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Three Suttas on Giving

(Aṭṭha) Dāna Sutta 1 The First Discourse on Ways of Giving | A 8.31/4:236

(Aṭṭha) Dāna Sutta 2 The Second Discourse on Ways of Giving | A 8.32/4:236

Dāna Vatthu Sutta The Discourse on the Grounds for Giving | A 8.33/4:236 f

Theme: The motives behind giving & the benefits of giving

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

1 Ethics of giving

1.1 These two suttas on giving—the **(Aṭṭha) Dāna Sutta** (A 8.31) and the stanzas (also called Dāna Sutta 2) (A 8.32)—and the **Dāna Vatthu Sutta** (A 8.33) are significant in the study of human nature.

The **(Aṭṭha) Dāna Sutta 2**, notes Rune Johansson remarks, is “a very interesting document in the history of psychology since it betrays sharp observation and realistic analysis of human motivation” (Johansson 1983:16). The merit or demerit of giving significantly depends on the intention and mental state of the giver. When the giving is done with good intention, the giving brings merit (*puñña*); when the giving is done with a wholesome mind, it is wholesome (*kusala*). In the former case, the giving bring material and worldly benefits (good health, wealth, etc); *in the latter case, it conduces to one’s spiritual progress (like expediting one’s mindfulness training)*.

1.2 Giving (*dāna*) and charity (*cāga*)—both embodying virtues of generosity and detachment—are key practices of the Buddhist laity. To support the monks, nuns and novices with their basic needs of almsfood, robes, shelter and health; the building and maintenance of monasteries and centres; and activities related to the propagation of the Dharma are regarded as acts of merit (*puñña*).¹

1.3 Offering gifts to virtuous monastic members are especially meritorious since they are the richest field where the Buddha has planted the Dharma (**Desanā Sutta**, S 4.42/4:315 f). Such acts are said to bring us immediate happiness and good future rebirths. Seen from the overall perspective of the Buddha’s teaching of spiritual liberation, this generous act, however, is only a skilful means that is instrumental for a higher purpose, that of building up wholesome (*kusala*) qualities leading to detachment (letting go of greed, hate and delusion).

1.4 All acts of merit still bind one to this world, albeit in a happy way. Understandably such acts of merit as giving can be self-motivated. In other words, it is clear that a good and generous heart is not always the motive for giving, as is evident in the Aṭṭha Dāna Sutta and the Dāna Vatthu Sutta, both of which show the Buddha’s keen observation of human nature.² The various motives that people have behind giving are deeply rooted in their **latent tendencies** (*anusaya*), that is,

the latent tendency to lust for pleasant feeling ...

the latent tendency to aversion towards painful feeling ...

the latent tendency to ignorance towards neutral feeling ... (**Cha,chakka Sutta**, M 148,28), SD 26.6

2 Types of donors

The Straits Times (the leading Singapore daily) dated 23 July 2005 carried an interesting article titled “What kind of donor are you?” being a summary of *The Seven Faces of Philanthropy: A new approach to cultivating major donors* by Russ Alan Prince & Karen Maru File.³ This is the rundown given in the Straits Times article with additional comments within [parentheses]:

(1) Communitarians: Doing good makes sense

Who: Typically business owners, they believe their success is tied to the prosperity of the community

Why they give: They believe that relationships forged with board members of charities buy goodwill and will come in handy in business dealings.

¹ For a detailed analysis of the term “giving” (*dāna*). see SD 45.3 (2.1).

² For an insightful modern analysis, see Johansson 1983:14-17.

³ Indianapolis, IN: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Expectations: They want recognition in the form of tokens of appreciation and invitations to grace events.

Mantra: “We’ve got to stick together and make life just a little better for everyone in the community.”
[Sutta: It’s good to give (**Dāna Sutta 1**, A 8.31.2(5)). One gives out of fear (**Dāna Sutta 1**, A 8.31.2.2; **Dāna Vatthu Sutta**, A 8.33.2.4)]

Note: This is an example of “fishing for gain with gain” or “giving for more,” that is, giving with an ulterior motive. As a rule, the giver has in mind, “What do I get by giving this?” or “What can you give me if I were to help me?” This is little different from a business transaction.

(2) Devotees: Doing good is “God’s will”

Who: Deeply pious people, who usually donate to religious institutions.

Why they give: They attribute all material success to “God” and view giving back to the community as a form of reciprocation.

Expectations: They seldom seek control over how funds are used because they have faith in the religious organizations.

Mantra: “Thanks be to the Almighty, I have the means to improve the lives of others. I should use my God-given talent of making money to do God’s work. That’s what charity is all about.”

[Dāna Sutta 1: One gives thinking, “He gave to me.” (2.3); One gives thinking, “It is good to give.” (2.5)]

[Dāna Vatthu Sutta: One gives out of delusion. (2.3); one gives thinking, “Having made this giving, I will, after death, when the body has broken up, be reborn in a heavenly world.” (2.6); one gives thinking, “When this gift of mine is given, it calms my mind. Satisfaction and joy arise.” (2.7)]

Note: The idea of “God’s will” has a ring of predestination and determinism, that is, we do not really have a choice but to do the divine fiat. As such, this is not an attractive idea for informed Buddhists and thinking individuals.

(3) Investors: Doing good is good business

Who: Affluent individuals who apply the same careful analysis and acute judgement to all their investments.

Why they give: They would rather give the money to non-profit organizations than to the government in the form of taxes.

Expectations: They want little to do with daily operations but insist on a business-like and professional relationship with the charity.

Mantra: “It’s not a question of whether to give or not, but a question of how to do it so that it’s not a financial mistake. Giving only makes sense when everyone comes out winning.”

[Dāna Sutta 1: One gives thinking, “He will give to me.” (2.4)]

Note: This is similar to the first motive for giving, only less selfish and calculating. It is, however, very goal-oriented. In a way, this is giving with strings attached, almost like being paid by the giver to carry out his instructions.

(4) Socialites: Doing good is fun

Who: Mostly extroverted women with a university degree and a sizeable wealth who believe philanthropy enhances their personality.

Why they give: They derive pleasure from organizing social functions and raising funds for charities.

Expectations: They relish small tokens of appreciation and want to be informed about activities.

Mantra: “Fitting in socially is all based on who you know and that means networking. The best place to network is at the planning meetings for the galas.”

[Dāna Sutta 1: One gives thinking, “From this giving of mine a good report would be spread about.” [2.7]; One gives impulsively. (2.1)]

Note: This again is giving with an ulterior motive (like the first and third motives), with strings attached. The beneficiary is the giver himself or herself. It is like the giver is paying to look good, renting an image.

(5) Altruists: Doing good feels right

Who: Selfless donors who usually want to remain anonymous.

Why they give: They believe giving to the less fortunate is a moral imperative that will enable their spiritual well-being.

Expectations: They resent those who donate to achieve personal objectives. They do not clamour for plaques and are happy so long as their motivations are recognized.

Mantra: “There is so much hurt in the world. For me to continue to grow as a compassionate person requires that I care in a way that moves things forward.”

[Dāna Sutta 1: One gives thinking, “I cook, but they [being recluses] do not. It would not be proper for me when I do cook not to give to those who do not.” (2.6)]

A similar sentiment is expressed in **the Bhikkhū-paramparā Jātaka** (no 496) by the Bodhisattva (reborn as an ascetic in the Himalayas) regarding a pratyeka-buddha to whom the Bodhisattva had offered the alms that the Bodhisattva had himself received:

I cook, he cooks not: I have wealth, he nothing: I’m bound tight
To worldly things, but he is free: the food is his by right. (J 4:372)

Note: This is the first case of a less self-centred motive for giving. This giving is good when the donor is not driven by guilt, say on account of having stolen some money from elsewhere or making huge profits at the expense of competitors.

(6) Repayers: Doing good in return

Who: They have benefitted from someone or an institution in the past.

Why they give: They feel a deep sense of loyalty to the institution and feel obliged to repay the act of kindness.

Expectations: They are more than happy to contribute both money and time but don’t expect any formal recognition for their help since they were once beneficiaries.

What they are likely to say: “An agency fed me and provided me with clothes when I was a child. I swore to God that if I could, I would give some other kids the same help.”

[Dāna Sutta 1: One gives thinking, “He gave to me.” (2.3)]

Note: This is good giving if it is really motivated by gratitude, but not so good if moved by guilt (as in the 5th motive). This can be a forced or socially pressured giving because of one’s position, say, in a prestigious organization or institution. The giving, in other words, is to save one’s face.

(7) Dynasts: Doing good is a family tradition

Who: Descendants of renowned philanthropists who have inherited their forebears’ wealth.

Why they give: To them, giving is a way they conform to their family and class values.

Expectations: They expect the non-profit organizations to operate in ways consistent with their values and will only interfere if they feel it’s not performing to their expectations.

Mantra: “While growing up, my siblings and I learnt that it was our responsibility to help the less fortunate. Our mother, God rest her soul, would be proud of us.”

[Dāna Vatthu Sutta: One gives thinking, “This was given in the past, done in the past, by my father and my father’s father. It would not be right for me to let this old family custom die!” (2.5)]

Note: This kind of giving is moved by two worldly, even selfish, motives. The first is that of keeping up the family name, or of not losing face before society at large (if one is in the habit of socializing). The second motive is not really a motive, as it is a habit: such a giving is purely ritual giving. In fact, at the bottom of it all, no one in the family really cares about the spirit of generosity because the motive is prestige.

□ **Proper motive for giving:** Giving out of any of the 4 biases (*agati*)—love, hate, delusion, fear—is common to all the seven types of givers. **[Dāna Vatthu Sutta:** 2.1-4]. Most notably, the last aspiration of

both the suttas, namely: “One gives thinking, ‘This is an adornment for the mind, a support for the mind’” is not found in any of the types given in the Prince/File book mentioned above.

3 Related suttas

Related suttas here include **the (Maha-p,phala) Dāna Sutta** (A 7.49/4:59-62), which share many common points. The Dāna Maha-p,phala Sutta, however, mentions the relative benefits of the various forms of giving, that is, those gifts with worldly intentions bring one heavenly birth, but when that karma is exhausted, “he is a returner, coming back to this world.” (A 4:59-62). Other suttas related to giving, to be studied in this connection, include the following:

(Dāna) Vacchagotta Sutta (on the benefits of giving to those freed from the mental hindrances) (A 3.57/1:160-162),

Bhojana Sutta (on the four blessings that accrue from giving of food) (A 4.57/2:62 f),

Sumanā Sutta (on the various levels of benefits the giver obtains) (A 5.31/3:32-34), and

Sappurisa Dāna Sutta (the true person gives out of faith, respectfully, at the right time, with a generous heart, without belittling anyone) (A 5.148/3:172 f).⁴

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SD 6.6a

(Aṭṭha) Dāna Sutta 1

(Paṭhama (Aṭṭha) Dāna Sutta)

The First Discourse on (the Eight Ways) of Giving | A 8.31/4:236

Theme: On the motives behind giving

[236]

1 Bhikshus, there are these eight ways of giving.⁵ What are the eight?

2 EIGHT WAYS OF GIVING

(1) One gives impulsively.⁶

(2) One gives out of fear.

(3) One gives thinking, “He gave to me.”⁷

(4) One gives thinking, “He will give to me.”⁸

(5) One gives thinking, “It is good to give.”⁹

⁴ See also **The Three Roots Inc**, SD 31.12 (6.4.1).

⁵ *Aṭṭh'imāni bhikkhave dānāni*, lit “Bhikshus, there are these 7 gifts.”

⁶ *Āsajja dānaṃ deti*. The indecl *āsajja* has a wide range of meanings. PED, taking it as gerund of *āsādeti*, causative of *āsīdati*, gives the following senses (summarized): (1) sitting on, going to, approaching; sometimes simply meaning “near” (Sn 418, 448); (2) put on to, hitting, striking (S 1:127); (3) knocking against, insulting, offending, assailing (D 1:107; A 3:373); (4) “sitting on,” ie attending constantly to, persevering, energetically, willingly, spontaneously (D 2:258=A 4:236 ~ *dānaṃ deti*; M 1:250; Vv 1.10.6 ~ *dānaṃ adāsīm*). Nyanaponika & Bodhi: “spontaneously” (A:ÑB 212); I B Horner: “with my own hands” (Vv:H 20); EM Hare: “of one’s own accord” (A:WH 4:160); R E A Johansson: “with devotion” (1983:15 f); Thai tr invariably has หวังได้จึงให้ทาน, “hoping for gain, one gives.” Comy glosses *āsajja* as *patvā*, “having obtained or arrived,” which could refer to giving from what one has at that moment or because a recipient of giving has arrived (AA 4:123). The Thai amplified tr has ให้ทานเพราะ ประจวบเข้า, “one gives because of a coincidence.” It is likely that “impulsively” here refers to the 3 unwholesome roots (greed, hate, and delusion): see **Dāna Vatthu S** (A 8.33): “one gives out of love,...out of hate,...out of delusion” (A 8.33/-4:236 f), SD 6.6.

⁷ This is evidently a sense of moral obligation, a gesture of reciprocal gratitude. On the less skillful side, this could be taken to be a one-upmanship in giving to give the impression of one’s higher economic or social status.

⁸ “He will give to me,” *dassati me*, ie *dassati* as fut of *dadāti*, “he gives”; also tr as “He will see me,” ie *dassati* = *passati*, “he sees.”

- (6) One gives thinking, “I cook, but they (being recluses) do not. It would not be proper for me when I do cook not to give to those who do not.”¹⁰
- (7) One gives thinking, “From this giving of mine a good report would be spread about.”¹¹
- (8) One gives for the sake of adorning the mind, as a support for the mind.¹²
- These, bhikshus, are the eight ways of giving.

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SD 6.6b

(Aṭṭha) Dāna Sutta¹³

Dutiya (Aṭṭha) Dāna Sutta | A 8.32/4:236

The Second Discourse on (the Eight Ways of) Giving

Theme: Faith, moral shame, generosity

*Saddhā hiriyaṃ kusalaṃ ca dānaṃ
dhammā ete sappurisānuyātā
etaṃ hi maggaṃ diviyaṃ vadanti
etena hi gacchati deva,lokan'ti*

Faith, moral shame, and wholesome giving,
these are the virtues a true person pursues.
This is the divine way, they say,
by this one goes to the heavenly world.

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SD 6.6c

Dāna Vatthu Sutta¹⁴

The Discourse on the Grounds for Giving | A 8.33/4:236 f

Theme: The motives behind giving

- 1 Bhikshus, there are these eight grounds for giving. What are the eight?
- 2 THE 8 MOTIVES BEHIND GIVING
- (1) One gives out of love.¹⁵

⁹ “The pleasure mentioned [here and] reason [7 of Dāna Vatthu S below], probably has something to do with the superego development. It gives pleasure to do one’s duty as implanted in the early years. This sense of duty is more clearly expressed [here in] reasons [5] and [6]. The same is expressed in [the Dāna Vatthu S] reason [5], which points out the importance of habit and tradition.” (Johansson 1983:16).

¹⁰ “He makes a gift, thinking,...,” *ahaṃ pacāmi, ime na pacanti, na arahāmi pacanto apacantānaṃ dānaṃ adātun ti dānaṃ deti*: **Maha-p,phala Dāna S** (A 7.49.4(4)/4:61,14-15), SD 2.3; **(Aṭṭha) Dāna S = Dāna S 1** (A 8.31/-4:236), SD 6.6. Here, a wordplay on *pacāmi, pacanti*, etc. Cf *apaca* (as in *anāgāre pabbajite apace brahma, cārayo*, “a homeless renunciant who cooks not, a celibate” (A 8.38/4:245.6*), where it means lit “not cooking,” and fig “who does not keep house.” See J 496/4:372 (see Intro (1) here). (CPD: ¹apaca).

¹¹ Apparently, this giving is motivated by an inferiority complex, by a wish to create a good impression and self-image. (See Johansson 1983:17)

¹² *Cittālanikāra, citta, parikkhār’attham dānaṃ deti*. As at **(Maha-p,phala) Dāna S** (A 7.49.4(7)). See Intro above.

¹³ In his study, Johansson omits this sutta calling the following text, **Dāna Sutta 2** (1983:15 f).

¹⁴ In his study, Johansson omits the previous short sutta (in verse), which is actually **Dāna Sutta 2**, while this is Dāna Vatthu Sutta (which Johansson calls Dāna Sutta 2) (1983:15 f).

¹⁵ “One gives out of love,” *chandaṃ danam deti*, lit “he gives out of desire.” *Chanda* usually has a neutral sense of desire, but may here denote lust or physical attraction. Comy glosses *chanda* here as *pema*, “(worldly) love” (AA 4:123). These first four motives for giving here are known as the 4 biases (*agati*), ie, the bias of lust (*chandāgati*),

- (2) One gives out of hate.¹⁶
 (3) One gives out of delusion.
 (4) One gives out of fear.¹⁷
 (5) One gives thinking, “This was given in the past, done in the past, by my father and my father’s father. It would not be right for me to let this old family custom die!”¹⁸
 (6) One gives thinking, “Having made this giving, I will, after death, when the body has broken up, be reborn in a heavenly world.”¹⁹
 (7) One gives thinking, “When this gift of mine is given, it calms my mind. [237] Satisfaction and joy arise.”²⁰
 (8) One gives for the sake of adorning the mind, as a support for the mind.²¹
 These, bhikshus, are the eight grounds of giving.

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the bias of hate (*dosāgati*), the bias of delusion (*mohāgati*), and the bias of fear (*bhayāgati*) (D 3:133, 182, 228; A 2:18).

¹⁶ “How can one give from hatred? The most reasonable explanation seems to be that it refers to the hatred and aggression concealed in the unconscious id of a person. One can hate monks and what they stand for because of early frustrations or because of one’s own shortcomings with regard to the same ideals, But by means of **reaction formation** this hatred can be transformed into the opposite attitude unconsciously. Maybe the act of giving will then be performed more demonstratively or even fanatically than would seem natural. Or the hatred behind the generosity could be directed toward the self. A man hating himself unconsciously could **compensate** this by generosity. In these cases there would be no conscious knowledge of the real motive behind the gifts. But it is also possible to feel hatred and *express* it by giving in an ironic or condescending way.” (Johansson 1983:16 f)

¹⁷ That is, out of fear of blame from others and out of the fear of painful rebirth (AA 4:123), which is actually the experience of moral shame (*hiri*) and moral fear (*ottappa*) respectively. It is also possible that we could give out of mortal fear, ie, fear of losing something precious or even our lives. A literary example here, found in Pearl S Buck’s *The Good Earth* (1931 ch 14). is that of the decadent rich man, fearing for his life, was so terrified at suddenly seeing the novel’s hero, Wang Lung (thinking he was part of the mob that had attacked the palace), gave him all his money, which actually marks a turning-point in the story.

¹⁸ As at **Dāna Maha-p,phala S** (A 7.49.4(3)). “The pleasure mentioned [here (5) and] reason (7), probably has something to do with the superego development. It gives pleasure to do one’s duty as implanted in the early years. This sense of duty is more clearly expressed in [Dāna S 1] reasons (5) and (6). The same is expressed in [the Dāna Vatthu S] reason (5), which points out the importance of habit and tradition.” (Johansson 1983:16). See Intro above.

¹⁹ Very similar to **Dāna Maha-p,phala S** (A 7.49.4 (1)). See Intro above.

²⁰ As at **Dāna Maha-p,phala S** (A 7.49.4 (6)). See Intro above.

²¹ As at **Dāna Maha-p,phala S** (A 7.49.4 (7)). See Intro above.