

Dana in the Western Insight Meditation Movement

by Gil Fronsdal, 2000 – 2001

And what is the accomplishment of generosity? Here, a noble disciple dwells at home with a mind free from stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in relinquishment, one devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing.

The Buddha

From the time of the first residential Vipassana retreats in 1974, the Insight Meditation teachers have been firmly committed to offering teachings freely. This has meant that retreats and sitting groups have been taught on a *dana* basis. Whereas retreatants pay for the expenses of putting on a retreat, the teachers are not compensated from the retreat fees. Rather, if they wish, the retreatants offer donations to the teachers and staff, often anonymously.

For over thirty years the generous and inspired donations of countless individuals have supported and nourished the growth of the Insight Meditation community. This goodwill has taken concrete form in the retreat centers of IMS and Spirit Rock, urban insight centers in half a dozen U.S. cities, the publishing of the Inquiring Mind, books published for free distribution by the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies and the Sati Center, and recently the work of Dharma Seed Tape Catalog. Some seventy-plus teachers travel around the country teaching over a hundred residential retreats a year on *dana*. Many, many people have donated their time and labor in innumerable acts of service to the Dharma. Every person who has participated in an Insight Meditation retreat has been the recipient of other people's generosity of money, time, talent and encouragement.

Within Theravada Buddhism the Dharma has traditionally been taught freely, with teachers supported by *dana*. What is new within the Western Insight Meditation Movement is that the teachers are almost all lay people including a sizable number of householders supporting families. There have been lay teachers in Asia, however these were few in numbers and they never taught within a self-contained network of fellow lay teachers.

In the early years of teaching in the West, retreat *dana* was small. Retreat staff served out of love of the Dharma and service, with no or little expectation of financial compensation. Teachers lived frugally, often with not enough money to pay for health insurance. Not a few teachers find themselves torn between wanting to give themselves to teachings and financial considerations allowing them to do so. At times, some of the teachers have felt that they would have to stop a life of full-time Dharma teaching because of financial pressures.

If there were no *dana* or any other means of support, most teachers would not be able to teach more than a minimal amount. Teaching takes up a lot of time, not all of which is obvious to people who attend retreats or weekly sitting groups. In addition to the actual time teaching, there can be time spent traveling, arranging logistical details, study preparations for Dharma talks, and follow-up counseling for some retreatants. In addition, teaching retreats is intensely demanding, often requiring time to recover.

Those teachers and centers whose primary means of support has been teaching are relying on an economic system that is radically different from that of most conventional careers. The *dana* system has no provisions for health and disability insurance, retirement benefits, sick leave, social security, or paid time for vacation and sabbatical. The *dana* system is based on trust rather than any institutional form of security. A common Dharma slogan that supports this trust has been, "The Dharma protects those who protect the Dharma." Many factors support this trust. A teacher's integrity is important because *dana* offers a clear opportunity for feedback. In addition, the teaching charisma (*parami*) of individual teachers can have some bearing on the amount of *dana* they receive.

Teaching on a *dana* basis as lay teachers seems to have inherent tensions. In a 1990 article in *Inquiring Mind*, Sharon Salzberg discussed some of these:

At this year's teacher meeting in California, we talked extensively about money. The dana system is part of our heritage. I personally can't contemplate changing it: we get so much more than money through it. Yet, in reality we are caught between many different and perhaps opposing forces-wanting to teach a lot, wanting to maintain our own study and practice, wanting to teach rather than devote ourselves to other means of livelihood, and wanting to lead household lives with some security.

Teaching on a *dana* basis also has joys and benefits for both giver and recipients. For the teacher, the act of teaching is itself a form of *dana*. It helps create a field of generosity, trust, goodwill, gratitude, and a sense of community. There is an assurance that the cost of the teaching is not limiting anyone's access to them. A number of teachers have reported they value the freedom the *dana* system provides. If they were to teach for a fee or salary, they feel it would come with obligations and expectations for their time and services. As the practice of generosity is a significant spiritual practice in its own right, the *dana* system encourages people to engage themselves in a practice of generosity. The question of how much to give in *dana* prompts many people to reflect deeply on their values, fears, and generosity. It is also a means for expressing some of the best qualities of the human heart.

Within the Insight Meditation movement it is common to claim that the Dharma has been maintained down through the centuries through the *dana* of people supporting it. This claim suggests, perhaps, that *dana* is the most common economic basis for teaching Buddhism. However, in the context of the rest of Buddhism in the West, the *dana* system is the exception rather than the rule. Zen Centers have membership dues and charge for retreats and classes. Tibetan Buddhist teachings are usually offered at a cost, sometimes a quite high cost. As Theravada Buddhism and the Insight Meditation movement have become more prominent in the United States, their commitment to *dana* has been instructive and inspiring to other Buddhist groups. In time perhaps Buddhists in the West will be recognized for their abundant generosity.