

Dana and Teacher's Support

adapted from an article by **Robert Beatty**

Since the time of the Buddha there has been a tradition that those who teach the Dharma are supported directly by their community. In Asia, where it is understood that the practice of generosity (dana) forms the bedrock of spiritual practice, this tradition has evolved into a system where the interdependence of the teachers and their community is implicit. Individuals who devote themselves to teaching are held in great respect, and their communities take seriously the reciprocal responsibility for supporting the teacher and the teachings. In turn, the teacher upholds the responsibility of living an exemplary life, and making the teachings readily available. It is understood that to support the teacher is to support oneself.

In Asia, support of the teachers takes the form of preparing food, providing transportation and medical care, constructing and maintaining shelter, and providing all the requisites of life for them. This allows the teachers to devote themselves to practice, study and deepening their ability to realize and share the Dharma.

The act of intentionally sharing one's energy, material wealth or time is understood to enhance one's capacity of letting go of attachments. This letting go is a central facet of the path of freedom from suffering.

As we introduce Buddhism to the West, teacher support is inevitably evolving into different forms. Those who teach are frequently householders who support themselves and sometimes a family, without a center or monastery. Their community is often geographically dispersed. Teachers participate directly in the cash economy, taking care of their own needs. As householders, their teachings may be particularly relevant to us because they are living lives of the Dharma amidst questions of money, relationships, sexuality and raising a family.

The dana basket is provided at lectures and retreats to give the community members the opportunity to practice dana and to support their teacher financially. This system of teacher support is radically different from that of most Western schools of training and personal growth where there is a fixed fee. The fact that there is no fixed fee leaves the responsibility with the individual to decide what amount of support is appropriate for them. It also guarantees that the teachings are available to persons of all economic levels. Dana invites each individual to develop one's own capacity to be generous in a context that directly assists one's own spiritual growth. As in Asia, to support one's teacher is to support oneself and to help make the teachings available to others.

People often ask for guidelines concerning the amount of dana. Offering guidance can be sensitive, as everyone's circumstances are different, and one of the gifts of dana is that it is optional, and if people decide to give in this way, they can give according to their means. That said, we recognize that Asian or monastic communities may be steeped in this teaching and the understanding of what is needed to support a teacher, and those in

different settings may feel a bit out to sea in this area. In this spirit we offer these guidelines as a place to start, and those who wish to give in this way can move up or down on the scale, according to their means.

One guideline is perhaps "to give until your heart feels full, to do your best to return what has been given." (without breaking the bank.) One may also seek guidance by looking at the fees that are charged for similar events or workshops. Evening events and lectures commonly cost \$15-\$25; movies now cost \$10 or more; yoga classes often \$15/hour. Leaders of workshops are typically paid \$80 - 100 or more per participant per day. The decision of what to give is deeply personal. Those with lesser means are free to contribute less and those with greater means may offer more according to the direction of their heart. Everyone's contribution – both financial and also the dana of their presence in the community - is valued.

During its 2600-year lifetime, Buddhism has adapted to many cultural traditions. In some periods and cultures, the monks were very wealthy and controlled great land holdings. At other times and places, they took vows of poverty and refused to touch money. In North America the different lineages are adopting various strategies. Tibetan teachers charge admission to teachings. In the Zen world it is common to establish centers that provide housing and income for the teacher and to charge membership dues and a fixed fee for sessions. Vipassana/Insight Meditation teachers are attempting to remain with the dana approach modeled on the practice in Southeast Asia. It remains to be seen which of these strategies will be viable in the development of North American Buddhism.

Dana, as the foundation of our spiritual life, helps us to recognize and practice our natural interconnectedness. As life gives generously to us, so we give generously back to life. We belong to what we support and what we support nourishes us. May all the ways in which you give dana nourish you deeply.