

# Dana Pāramī (The Perfection of Giving)



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## ABSTRACT

Every religion in the world likes to teach that charity is important. This is the case with Buddhism also. The Buddha describes the three central practices as *Dana* (generosity), *Sila* (morality) and *Bhavana* (meditation). Bhikkhu Bodhi writes, “the practice of giving is universally recognized as one of the most basic human virtues”, and Susan Elbaum Jootle confirms that it is a basis of merit or wholesome kamma and when practiced in itself, it leads ultimately to liberation from the cycle of repeated existence”.

Buddhists do not seek publicity for charity. But it is the practice of the vehicle of great enlightenment (*mahābodhiyāna*) to improve their skillfulness in accumulating the requisites for enlightenment. We now undertake a detailed explanation of the *Dana Pāramī*.

**Keywords:** Dana (generosity), Bhavana (meditation), Sila (morality)

## What are the Pāramis?

For the meaning of the Pāramīs, the Brahmajāla Sutta explains that they are the noble qualities such as giving and etc., accompanied by compassion and skillful means, untainted by craving and conceit views (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2007). Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche renders “*pāramīs*” into English as “transcendent action”. He understands “transcendent action” in the sense of non-egocentric action. He says:

“Transcendental” does not refer to some external reality, but rather to the way in which we conduct our lives and perceive the world – either in an egocentric way or non-egocentric way. The six *Pāramīs* are concerned with the effort to step out of the egocentric mentality” (Ray Reginald, 2004).

According to the perspective of Tibetan Buddhism, *Mahāyāna* practitioners have two types of practice, the path of perfection (Sanskrit: *pāramitāyāna*) and the path of tantra (Sanskrit: *tantrayāyāna*), which is the *Vajrayāna* (Wikipedia, 2018).

*Pāramīs* are mentioned in *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariyā-piṭaka* of *Khuddaka-nikāya*. They are counted more important than the four noble truths by modern Indian Buddhists initiated by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in later part of twentieth century. Their followers are called neo-Buddhists. However, the practices of *pāramīs* are very much reflected by *Jātaka* stories of Buddha. The *Buddhavaṃsa* mentions ten *pāramīs* and *Cariyā-piṭaka* mentions seven. The ten *pāramīs* are: *Dāna* (charity or generosity, giving of oneself), *sīla* (virtue, morality, and proper conduct), *nekkhamma* (renunciation), *paññā* (wisdom, transcendental), *virīya* (energy, diligence), *khanti* (patience, tolerance), *sacca* (truthfulness, honesty), *adhiṭṭhāna* (determination), *mettā* (loving kindness, goodwill), *upekkhā* (equanimity, serenity). Wisdom, energy and patience are not mentioned in the *Cariyā-piṭaka*. In both the lists charity is counted as the first *pāramī*. Bhikkhu Bodhi comments on Buddhahood as follows:

Giving, virtue, then renunciation, wisdom and energy come to five; Patience, truth, resolution, love, with equanimity, these are ten (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2007).

Therefore, the method given as the first of *Pāramī* is giving. The *Brahmajāla Sutta* explains giving at the beginning because it is common to all beings: even ordinary people practice giving and next because it is the least fruitful and because it is the easiest to practice. Virtue is placed immediately after giving because virtue purifies both the donor and the recipient, virtue prevents the affliction of others, in order to state a factor of

abstinence immediately after a factor of positive activity and in order to show the cause for the achievement of a favorable state of future existence right after the cause for the achievement of wealth. The third *pāramī* is renunciation, which perfects the achievement of virtue and is placed after giving and virtue in order to show that the purification of one's inclinations (*āsaya*) through the abandoning of the offensive mental defilements follows the purification of one's means (*payoga*) by the abandoning of offensive actions. Wisdom is attained after renunciation which shows that there is no wisdom in the absence of meditation. Wisdom is the causal basis for equanimity immediately after the causal basis for serenity. The state immediately after wisdom is energy because the function of wisdom is perfected by the arousing of energy. Energy shows the miraculous work the bodhisattva undertakes for the welfare of beings after he has reached reflective acquiescence in their emptiness. Patience is mentioned immediately after energy: because as it is said: "the patience of the energetic person shines with splendor," which shows that the bodhisattva must patiently endure the suffering created by others even when he is working to the utmost for their welfare. Truthfulness is the state immediately after patience. This truthfulness shows that a bodhisattva who through patience does not vacillate in the face of abuse. Determination is the state immediately after truthfulness because truthfulness is perfected by determination. Loving kindness is mentioned after determination because loving kindness perfects the determination to undertake activity for the welfare of others. And the last *pāramī* is equanimity. It purifies loving kindness which shows that one must maintain indifference towards the wrongs inflicted by others when one is causing their welfare and shows the bodhisattva's wonderful virtue of remaining impartial even towards those who wish him well.

## The Conditions of the Pāramīs

The condition of the Pāramīs is the great aspiration (*abhinīhāra*). They are supported by the eight qualifications such as human state (*manussatta*), male sex (*liṅgampatti*), cause (*hetu*), the sight of the Master (*satthāradassana*), the going forth (*pabbajjā*), the achievement of noble qualities (*guṇasampatti*), extreme dedication (*adhikāra*) and strong desire (*chandata*).

The eight qualifications are:

1) The human state (*manussatta*): the aspiration for Buddhahood only succeeds when made by one who has attained to the human state of existence.

2) The male sex (*liṅgasaṃpatti*): the aspiration only succeeds when made by a man. As it is said: “this is impossible, bhikkhu, this cannot come to pass, that a woman might become a Holy One, a perfectly enlightened Buddha” (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2007).

3) The cause (*hetu*): the achievement of the necessary supporting conditions. The aspiration for Buddhahood only succeeds when made by one who has achieved the requisite causal foundation.

4) The sight of the Master (*satthāradassana*): the aspiration only succeeds when made in the presence of the Buddhas, for they alone possess spiritual power adequate to the loftiness of the aspiration.

5) The going forth (*pabbajjā*): the aspiration succeeds only when made in the presence of the Exalted Buddha by one who has gone into the homeless state of a monk or bhikkhu or an ascetic who maintains the doctrine of *kamma* and the moral efficacy of action.

6) The achievement of noble qualities (*guṇasaṃpatti*): possessing the necessary supporting conditions and the direct knowledge that the Great Man, after he has made the aspiration, is able to investigate the *pāramīs* by himself.

7) Extreme dedication (*adhikāra*): the aspiration only succeeds for one endowed with the aforesaid qualities that at the time has such strong devotion for the Buddhas that he is prepared to relinquish his very life for them.

8) Strong desire (*chandatā*) is the wish for accomplishment. He must have to yearning and longing to practice the dhammas culminating in Buddhahood. The strong desire is the wholesome desire (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2007).

The aspiration of eight factors is in denotation the act of consciousness occurring together with the collection of these eight factors. Its characteristic is rightly resolving to attain the supreme enlightenment. Its function is to yearn. Its manifestation is the root cause of enlightenment. Its proximate cause is great compassion. The root cause is the cause of all the dhammas culminating in Buddhahood.

“Oh, may I awaken to the supreme perfect enlightenment and bring well-being and happiness to all beings.”

The aspiration is originating by means of the four conditions (*paccaya*), the four causes (*hetu*), and the four powers (*bala*). It is succeeding when it becomes endowed with the collection of eight factors. These are the four conditions for the aspiration:

- 1) The great Man sees a *Tathāgata* performing a miracle, replete with wonders and marvels, through the great spiritual power of a Buddha.
- 2) The great Man hears from the great power of the *Tathāgata* and he resolves upon the supreme enlightenment and fixed his mind on this goal.
- 3) The great Man hears someone expounding the *Tathāgata*'s Dhamma with a discourse concerning the spiritual power of a Buddha.
- 4) He is a man of lofty temperament and a noble disposition, and he thinks: "I will protect the heritage, lineage, tradition and law of the Buddhas".

These are the four causes for the great aspiration.

- 1) The Great Man is naturally endowed with the necessary supporting condition (*upanissaya*).
- 2) The Great Man is naturally endowed with a compassionate temperament and disposition. He desires to alleviate the suffering of beings and is even ready to relinquish his own body and life to do so.
- 3) Until he reaches his goal, the Great Man is willing to struggle and strive for an extremely long time along a course involving great hardship, without fear and without becoming disenchanted with all the suffering of the round, all for the sake of the welfare of other beings.
- 4) The Great Man relies upon good friends, who restrain him from evil and establish him in what is good.

These are necessary supporting conditions with which the Great Man is naturally endowed. The Great man is naturally inclined to giving and delights in giving.

These are the four powers:

- 1) The internal power (*bhikkhūbala*) is the power of the Great Man is dominated by his personal ideals.
- 2) The external power (*bāhirabala*) is the longing or undeviating inclination for the supreme enlightenment which is grounded upon consideration for others, through this

power the Great Man, dominated by a consideration for the world (*lokādhīpati*). It fulfills the *pāramīs* and attains the supreme enlightenment.

3) The power of the supporting conditions (*upanisayabala*) is based on the achievement of the necessary support condition.

4) The power of effort (*payogabala*) is the Great Man's endowment with the appropriate effort for supreme enlightenment that is thoroughness and perseverance in his work.

For the root cause of these conditions when it arises in the Great man, four wonderful qualities are established:

1) He develops a heart of love for all living beings in every realms of existence.

2) His inclination and efforts turn towards promoting the welfare and happiness of beings.

3) The potential Buddha-qualities within himself grow more and more prominent and come to maturity.

4) Since the great Man possesses the full condition of merit and goodness. It is in this way that the great aspiration, with its numerous noble qualities and benefits, functions as the condition for the *pāramīs* (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2007).

The Great man devotes himself to working uninterruptedly for the welfare of others without any concern for their own happiness and without any fear of extremely difficult course of conduct that great bodhisattvas must follow. Their nature is such that they can act to promote the happiness of beings. And through his wisdom he can understand all conditions that can lead him to destroy all attachment. Another set of conditions is the six inclinations which for bodhisattva, seeing all of these conditions are the fault in all the realms of existence. And he tries to escape these six inclinations. And these are important for the *pāramīs* because the *pāramīs* do not arise without seeing the danger in them. These are six inclinations are: renunciation, solitude, non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion and escape. Therefore, for bodhisattvas striving for enlightenment, the inclination toward each of the ten *pāramīs* is a condition for the practice of each.

## What is Giving (Dāna)?

Sprio and Gombrich think that dana should be about detachment and generosity. James Egge confirmed this agreement by argument of Theravādin Buddhists, including of their informants, attach importance to the qualities of *dāna* because they understand meritorious giving not only as an exercise of generosity but also act of worship directed toward the recipient. These two distinct sets of meaning that can inform an action of giving.

Giving or *dāna* is the essential preliminary steps of Buddhist practice. Even those who are well established on the path to emancipation continue to practice giving as it is conducive wealth, beauty and pleasure in their remaining lifetime. Like all good deeds, the activities of giving will bring to happiness of donators as well as recipient (Egge, 2013). Buddhist teaching devotes special attention to the psychological basis of giving. That is the volition of the donor before, during and after of generosity in the activities of giving. Psychological factors give the different results for different states of mind in act of giving. There is difference between giving with wisdom and lack of wisdom. The aim of doing is the same but the processes of thinking are different.

In the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, the giving is opposed to greed, hatred, and delusion. It is applied to the qualities of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. Therefore, giving has the characteristic of relinquishing. The function of giving is to dispel greed for things. Its manifestation is non-attachment or the achievement of prosperity (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2007).

## The Perfection of Giving

The Buddha said that the practice of giving will be helpful in our effort to purify the mind. The perfection of giving is the volition of relinquishing oneself and one's belongings, accompanied by compassion and skillful means, which occur in the mental continuities of bodhisattvas.

Possessions such as fields, land, bullion, slaves, children, wives, etc. bring immense harm to those who have intense craving for them. Because of the desire for having them and because of attachment of these things, the non-egocentric forces are absent. *Dāna* helps us in giving impetus to these forces.

This is the method of reflecting on the perfection of giving. At first, one should arouse a desire to give things away without any concern: "If a dear person asks for something, he should arouse joy by reflecting". Then if he gives him something that man will become my

friend”. Therefore, he should give to neutral and hostile people in the same way to gives to dear people, which means giving with loving kindness and compassion.

If due to their cumulative force, states of greed should arise for things that can be given away, the bodhisattva should reflect: “Suppose there is a great medicine tree and someone is in need of its parts, the three would not be overcome by thoughts such as “they are taking away my belongings.” In the same way when I have undertaken to exert myself for the welfare of the entire world, I should not arouse even the subtlest wrong thought over this wretch”. He has to reflect upon path of full enlightenment, without any concern for his life. When he has no concern for these ordinary things, he become purified, he abides in the practice of the true way. This is the explanation of the practice of the true way.

The giving is of threefold types:

- The giving of material things (*āmisadāna*): its examples are relinquishing one’s happiness, belongings, body and life to others. Among these, the objects to be given can be of two kinds: internal and external. The external gift is tenfold: food, drinks, garments, vehicles, garlands, scents, unguents, bedding, dwellings, and lamps. He gives whatever is needed to whomever is in need of it.
- The giving of fearlessness (*abhayaadāna*); by dispelling their fear. He will give protection to beings when they have become frightened on account of kings, fire, water, any animals, etc.
- The giving of the Dhamma (*dhammadāna*); by instructing them in the Dhamma. That is an undistorted discourse in the Dhamma given with an undefiled mind. Therefore, he will give discourses establishing and purifying them by the noble quality.

A bodhisattva must give more than material goods to fulfill the highest form of the perfection of generosity. He must freely give the parts of his body, his children, his wife, and even his own life. The story of Vessantara is one of the most popular *apadānas* of Theravada Buddhism. It tells about one of Gautama Buddha’s past lives as a compassionate prince, who gives away everything he owns, including displaying the virtue of perfect generosity.

One day Vessantara gave away the magical white elephant, which had brought rain to his kingdom, to envoys from Kalinga, a neighboring country. Then king readily gave away his kingdom to his father. Before leaving the city and going to live in the forest as a hermit with his wife (Madri) and their children. He also gave away his wealth.



Meanwhile, Jujaka, a greedy old Brahmin who lived as a beggar, had a very young wife (Amitada). One day she harassed Jujaka telling him to find her some servants in order to spare her more ridicule. Jutaka went to the forest to prince Vessantara and asked him for two of his children. Vessantara asked if they would help their father achieve his highest goal. Both agreed and became the slaves of Jutaka. After Madri came back and knew what had happened, she praised the prince for his greatness.

God Śakra intervened, fearing that Vessantara would have given away his wife, then he asked for his wife and Vessantara readily gave her to him as well. For all Vessantara's acts of benevolence and generosity had been perfect. Thus a bodhisattva must give more than material goods to fulfill the highest form of the perfection of generosity. He must freely give the parts of his body, his children, his wife, and even his own life.

### **Conclusion: The Value of Giving**

Many scriptures and suttas enumerate the various benefits of giving. The *Magha Sutta* maintains that hate is eliminated when one is established in generosity. The one with a generous heart earns the love of others. According to one sutta, it is stated that if a person makes an aspiration to be born in a particular place, his will is fulfilled. It shows that only by practice of giving, he will take birth in the human realm after his death. But if one who practices giving and morality to a great extent does not have any knowledge of meditation, they find rebirth in one of the heavens. They excel other deities in the length of life, beauty and pleasure. This is the evidence that giving has benefits for its practitioners. The Anguttara Nikaya enumerates a number of this worldly benefits of giving. The generous person will have the sympathy of others. A good reputation spreads about him. He has satisfaction of having fulfilled the house-holder-person's duties (*gihidhammaanapetohoti*). It is said that an alms-giver bestows on other's life beauty, happiness, strength and intelligence and all these bring a great reward to giver in this life as well as life after death.

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