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A STUDY ON DĀNA BASED ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MONASTIC AND LAY DISCIPLES

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Different from other religious traditions, *dāna* or giving in Buddhism has two kinds, namely, *āmisadāna* or material gift, and *dhammadāna* or spiritual gift. Through *dhammadāna*, the monastics have the opportunity to share the Buddha's teachings with others and the problems of the laity related to spiritual life could be solved in various ways. In early Buddhism, the Buddha advised his lay disciples to practice *dāna* as the first step of spiritual cultivation. He encouraged them to offer essential material needs to the noble and virtuous ones for getting much more merit. For the monastics, the Buddha emphasized the importance of sharing the Dhamma for the welfare and happiness of others. There is a fact that the mutual interaction between both communities plays a crucial role in the survival of Buddhism. Without the material support of the laity, the monastics can't concentrate on their spiritual cultivation. In the same manner, the laity seems to be hard to see the light of wisdom if lacking spiritual guidance taught by the monastics. *Āmisadāna* and *dhammadāna*, therefore, become the marrow for the fulfillment of noble ideals in spiritual cultivation. With the emergence of *Mahāyāna* along with the ideal of Bodhisattvas, various new facets of *dāna* were added to Buddhism. It made the relationship between the monastics and laypeople closer, leading to a mutual and flexible exchange of the role and duties of both. Many monastic Bodhisattvas zealously participate in building stupas and monasteries, creating social charity associations, helping ones in need,

and so on. Along with the sacred duty, that is, offering material gifts to the monastics, laypeople also strive for spiritual cultivation.

Dāna and The Methods of Cultivation

One of the essential lessons of the Buddha is the Four Noble Truths (*Cattāri Ariyasaccāni*). The Four Noble Truths consist of the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The Buddha explains, “It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust”¹ is the root cause for all suffering and the Noble Eightfold Path is the middle way that “leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna.”² Although dāna is indirectly mentioned in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, it is the fact that dāna is closely related to these teachings because of its supportive advantages for the achievement of freedom from worldly pleasures. As stated by Bhikkhu Bodhi:

Giving does not appear in its own right among the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, nor does it enter among the other requisites of enlightenment or *bodhipakkhiyā dhammā*. Most probably it has been excluded from these groupings because the practice of giving does not by its nature conduce directly and immediately to the arising of insight and the realization of the Four Noble Truths. Giving functions in the Buddhist discipline in a different capacity. It does not come at the apex of the path, as a factor constituent of the process of awakening, but rather it serves as a basis and preparation which underlies and quietly supports the entire endeavor to free the mind from the defilements.³

That is why in his instructions the Buddha always refers to dāna as a fundamental virtue along with other elements in various methods of spiritual cultivation for both the laity and monastic community.

Dāna, first of all, belongs to the first of the three meritorious deeds (*puñña-kiriya-vatthu*). The other two factors are virtuous behavior (*sīla*) and meditative development (*bhāvanā*).⁴ Besides the model of the threefold training (*ti-sikkhā*) consisting of morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*),

¹ *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, V.421.

² *Ibid.*, V.421.

³ Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., *Dāna: The Practice of Giving: Selected Essays*, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2011), 7.

⁴ *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, IV.244.

the three meritorious deeds can be considered as a simpler model for the laity. In comparison to the monastic community, *paññā* is not the ultimate goal of lay people's life. In contrast, *dāna* cannot be the chief element in the highest spiritual cultivation that the monastics aim to. Nowadays, the life of laypeople is increasingly dependent upon domestic ties with their rights and duties and therefore it is not easy for them to put it all down. Only practicing *dāna* can be an effective way for the laity to gradually cultivate the virtue of giving up on worldly things.

Dāna, secondly, is one of the four virtues of benevolence (*saṅgaha-vatthu*). The other three virtues are pleasant speech (*priyavāditā*), promoting the interest of others (*arthacaryā*), and sharing the joy and sorrow of others (*samānārthatā*).⁵ As part of the four virtues of benevolence, the practice of *dāna* is manifested through giving, sacrificing, and sharing his possessions with others. Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh states, "Giving is an essential Buddhist practice. It is about generosity, openness, and our capacity to embrace others with compassion and love."⁶ The practice of the four virtues of benevolence, especially *dāna* as a tool, in various aspects, helps a monastic Bodhisattva as a preacher become easier to attract and approach the laity in conveying the teachings of the Buddha.

Although the practice of perfection (*pāramita*) is different in number among the Buddhist sects, *dāna* is undoubtedly considered the first and most important factor. The cultivation of *dānapāramita* is the marrow for Bodhisattvas to achieve Buddhahood as per *Mahāyāna*. This method is for both the lay bodhisattvas and the monastic bodhisattvas.

Another cultivation method of *dāna* practice related to contemplation is that *dāna* is the fifth of the six recollections. The other factors are the recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, the Virtue, and the Devas. These six elements are considered objects for practitioners to become ardent, alert, and mindful. In the recollection of generosity, a practitioner, a monk or a nun or a layperson, should recollect his or her generosity thus: "It is truly my good fortune and gain that in a population obsessed by the stain of miserliness, I dwell at home with a mind devoid of the stain of miserliness, freely generous, openhanded,

⁵ *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, II.32.

⁶ "Practice of Generosity," Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://thichnhatanhfoundation.org/practice-of-generosity>.

delighting in relinquishment, devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing.”⁷ Based on such practice, the practitioners are not obsessed with lust, hatred, and illusion. Their mind then becomes joyful and rapture consequently arises in their mind. “For one with a rapturous mind, the body becomes tranquil. One tranquil in body feels pleasure. For one feeling pleasure, the mind becomes concentrated.”⁸ Based on that, both the lay and monastic Bodhisattvas can obtain some spiritual values in the path of liberation occurred by the subtle states of the mind.

Dāna and Responsibilities

The material transaction is a central part of the religious relationship and ‘dāna contract’ is the term that E.B. Findly used to refer to this relationship.⁹ This term itself manifests the responsibility of parties in this religious relationship.

Material gifts given by the laity affect the responsibility of the monastics in various ways. A monk reluctantly becomes the protector of assets when receiving valuable gifts from the laity. This may lead him to lack concentration in his own cultivation. In the relationship between a monastic and his own great donor, there gradually formulate a responsibility for participating in some unwanted problems related to the private life of the donor as well as his or her relatives. The burden of the laity’s responsibility on dāna is definitely reduced to a certain extent because they basically fulfill their duty by offering four requisites.

Dhammadāna can be considered as the major responsibility of the monastic Bodhisattvas towards the laity and it is completely compatible with the spirit of the principle of the cause and the effect in Buddhism. There is one story related to a certain newly ordained monk who spends too much time in the house of the laity and this makes other monks unsatisfied with his action. Hearing the admonishment of these monks, he argues that the elder monks could approach families excessively, so why he could not? Having failed in giving advice, these monks tell the story to the Buddha and the Buddha instructs that “here the elder bhikkhus dress in the morning and, taking bowl and robe, enter a village or town for alms. There they speak on the Dhamma, and *the laypeople show their confidence* to them. They use their gains without

⁷ *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, V.332.

⁸ *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, V.332.

⁹ E.B. Findly, *Dāna: Giving and Getting in Pāli Buddhism*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2003), 1.

being tied to them, infatuated with them, not blindly absorbed in them, seeing the danger in them and understanding the escape. This increases their beauty and strength, and on that account, they do not meet death or deadly suffering.”¹⁰ Here *the laypeople show their confidence* denotes the responsibility of the laity to the monks in giving the four requisites and before doing that, the monks need to carry their responsibility for the laity i.e., preaching the teachings of the Buddha. Besides, through this story, another responsibility of the monastics toward the laity is that the elder monks must have a greater duty than the younger ones in approaching and communicating with the laity in *dhammadāna*. The more time one spends in spiritual cultivation, the more spiritual experience one gets, in an ideal condition, of course. It is the deep experience in cultivation, the elder monks can share valuable and practical lessons with the laity.

Dāna and the Bodhisattva Path

In early Buddhist texts, Bodhisattva is ascribed to Buddha alone whereas lots of Bodhisattvas have appeared in Mahayana literature. Each has a certain specific characteristic such as *Avalokiteśvara* and *Mañjuśrī*, the embodiment of compassion and of wisdom respectively. Additionally, not only monastic followers but also lay disciples can attain Buddhahood through the practice of the Bodhisattva path. On this noble path, a Bodhisattva needs to raise his Bodhicitta and practice the ten *pāramitās*. In the practice of *pāramitās*, *dāna pāramitās* could be considered a crucial part of a Bodhisattva’s discipline.¹¹

In order to fulfill the path, lay bodhisattva must practice *dāna* in various dimensions including the practice of giving and transformation of merit.¹² On the path of bodhisattvas, it is necessary to preach the teachings of the Buddha as an effective means to save all human beings from the shore of suffering to the shore of liberation, and “those who join the monastic community give everything away as a condition of entry, and as religious teachers and exemplars give of their time in teaching and performing good works. In this respect they give the gift of the Dhamma, which is said to be the highest of all gifts.”¹³

¹⁰ *Samyutta Nikāya*, II.269-70.

¹¹ Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1970), 172.

¹² Jan Nattier, *The Bodhisattva Path: Based on the Ugraparipṛcchā, a Mahāyāna Sūtra*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2007), 111-12.

¹³ C.S. Prebish and D. Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, (London: Routledge, 2010), 239.

In relation to the transformation of merit, it is not easy for the lay Bodhisattvas to transfer their merit to others because they still make merit by giving alms and other material supports. The lay bodhisattvas giving gifts to others including beggars or someone in need manifest their compassion and loving-kindness to other living beings. Simultaneously, they also offer the requisites to the monastic community as a means to earn merit.¹⁴

Speaking of the ideal gift that a Bodhisattva should give away, the Buddhist texts generally conceive and depicts “the gift of the body not as an ordinary act of giving, but rather as the fullest possible manifestation of dāna and the ideal form of dāna.”¹⁵ The gift of the body is often associated more specifically with the Bodhisattva’s perfection of generosity. One of the important factors to fulfill this perfection is “in terms of the absolute purity of intention that accompanies the gift”.¹⁶ It means that the Bodhisattva gives without self-interest, expecting nothing in return.¹⁷ There are other elements that a bodhisattva should know how to give such as he should be joyful and happy when he gives away anything or he should not talk of his charitable deeds.¹⁸ Such a thing can be practiced by both the laity and monastic Bodhisattvas.

However, it is worth noting that the gift of one’s own body is somehow equivalent to the ultimate gift, giving up the world. In this case, the gift of the body is manifested by the renunciation of the world. The renunciation of the world is not “merely the rejection of family and all material possessions but also the loss of one’s former identity and the giving up of one’s self - which is aptly symbolized by the gift of one’s body.”¹⁹ In other words, the gift of the body in the sense of giving up the world leads one to transform one’s former identity to a new one such as a monk or renunciant. Hence, “the gift of the body thus becomes a concrete and visceral image of the kind of eradication of self that is perhaps most fully realized when one

¹⁴ Richard F. Gombrich, *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 248-9.

¹⁵ Reiko Ohnuma, “The Gift of the Body and the Gift of Dharma,” in *History of Religions*, vol. IV, 168.

¹⁶ Ohnuma, *The Gift of The Body*, 169.

¹⁷ Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and Kelsang Gyatso, *Introduction to Buddhism: An Explanation of the Buddhist Way of Life*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1999), 98.

¹⁸ Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine*, 176.

¹⁹ Reiko Ohnuma, *Bodily Self-Sacrifice in Indian Buddhist Literature*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2009), 172.

renounces the world.”²⁰ From this perspective, it may be impossible for the lay bodhisattvas to complete it because of their attachment to domestic ties.

Reiko Ohnuma in her article *The Gift of the Body and the Gift of the Dhamma* explains that the gift of Bodhisattva’s body is parallel to the Buddha’s gift of Dhamma (*dhammadāna*). She describes the Buddha’s preaching as a gift or a sacrifice of the physical body.²¹ In other words, *dhammadāna* is not just the preaching of the Buddha’s teachings uttered by the monastics but also the manifestation of the sacrifice of their body as a material gift.

Dāna as a means of creating welfare in society

Dāna in Buddhism is the first of the three levels in the establishment of freedom and happiness for human beings, along with precepts (*sīla*) and mindfulness (*bhāvanā*). The Buddha was equally concerned about the welfare of the society in which he lived as that of the brethren of the Sangha. He wanted a society without discrimination for serving the interests of many. E.B. Findly states, “Buddhist dāna is an important response to the increased wealth and to the recharging of social and economic schema.”²² Sulak Sivaraksa sees that “the practice of dāna cultivates seeds of peace within and undermines the bases in greed of capitalism and consumerism in the outer world.”²³

Dāna helps in the development of ethical values and one can cultivate many good virtues in life by reducing greed and the nature of the collection. Through generosity, one can conquer miserliness because greed is becoming a habit in modern society, and to collect more money, a person is ready to follow wrong ways and do unwholesome deeds.²⁴ In order to help people realize the true happiness and the danger of greed, the monastics need to fulfill their role as preachers in imparting the Buddha’s teachings to all walks

²⁰ Ibid., 172.

²¹ Ohnuma, *The Gift of The Body*, 323-59.

²² Findly, *Dāna: Giving and Getting*, 37.

²³ Sulak Sivaraksa, “Buddhism and Human Freedom,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 18 (1998): 63-68, accessed April 23, 2021, doi:10.2307/1390436.

²⁴ Gyanaditya Shakya, *Human Values and Buddhist Ethics*, (Maharashtra: Sangyan Prakashan, 2020), 188.

of life. His Holiness Dalai Lama also emphasizes the importance of giving wisdom as a useful tool to transform awareness for those who lack understanding.²⁵

The family is the cell of society. If each member in the family fulfills their own duties and responsibilities, the family will have peace and happiness. Happiness and peace of each family are the vital bases of the prosperity and welfare of society. That is why in his instructions, the Buddha teaches his lay disciples to offer valuable gifts to their parents as a necessary duty because the parents are the ones who raise them, nurture them, and show them the world.²⁶ The encouragement and action of authorities on dāna make society peaceful and joyful.²⁷ Charitable activities bring happiness and benefit to many, contributing to minimizing difficulties in life. Volunteer activities through caring and sharing material gifts will reduce the gap between rich and poor, the difference in social life, and especially help people closer together in social relationships. Even the poor are encouraged to share gifts with those in more difficult circumstances than themselves.²⁸ The lay-bodhisattvas, therefore, can be the major forces in carrying out such activities.

In secular life, a politically unstable country will lead to war and internal turmoil. Economic instability and poverty will lead to robbery, prostitution, and fraud. The moral and cultural declination will lead to deterioration in lifestyle, domestic and social instability, and increase of a variety of social evils. Economic crisis, unstable social life, and miserable people can lead to political instability. Only sharing, sacrificing, dedicating, and serving sentient beings in the spirit of selflessness and non-self-interest will establish a stable society with happiness and welfare. To accomplish this goal, the coordination between lay people and the monastic community in both the aspects, material gifts, and spiritual gifts respectively, will be the wings for social stability, bringing “the blessings of the many folks, for the happiness of the many folks out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the blessing, the happiness of devas and men.”²⁹

²⁵ Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, *Courageous Compassion*, (Somerville: Wisdom Publications: 2021), 32.

²⁶ *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, I.133.

²⁷ *Dīgha Nikāya*, I.136.

²⁸ *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, I.20.

²⁹ *Mahāvagga*, I.28.

In conclusion, dāna is one of the essential practical factors in the doctrinal system of Buddhism though the way it occurs is direct or indirect. As part of the three meritorious deeds, dāna is emphasized toward the lay Bodhisattvas for getting merit as well as detaching them from worldly things. Here, the monastic Bodhisattvas as the field of merit are the ones whom the laity can firmly put their faith to sow their wholesome seeds. It is the wholesome seed on dāna that gradually leads the laity to the brightness of wisdom from the darkness of ignorance. To approach the ideal of enlightenment and liberation, lay bodhisattvas strive to practice *āmisadāna* as an effective means for alleviating the suffering of other beings while monastic bodhisattvas are assigned to dedicate everything, from his physical to mental health, as a necessary step leading to the supreme enlightenment through the achievement of Buddhahood. A lay bodhisattva is ready to give his material gifts to others but he could not give up his secular life due to his attachments to many worldly things whereas the practice of dāna is fully accomplished by the monastic bodhisattvas by renouncing worldly life for the sake of the freedom of mind and the freedom of wisdom. There is the fact that dāna contains a hidden strength in the undisputed relationship between the laity and monastic community. Its veiled power lies in the self-reflection of the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis when receiving material gifts from the laity. The monastics not only play a role as the beneficiary of the four requisites but also needs to make more effort in spiritual cultivation to deserve what they receive from the lay people. It truly is called a contract between the two communities. Lastly, whether you are a monastic or a layperson, you should actively practice various facets of dāna for the welfare of society. In this way, our society will become richer and more beautiful, both literally and figuratively, people will live in love-filled sharing, social connections will become tighter and of course, the spirit of contemporary lay and monastic bodhisattvas will rise stronger, contributing to spreading the noble teachings and gestures in Buddhism to the masses, and making Buddhism more and more prosperous in the world.

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