

Why the Beggar Man Begg

It's true that practicing generosity can be an act of liberation for yourself,
but it's important to remember that it is not self-centered.



IT WAS THE SECOND day of a vipassana meditation retreat I was co-teaching in Santa Fe, and we had a problem. Or at least, I had a problem. I was not satisfied with the Tibetan bowl we were using as a bell to signal the end of each sitting. The retreat managers had provided us with a small bowl, and I found that the sound was not right for the meditation hall. The managers had been very responsive and located two other bowls, but something seemed wrong with the sound of each of these as well. Ordinarily I'm not that particular; after all it was just a bell. Moreover, the yogis were witnessing the search for the perfect bell. A dharma teacher who's attached to the sound of a bowl is hardly the ideal role model for students who are being asked to sit in silence hour after hour, day after day. Still, I had this feeling that wouldn't go away; it wasn't the right bowl. I've learned to trust my intu-

ition, even in matters that seem trivial, but in this instance I didn't know what to do.

I was sitting in the meditation hall by myself when a yogi came in and asked if I was in need of a different bell. I answered that indeed I was, and he said that on an impulse he had put one in his car before he left home. He then brought in a large Tibetan bowl that when struck sustained a clear, full bass tone that harmonized with all the higher notes the bell made. It was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard from a bowl its size.

On the day I was leaving, the yogi came up to me, bowed, handed me a note, and said, "Read this when you settle down somewhere." I assumed he meant when I was on the airplane, so I put the note in my pocket and thought no more about it until I was in the air. The note said, "I now know why I was compelled to bring this bowl—it was meant to be yours. Please take it with you when you leave. Thank you for sharing the dharma with us." I was glad I had not read the note earlier. This way I was able to avoid taking the yogi's bowl without refusing his gift. He clearly loved the bell; one

day I had found him sitting in the hall during the lunch break, striking the bell and just listening to it. The last thing I wanted was to deprive him of such pleasure. Yet, he was offering the bell as *dana*, which is the practice of generosity. I felt as though I had received the warmth of his good intention, he had received the merit of the giving, and still he had his bowl. So it seemed like a fortuitous outcome.

I told the story of the bowl to two of my teachers, who were staying at my house, when I returned from Santa Fe. They were somewhat disapproving of my relief at the way things had turned out. It was an act of true *dana*, they said, and not to receive it with equal generosity would be failing him as a teacher. I could not disagree with their comments, but I was still glad to have avoided the situation.

To my consternation, within a few days of returning

from Santa Fe, I received an e-mail from him: “Why did you not take your bell? If you did not read my note before you left, why have I not heard from you since then?” I wrote back explaining what had happened and suggested that the time had passed for giving away the bowl. He replied by asking for shipping instructions.

That is how the bell of the enchanting sounds came to reside with me. I often carry it to retreats around the country where I am teaching, and hundreds of yogis have ended their meditation time on the cushion in response to its deep chime. Thus, one yogi’s dana became a gift to many. This is the power of the practice of dana—it reverberates out into unknown directions, over indefinite periods of time. But to the giver, it is not the fruits of giving that is of concern, only the practice of dana itself—the inner intention to find release from attachment and egoism by giving freely whatever one has that is of value. What you have to give may be material in nature, or it may be your time, energy, or wisdom.

Dana in its original context refers to the giving of alms in the form of money or food to the monks. Buddhist monks and nuns in the Southeast Asian forest tradition take vows of poverty; therefore, they are totally dependent on dana. Dana is one of three kinds of meritorious behavior along with *sila* (ethical behavior) and *bhavana* (mental development through meditation). The Buddha taught that five blessings accrue to the giver of dana: the affection of many people, noble association, good reputation, self-confidence, and a heavenly rebirth. The Buddha was quite clear that it is harmful for a person to attempt to buy these blessings with money or good conduct. Generosity is regarded as one of the *paramitas* or perfections that a bodhisattva achieves on the way to enlightenment, along with such virtues as patience, discipline, and wisdom. Dana is also understood as a form of kindness and compassion practice motivated by unconditional caring for another.

Monks, nuns, and lay teachers offer the dharma as their practice of dana. They in

turn are supported by dana from students. For laypeople living amidst monks in Southeast Asia, it is common practice to provide food, robes, and other small necessities of life, as well as financial gifts for the monastery and travel stipends for the monastics. Monks and nuns are not allowed to handle money themselves, and there are rules restricting what they can receive.

In the United States this practice of dana is also the basis of support for monastics living in the forest tradition. At the Abhayagiri Monastery in Northern California, monks and nuns go on monthly alms rounds for food in the small town in which it is located. Laypeople will bring food to the monastery and serve lunch to the monks and nuns. Lunch is the last meal of the day for these monastics, and they can only receive what is offered to them. So when you stand in line placing food in the alms bowl of one monk after another, the joy of giving is palpable. The deeper lesson is that each of us is equally dependent on others for the blessing of our food. We are all interconnected with one another and with the Earth in a web that goes beyond the marketplace of commercial exchange. We flourish or perish together through interwoven acts of dana arising from the benevolence and integrity of people we shall never meet. This too is the power of dana—even when practiced without consciousness, it arises and spreads. When you mindfully practice dana, you come into contact with its joyful, healing power.

Dana in Daily Life

UNDERSTANDING DANA is key to living the dharma in daily life, yet it is seldom taught on retreats as a practice. You practice dana to eradicate the attachment that comes from feelings of scarcity and separateness. However, there is a paradox contained in dana: You practice it as an act of liberation for yourself, yet it is not self-centered. True dana arises from the intention underlying your act. It is not that you are supposed to have only pure motives but rather that your intention is to cultivate purity of generosity without self-consideration.

There is an old Sufi story about the im-

portance of cultivating generosity which asks the question, why does the beggar man beg? A seemingly crippled beggar sits in the central square all day crying, “Baksheesh! Baksheesh! Who will give me baksheesh?” Some pass by ignoring him, some give little, others give generously. He praises them all and asks that Allah bless them. At the end of the day, the beggar rises from his seat, walks normally over to the prayer fountain, tosses in the coins he has received, then goes home to his comfortable middle class house. So why does the beggar beg? The last line of the story answers, “He begs for me and thee.” This teaching asks you to reflect on how practicing generosity fits into your spiritual life. What form your generosity takes is up to you, as it can only come from your values and what you have to offer. Remember it is your authentic intention that matters, even if that is simply a sincere wish that in time you will become more spontaneously generous.

It is important to understand that mixed motives are to be expected when you practice dana and that you are supposed to act from these mixed motives rather than wait for perfection of goodness. You practice in order to recognize and move toward the purity that already exists within you. If you only had pure motives, there would be no need to practice. This may seem obvious, but many yogis become confused and start to judge themselves by how much purity they have acquired. All that is called for is to practice daily in small but persistent ways—the practice will deepen by itself.

Dana means practicing generous behavior in all aspects of your life, not just giving money or sharing material possessions. Certainly the emotional impulse to practice dana most easily arises when you participate in providing sustainability for others, whether it is shelter, food, clothes, or medicine. But with less immediate life needs, such as education, safety, or earning a living, the appropriate dana may be the gift of your time. When it comes to intangibles such as justice and dignity, what may be most appropriate is to voice your support. Dana, along with

compassion, is a cornerstone of mindful social activism.

In daily life *dana* also means receiving each arising moment with a generous attitude and meeting it with patience that is based in spiritual practice. When interacting with friends or strangers, you give them your full attention as you listen to their words, and you interpret their actions with sympathy, even when they are clumsy. This is not to be misunderstood as being naïve or allowing wrong action to go uncorrected. Rather, it means holding for each person life's greatest possibility in the moment, even if in that moment the possibilities are severely limited. Can you see that meeting another person in this manner is the same as putting food in a monk's alms bowl? Likewise, you too are standing there with your alms bowl, arms extended. *Dana* in any form is *dana*; it nourishes the very essence of the other's being. In cultivating our sense of self-worth and well-being, we are just as dependent on the kindness of others as we are in our material needs. Thich Naht Hanh often teaches that we "inter-are," and from this knowing *dana* flows like water going downhill.

You know when you encounter someone with the bliss-bestowing power of a generous spirit. You part feeling more alive and better about yourself. What is usually hard to imagine is that you can be this way yourself. Yet with the conscious practice of *dana*, you are slowly transformed. There comes a time when for a few moments in your day the person in front of you is like the monk in the food line holding out an alms bowl. This is the blossoming of the felt experience of interconnectedness. When this starts to happen, the practice of *dana* becomes more spontaneous, less deliberate, and your difficulties with others become less personal. Mind you, your fears and wants do not go away, you just cease to be so identified with them.

You may well see yourself as too impoverished to approach life as a practice of *dana*, but this is a misperception. Practicing *dana* skillfully, be it material, energetic, emotional, or wisdom sharing, will

only make your life richer. You start practicing in small ways with people for whom you feel appreciation, then gradually you spread your generosity to neutral people and situations, and you save the difficult opportunities for when you have some momentum in the practice. It is not unlike doing *metta* (loving-kindness) practice. At first your *dana* comes from your desire to be such a person, then it evolves into a more heartfelt experience.

Better to Receive?

THERE IS A REVERSE side to *dana* that is often neglected—the practice of receiving generosity. Many people are better at giving *dana* than receiving it. It is a difficult practice that calls upon you to be both vulnerable and humble. Once the yogi offered the Tibetan bowl as *dana*, it was my practice to receive it without being controlled by my own preferences.

My first great lesson in receiving *dana* came long before I ever heard the word. As a teenager living in the Appalachian Mountains, I worked as a bag boy in a local supermarket. To my consternation, it was the working poor who were most likely to give tips, and they often seemed more needy than I. I would either refuse the tip or sometimes slip the money back into one of the bags as I put them in the car. I felt quite proud about this until one cold, rainy Christmas Eve when a man wearing cheap, worn-out clothes and driving a beat-up old car filled with many wide-eyed, unkempt children insisted on giving me a large tip. I was embarrassed at the idea of taking his money and flatly refused. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "This is something I can do for you. It is my Christmas." Suddenly I "got it"—the tips were not about me, they were about the giver, his values, and his life. Unconsciously I'd believed I had the right to decide the appropriateness of another's generosity when directed toward me. Such arrogance, such ignorance! I accepted the money, deeply thanked him, and kept walking through the parking lot pushing the empty shopping cart in the freezing air rather than returning to the warm store. My ears burned from shame, but my heart was

warm, for I had been touched by a generous spirit. I knew then that I had received a true teaching, but it was years before I could make it my own.

Generosity Gene

THERE IS ONE LAST point to consider about *dana* that has to do with the "selfish gene" theory currently in vogue with social biologists. They assert that any seemingly altruistic behavior is actually self-serving, because even if you sacrifice yourself to save others or to serve your community, you are really perpetuating your gene pool.

From this perspective, there isn't any such thing as *dana*, or loving-kindness, or compassion—it all falls under the category of self-interested behavior. While there are several reasons to disagree with this, what most needs to be questioned is its underlying assumption of separateness. When Mother Teresa was asked if it was difficult for her to touch lepers on the streets of Calcutta, she replied that each time, she was touching God; for her it was not a burden, but a privilege.

This is the radical understanding of nonseparateness and interdependency. If you believe it, the selfish gene theory is simply irrelevant. With this insight you realize practicing *dana* is an act of generosity from yourself to yourself. So of course you want to give away your beautiful bowl, and you are happy to receive it in order to share it with others. You know that you are both the giver and receiver in a never-ending dance of life in exchange with itself. You know why the beggar man begs, and you practice *dana* in order to be fully alive. ■

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