happy. Then the king asked another question: To whom should alms be offered to obtain great fruit? The Buddha discriminated the two as different questions and replied that alms offered to the virtuous bears great fruit. He further clarified that offerings yield great fruit when made to virtuous recluses who have eliminated the five mental hindrances (*nivarana*) and cultivated moral habits, concentration, wisdom, emancipation and knowledge and vision of emancipation (*sila, samadhi, pañña, vimutti, vimuttinanadassana*).

In the Sakkasamyutta (S.i,233) Sakka asked the same question from the Buddha: Gifts given to whom bring the greatest result? The Buddha replied that what is given to the Sangha bears great results. Here the Buddha specifies that what he means by "Sangha" is the community of those upright noble individuals who have entered the path and who have established themselves in the fruit of saintship, and who are endowed with morality, concentration and wisdom. It is important to note that "Sangha" according to the Vinaya means a sufficient group of monks to represent the Order of monks for various ecclesiastical purposes (Vin. i,319). But in the suttas "Sangha" means the four pairs of noble individuals or the eight particular individuals (*cattari purisayugani, attha purisapuggala*), i.e., those who are on the path to stream-entry, once-returning, non-returning, and arahantship, and those who have obtained the fruits thereof.

The Magha Sutta (Sn.p.86) gives a detailed account of the virtues of the arahant to show to whom alms should be offered by one desiring merit. The Brahmanasamyutta (S.i,175) maintains that offerings bear greatest results when they are made to those who know their previous lives, who have seen heavens and hells, who have put an end to birth and who have realized ultimate knowledge. Thus the Sangha comprising morally perfect, worthy personages as described in the suttas constitutes the field of merit (*punnakkhetta*, M.i,447). Just as seeds sown in fertile well-watered fields yields bountiful crops, alms given to the virtuous established on the Noble Eightfold Path yield great results (A.iv,238; i,162). The Dhammapada maintains that fields have weeds as their blemish; lust, hatred, delusion and desire are the blemishes of people and therefore what is given to those who have eliminated those blemishes bears great fruit (Dhp. 356-59). The results of generosity are measured more by the quality of the field of merit represented by the recipient than by the quantity and value of the gift given.

The Anguttara Nikaya (A.iv,392-95) records a fabulous alms-giving conducted by the Bodhisatta when he was born as a brahman named Velama. Lavish gifts of silver, gold, elephants, cows, carriages, etc., not to mention food, drink and clothing, were distributed among everybody who came forward to receive them. But this open-handed munificence was not very valuable as far as merit was concerned because there were no worthy recipients. It is said to be more meritorious to feed one person with right view, a stream-enterer (*sotapanna*), than to give great alms such as that given by Velama. It is more meritorious to feed one once-returner than a hundred stream-enterers. Next in order come non-returners, arahants, Paccekabuddhas and Sammasambuddhas. Feeding the Buddha and the Sangha is more meritorious than feeding the Buddha alone. It is even more meritorious to construct a monastery for the general use of the Sangha of the four

quarters of all times. Taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is better still. Abiding by the Five Precepts is even more valuable. But better still is the cultivation of *metta*, loving-kindness, and best of all, the insight into impermanence, which leads to Nibbana.

## The Motivation for Giving

The suttas record various motives for exercising generosity. The Anguttara Nikaya (A.iv,236) enumerates the following eight motives:

1. *Asajja danam deti*: one gives with annoyance, or as a way of offending the recipient, or with the idea of insulting him.[\[5\]](#)
2. *Bhaya danam deti*: fear also can motivate a person to make an offering.
3. *Adasi me ti danam deti*: one gives in return for a favor done to oneself in the past.
4. *Dassati me ti danam deti* one also may give with the hope of getting a similar favor for oneself in the future.
5. *Sadhu danan ti danam deti*: one gives because giving is considered good.
6. *Aham pacami, ime ne pacanti, na arahami pacanto apacantanam adatun ti danam deti*: "I cook, they do not cook. It is not proper for me who cooks not to give to those who do not cook." Some give urged by such altruistic motives.
7. *Imam me danam dadato kalyano kittisaddo abbhuggacchati ti danam deti*: some give alms to gain a good reputation.
8. *Cittalankara-cittaparikkarattham danam deti*: still others give alms to adorn and beautify the mind.

Favoritism (*chanda*), ill will (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) are also listed as motives for giving. Sometimes alms are given for the sake of maintaining a long-standing family tradition. Desire to be reborn in heaven after death is another dominant motive. Giving pleases some and they give with the idea of winning a happy frame of mind (A.iv, 236).

But it is maintained in the suttas (A.iv,62) that alms should be given without any expectations (*na sapekho danam deti*). Nor should alms be given with attachment to the recipient. If one gives with the idea of accumulating things for later use, that is an inferior act of giving. If one gives with the hope of enjoying the result thereof after death, that is also an inferior act of giving. The only valid motive for giving should be the motive of adorning the mind, to rid the mind of the ugliness of greed and selfishness.

## The Manner of Giving

The suttas (e.g., A.iii,172) lay much emphasis on the manner of giving. The attitude of the donor in the act of giving makes a world of difference for the goodwill between the donor and recipient irrespective of whether the gift given is big or small. *Sakkaccam danam deti*: alms should be given in such a way that the donee does not feel humiliated, belittled or hurt. The needy ask for something with a sense of embarrassment, and it is the duty of the donor not to make him feel more embarrassed and make his already heavy burden still heavier. *Cittikatva danam deti*: alms should be given with due consideration

and respect. The recipient should be made to feel welcome. It is when a gift is given with such warmth that a cohesive mutually enriching friendliness emerges between the donor and donee. *Sahattha deti*: one should give with one's own hand. The personal involvement in the act of giving is greatly beneficial. This promotes rapport between the donor and donee and that is the social value of giving. Society is welded in unity with care and concern for one another when generosity is exercised with a warm sense of personal involvement. *Na apaviddham deti*: one should not give as alms what is only fit to be thrown away. One should be careful to give only what is useful and appropriate. *Na anagamanaditthiko deti*: one should not give in such a callous manner so as to make the donee not feel like coming again.

Giving with faith (*saddhaya deti*) is much extolled in the suttas (A.iii,172). Especially when offering alms to the clergy one should do so with due deference and respect, taking delight in the opportunity one has got to serve them. One should also give at the proper time to meet a dire need (*kalena deti*). Such timely gifts are most valuable as they relieve the anxiety and stress of the supplicant. One should give with altruistic concerns, with the sole intention of helping another in difficulty (*anuggahacitto danam deti*). In the act of giving one should take care not to hurt oneself or another (*attanā ca parā ca anupahacca danam deti*). Giving with understanding and discretion is praised by the Buddha (*viceyyadanam sugatappasattham*). If a gift contributes to the well-being of the donee it is wise to give. But if the gift is detrimental to the welfare of the donee one should be careful to exercise one's discretion. Giving as described above is highly commended as noble giving (*sappurisadana*). More than what is given, it is the manner of giving that makes a gift valuable. One may not be able to afford a lavish gift, but one can always make the recipient feel cared for by the manner of giving.

## **The Value of Giving**

Many suttas enumerate the various benefits of giving. Giving promotes social cohesion and solidarity. It is the best means of bridging the psychological gap, much more than the material economic gap, that exists between haves and have-nots. The Magha Sutta maintains that hates gets eliminated when one is established in generosity (Sn. 506). The one with a generous heart earns the love of others and many associate with him (A.iii,40). Giving also cements friendships (Sn. 187).

It is maintained that if a person makes an aspiration to be born in a particular place after giving alms, the aspiration will be fulfilled only if he is virtuous, but not otherwise (A.iv,239). According to one sutta (A.iv,241-43), if one practices giving and morality to a very limited degree and has no idea about meditation, one obtains an unfortunate birth in the human world. One who performs meritorious deeds such as giving and morality to a considerable degree, but does not understand anything about meditation, meets a fortunate human birth. But those who practice giving and morality to a great extent without any knowledge of meditation find rebirth in one of the heavens. They excel other deities in the length of life, beauty, pleasure, fame and the five strands of sense pleasure.

The Anguttara Nikaya (A.iv,79) enumerates a number of this-worldly benefits of giving. The generous person, and not the miser, wins the sympathy of others. arahants approach him, accept alms and preach to him first. A good reputation spreads about him. He can attend any assembly with confidence and dignity. He is reborn in a state of happiness after death. Another sutta (A.iii,41) adds that a generous person wins popularity; people of noble character associate with him and he has the satisfaction of having fulfilled a layperson's duties (*gihidhamma anapeto hoti*).

It is said that an almsgiver bestows on others life, beauty, happiness, strength and intelligence. Having bestowed them on others, he becomes a beneficiary of them himself (A.iii,42). The same idea is expressed by the succinct statement that one reaps what one sows (*yadisam vapate bijam tadisam harate phalam*, S.i,227).

Giving with faith results in the attainment of riches and beauty whenever the fruition of the gift occurs. By giving alms with due deference one gains, in addition, children, wives, subordinates and servants who are obedient, dutiful and understanding. By giving alms at the proper time not only does one obtain great wealth but also timely fulfillment of needs. By giving alms with the genuine desire to help others, one gains great wealth and the inclination to enjoy the best of sense pleasures. By giving alms without hurting oneself and others, one gains security from dangers such as fire, floods, thieves, kings and unloved heirs (A. iii,172).

Alms given to recluses and brahmans who follow the Noble Eightfold Path yield wonderful results just as seeds sown on fertile, well-prepared, well-watered fields produce abundant crops (A.iv,238). Alms given without any expectations whatsoever can lead to birth in the Brahma-world, at the end of which one may become a non-returner (A.iv,62).

The Dakkhinavibhanga Sutta enumerates a list of persons to whom alms can be offered and the merit accruing therefrom in ascending order. A thing given to an animal brings a reward a hundredfold. A gift given to an ordinary person of poor moral habit yields a reward a thousandfold; a gift given to a virtuous person yields a reward a hundred thousandfold. When a gift is given to a person outside the dispensation of Buddhism who is without attachment to sense pleasures, the yield is a hundred thousandfold of crores. When a gift is given to one on the path to stream-entry the yield is incalculable and immeasurable. So what can be said of a gift given to a stream-enterer, a once-returner, a non-returner, an arahant, a Paccekabuddha, and a Fully Enlightened Buddha?

The same sutta emphasizes that a gift given to the Sangha as a group is more valuable than a gift offered to a single monk in his individual capacity. It is said that in the distant future there will be Buddhist monks who wear only a yellow collar as a distinguishing clerical mark, who are immoral and of evil character. If a gift is offered even to such monks in the name of the Order, it yields much more merit than a gift given to a monk in his individual capacity. But it should be observed that this statement is contradictory to ideas expressed elsewhere, that what is given to the virtuous is greatly beneficial but not

what is given to the immoral. It is evident here that a later interpolation cannot be altogether ruled out.

The Buddha once explained that it is a meritorious act even to throw away the water after washing one's plate with the generous thought: "May the particles of food in the washing water be food to the creatures on the ground." When that is so, how much more meritorious it is to feed a human being! But the sutta hastens to add that it is more meritorious to feed a virtuous person (A.i,161).

Another sutta (A.iii,336) maintains that it is not possible to estimate the amount of merit that accrues when an offering is endowed with six particular characteristics. Three of the characteristics belong to the donor while three belong to the donee. The donor should be happy at the thought of giving prior to making the offering. He should be pleased at the time of making the offering, and he should be satisfied after the offering is made. Thus the nobility of thought — without a trace of greed before, during and after the offering — makes a gift truly great. The recipients also should be free from lust, hatred and delusion, or they should have embarked on a course of training for the elimination of these mental depravities. When an almsgiving is endowed with these qualities of the donor and donee, the merit is said to be as immeasurable as the waters in the ocean.

Once Visakha gave a learned explanation of the benefits she expected from her munificence when the Buddha questioned her as to what she saw as the advantages of her great generosity (Vin.i,293-94). She said that when she hears that a particular monk or nun has attained any of the fruits of recluseship, and if that monk or nun has visited Savatthi, she would be certain that he or she has partaken of the offerings she constantly makes. When she reflects that she has contributed in some measure to his or her spiritual distinction, great delight (*pamuja*) arises in her. Joy (*piti*) arises in the mind that is delighted. When the mind is joyful the body relaxes (*kayo passambhissati*). When the body relaxes a sense of ease (*sukha*) is experienced which helps the mind to be concentrated (*cittam samadhiyissati*). That will help the development of the spiritual faculties (*indriyabhavana*), spiritual powers (*balabhavana*), and factors of enlightenment (*bojjhangabhavana*). These are the advantages she hopes for by her munificence. The Buddha was so pleased with her erudite reply that he exclaimed, "Sadhu sadhu sadhu" in approbation.

It is evident that giving alone is not sufficient for one to make an end of suffering. Anathapindika, who was pronounced by the Buddha as the foremost among almsgivers, became only a stream-enterer. It is specifically said that *dana* has to be fortified by *sila*, morality, if it is to produce good results. Though Anathapindika practiced unblemished virtue, it is nowhere stated that he practiced mental culture or meditation (*bhavana*). Therefore, in spite of all his magnanimous munificence, he had to remain a stream-enterer.

The *Ghatikara Sutta* (M.ii,52) records a unique almsgiving where even the donor was not present. Chatikara the potter was the chief benefactor of the Buddha Kassapa. He was a non-returner who did not want to enter the Order as he was looking after his blind, aged



parents. He had greatly won the trust of the Buddha by the nobility of his conduct and devotion. One day the Buddha Kassapa went to his house on his alms round but Ghatikara was out. He asked the blind parents where the potter had gone. They replied that he had gone out, but invited the Buddha to serve himself from the pots and pans and partake of a meal. The Buddha did so. When Ghatikara returned and inquired who had taken from the food, the parents informed him that the Buddha had come and they had requested him to help himself to a meal. Ghatikara was overjoyed to hear this as he felt that the Buddha had so much trust in him. It is said that the joy and happiness (*pitisukha*) he experienced did not leave him for two weeks, and the parents' joy and happiness did not wane for a whole week.

The same sutta reports that on another occasion the roof of the Buddha Kassapa's monastery started leaking. He sent the monks to Ghatikara's house to fetch some straw, but Ghatikara was out at the time. Monks came back and said that there was no straw available there except what was on the roof. The Buddha asked the monks to get the straw from the roof there. Monks started stripping the straw from the roof and the aged parents of Ghatikara asked who was removing the straw. The monks explained the matter and the parents said, "Please do take all the straw." When Ghatikara heard about this he was deeply moved by the trust the Buddha reposed in him. The joy and happiness that arose in him did not leave him for a full fortnight and that of his parents did not subside for a week. For three months Ghatikara's house remained without a roof with only the sky above, but it is said that the rain did not wet the house. Such was the great piety and generosity of Ghatikara.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, *dana* is the first of the meritorious deeds. It is also one of the four benevolent ways of treating others (*cattari sangahavatthuni*), A.iv,219). But is noteworthy that in the lists of virtues required for liberation such as those included among the thirty-seven requisites of enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiya dhamma*), *dana* never occurs as a required virtue. Instead of *dana*, *caga* or generosity is included in some of the lists, such as the five qualities — faith virtue, learning, generosity and wisdom. Perhaps there is a slight difference between *dana* and *caga* when considered as virtues ingrained in the mind. *Dana* is the very practical act of giving, *caga* is the generous attitude ingrained in the mind by the repeated practice of *dana*. The word *caga* literally means giving up, abandonment, and it is an indication that the close-fitted selfish grip one has on one's possessions is loosened by *caga*. It is possible to give alms even out of negative motives such as favoritism (*chanda*), ill will (*dosa*), fear (*bhaya*), delusion (*moha*), desire for a good reputation, etc., but *caga* is the positive virtue of a generous disposition.

Buddhism teaches a gradual process of emptying oneself. It starts with giving away one's external possessions. When the generous dispositional trait sets in and is fortified by the deepening insight into the real nature of things, one grows disenchanted with sense pleasures (*nibbindati*). At this stage one gives up household life and seeks ordination. Next comes the emptying of sensory inputs by guarding the sense doors. Through meditation (*bhavana*) one empties oneself of deep-seated defilements and fills oneself

with positive noble qualities. But this whole process of bailing out negativities starts with *dana*, the practice of giving.