

GATSAL

TEACHING

Generosity or Dana

The First of the Six Perfections

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I think the Buddha put Dana – which means giving or generosity – at the very beginning of the spiritual path, because it is something that we all can do more easily than some of the other perfections.

However deluded we may be, however angry we may be, however jealous or greedy we may be, we can still give. It's a very basic quality. We don't need any spiritual heights to learn how to give. The act of giving means having to open up our hands and heart. It's a very beautiful way to respond to others.

In Asia, people understand very well this whole quality of open-hearted giving and generosity. It is based on the understanding that if we want to be prosperous and successful not only now, but in our future lives, then we have to plant seeds; we are not going to get a harvest if we don't plant seeds. The seeds for prosperity are generosity and giving. Therefore, if one wants to have success and hopes for things to go well in the way we want them to go; one has to create the causes for that.

It is considered that if we have a difficult time earning and accumulating money, if we are always ending up very poor, it's because we haven't created enough causes through open-heartedness and generosity in the past. The Buddha once said that if people understood the true future benefits of giving, then they would not keep even one meal to themselves, but they would try to share it with others.

But because we don't see future results, our minds keep thinking, "If I give something away, then what will I have? What will there be left for me?" That kind of mind not only cuts off our generous impulses, it also creates the causes for not being prosperous later. We need to consider this whole idea of sharing and being open to others needs as well as our own.

It's a joy to give. It benefits not only the recipient but ourselves. It benefits us more than it benefits the recipient because it is the close-mindedness of 'this is mine and I am not giving to anyone else' which causes us so much inner pain and prevents us, even if we have so much, from really appreciating it, because we are afraid to open-heartedly share with others.

We are always afraid that people will try to take things away from us. It isn't the things which we own which are the problem; it's our clinging and our grasping which is the problem. So do the things own us, or do we own them? Are we able to hold things lightly so that when we see someone in need or just out of appreciation, we can give joyfully.

I am not saying that you should go home and clear out all your things – that is not the point. The point is this question of opening the heart, of really being able to rejoice in giving to others – not just material things. Material things are good things to start with but we can also give other things like our time, our sympathy, being there when others need us, giving fearlessness.

In Buddhist parlance, there are three kinds of giving that come to mind. First is the giving of material gifts. Second is the gift of the Dharma. That means being there for others, listening to them, trying to help them, giving them advice, just trying to help people to try to clarify their minds a little bit.

But there is also the gift of fearlessness, of being a protection, of helping people to discover their own inner courage – to give that to someone is considered a very priceless gift. So we can start in simple ways. We can start by just developing this quality of being conscious of others, of other's needs, and of giving joy and pleasure to others. We give with the intention to give delight and to give help if necessary. Not just giving at Christmas or birthdays, or when we are visiting or whatever, but spontaneously. We see something we like and we give it to somebody, maybe even to somebody whom we don't like.

It's nice to give to people we like, but it's also nice to give to people whom we don't like because it's a beautiful way to relate to others. And it is the first of the Perfections. It's the first step in the spiritual path so it's very important.