

## An Aspect of Mahāyāna Buddhist Ethics: The Culture of Generosity (*dāna*)

Tashi Dorjey

Eliezer Joldan Memorial College, Leh, India  
E-mail: ratnatashi@gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

Buddhist ethics deals with do and don't pertaining to individual behavior by transforming inner mental process towards harmony of external phenomenon. The major ethical practices of Mahāyāna is the six perfections (*pāramitā*), viz. the perfection of giving or generosity, the perfection of morality, the perfection of fortitude, the perfection of effort, the perfection of concentration, and the perfection of wisdom. *Dāna* or generosity is the first of the six perfections, dealing with from four points of view. It can be considered to whom a generosity is given, what is to be given, how it is given, and why and with motivation it is given. In this paper I presented specifically what can be given in detailed way as traditional Buddhist texts describe generosity (*dāna*) in terms of the four stages. They are the generosity of material things, the generosity of freedom from fear, the generosity of spiritual teaching which entails offering comfort, concern and advice to support other's psychological and emotional well-being, and the generosity of love.

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### INTRODUCTION

It has been almost two thousand and five hundred years since the Buddha imparted the teachings of the four noble truths to help all sentient beings to eliminate or even discard pains and sufferings from life. Compassion, love, and generosity are three amongst those cardinal teachings of the Buddha. They give colors to the entire teachings of the Buddha. He put very much concerns on the problems of human life, and he takes them as the starting point to philosophize life.

In the course of time of its developments, today, there are two major schools of Buddhism, viz. Theravāda and Mahāyāna with its sub schools. Despite of evident differences in their approaches

to life, the focus of all Buddhist schools remain the same based on the teaching and practice of the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, and the Eightfold Paths. Generosity as one cardinal principle in Buddhist ethics has a very important role in the attempt to lift our being to perfection. No matter how good it is the principle if there is no sufficient attempt to habituate it in daily life; there will no point to learn it without practicing it.

In this paper, I would like to highlight the ethical part of the principle of generosity (*dāna*), which is one of the six perfections (*pāramitās*) in the practice of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Definition, nature, kinds of generosity, and the significance of practicing it will be elucidated in light of Buddhist sources in the following sections. It is worth to discuss since acquiring good understanding of generosity either from Theravada or Mahayana school of Buddhism will make the practice is more meaningful.

## DISCUSSION

### Definition and Nature of Generosity

There are many faces of generosity. This generosity varies when it comes to ordinary and extraordinary Buddhists as the meaning of the word differs greatly from the one that is a part of our common vocabulary. The definition of this extraordinary generosity is given in the Bodhisattva Bhūmi as The Jewel Ornament of Liberation, translated by Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche (Gampopa 1998:185) “a mind co-emergent with non-attachment with that motivation, fully giving things”. Further it is said in the Bodhisattva Bhūmi that, “what is the nature of generosity? It is the intention accompanying bodhisattva’s disinterested non-attachment to all their possessions and their body, and, motivated by this, the physical and verbal actions of giving the things to be given”. Therefore, the Buddha taught in general that it is the extremely virtuous mind which is free from attachment and negative emotions. The Bodhisattvas perform activities with pure positive motivation for the sake of other sentient beings without discrimination. For, in Buddhism there are three doors of action (*karma*) these are the body, the speech and the mind where all actions are determined by the mind. The practice of generosity is not quite concerned with removing the scarcity of beings rather than eliminating the root of attachment and grasping of one’s possessions.

In Buddhist philosophy, karma theory plays an important role. In accordance with this theory all karma is governed by the mind. It is said that, Ethics of Tibet: Early works to 1800, Bodhisattva stages (Mahayana Buddhism) -- Early works to 1800, Paramitas (Wayman, 1991, p.12) “the virtuous volition is the nature of giving, and the body and speech karma are aroused by it. Now, the fulfillment of the perfection of giving does not concerned removing the poverty of living beings by handing over to another the material to be given. Otherwise, there being poor persons, the former Jinās would not have taken giving to its fulfillment, thus, body and speech do not govern, but mind governs”. However, when we talk about bodhisattva-level generosity that means one must have proper realization of selflessness or emptiness. To perform the spiritual activities, it is significant to have the knowledge of clairvoyance to know what is needed for beings and when it is needed and where it is needed etc. Therefore, Atisha says in his work called *Bodhipathapradīpa* that birds cannot fly without wings; in the same manner bodhisattvas cannot help others in the absence of clairvoyance. Hence, clairvoyance helps the bodhisattvas to act

accordingly by knowing others wishes and needs. According to Mahāyāna text, it says that perfection of generosity is achieved at the first level of the ten bhūmi.

The discussion on the definition of extraordinary generosity therefore fails to apply to ordinary people. This is only because most ordinary people are either unaware or half aware of the disadvantages of attachment and desire and will subsequently not be able to realize the potential and benefits of the meaning of generosity of this level. But Buddhism still encourages us to practice the generosity which comprises of the giving away of material goods, the generosity of love etc. Regarding the practice of generosity H.H. the Dalai Lama says, *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World* (Dalai Lama 2013:150) “It is important to recognize that generosity here refers not just to giving in a material sense, but to generosity of the heart. As such, it is closely connected to the virtue of forgiveness. Without generosity of the heart, genuine forgiveness is impossible”. We have so far seen that the value of generosity is an invaluable part of the ethical practice of Buddhism, particularly in Mahāyāna Buddhism. According to Buddhist texts there are different ways to practice the perfection of generosity as giving material help etc. but the generosity of the teachings is the highest form of generosity in Buddhist thought. The various stages of generosity shall be outlined in the subsequent sections.

### **Different Kinds of Generosity:**

Traditional Buddhist texts describe generosity in terms of the four stages. They are the generosity of material things, the generosity of freedom from fear, *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World* (Dalai Lama 2013:152) “the generosity of spiritual teaching which entails offering comfort, concern and advice to support other’s psychological and emotional well-being” and the generosity of love. Each of them will be described as follows:

#### **1. Generosity of material things**

In general, there are many material things that one can give and similarly, things which should not be given in the form of generosity. It is said that gifting someone left over food and drink is an inappropriate form of generosity. In the same way is to give food and drink which are infected or polluted. One should not give alcohol, meat, garlic, and onion, etc. to ones who do not eat them. According to Mahāyāna Buddhism, Buddha instructed the *bodhisattvas* to display generosity with compassion and sincerity without any degree of expectation of getting something in return. *Bodhisattavas* always practice the giving away of material things which brings immediate feeling of happiness and gets rid of pain and suffering of others. Therefore, it is said that, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Vol-II, translated by the Lamrim chenmo Translation Committee, Tsongkha-pa (2002: 130) “*bodhisattvas* should give to others those things which immediately produce in the recipients’ pleasurable feelings that are free from the causes for a miserable rebirth and which ultimately will benefit them, either eliminating their sin or setting them in virtue. Even these things do not immediately bring happiness, they should give them if they are beneficial in the end they should not give things which immediately produce pain and ultimately cause harm. Or, that which bring immediate pleasure but are ultimately harmful”.

In the Mahāyāna text there are series of passages dealing with the ways and manner in which one should cultivate the practice of generosity. According to Mahāyāna when we are giving the gifts we should give it with smile on our face and with respect and honesty. One should be able to bear the hardship when you give it. It says, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Vol-II, translated by the Lamrim chenmo Translation Committee, Tsong-kha-pa (2002:129) “By charity out of a sense of service, you will receive service from others such as your relatives; by using your own hands when giving you will obtain people who serve you; by giving when appropriate you will accomplish your aims on time”. While you give something to someone you should not hurt anyone else. Non-violence is the first precept of Buddhism in general. Being a Buddhist, one should abstain from violence. Hence it is not the right way to practice Buddha’s teachings that you are doing good things on the one hand and bad things with the other. It is just like killing a fish and giving it to a dog. It says, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Vol-II, translated by the Lamrim chenmo Translation Committee, Tsong-kha-pa (2002: 129) “by charity without hurting anyone else you will obtain stable resources; by giving while bearing unpleasantness you will have intimate companions”.

In terms of generosity of material things related to our body, there are numbers of Jataka stories which tell us that Buddha practiced the perfection of generosity in his previous life before attaining enlightenment. As it has been mentioned vividly in the passage of nature of generosity, ones who have pure intention and pure motivation are encouraged to make the perfection of generosity of even their body and its parts. But Mahāyāna texts say that though you are asked to give your body and its parts you are not supposed to give it till you have developed the feeling of great compassion. Even one should not make the generosity of their body for some sort of a small purpose. Ācārya Shantideva says *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Vol-II, translated by the Lamrim chenmo Translation Committee, Tsong-kha-pa (2002:133) “for something trifling does not harm your body, which is for practicing the sublime teachings; in this way you will quickly fulfill the aims of living beings”. In the same manner Śikṣāsamuccaya says, *Ethics of Tibet: Early works to 1800, Bodhisattva stages (Mahayana Buddhism)--Early works to 1800, Paramitas*, (Alex Wayman 1991:127) “what there would be if a man of weak strength should undertake heavy work; or if out of due time; or if a man whose conviction is immature should undertake a difficult task like giving away his flesh. He has given his embodiment to the sentient beings, but he must prevent an untimely usage”. But those, who have developed the attitude of great compassion, are encouraged to make generosity of their own body and its parts as Buddha himself practiced the perfection of generosity to attain the enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings who are in the position of helplessness and experiencing pain and suffering of saṃsāra from the beginningless of birth. Therefore, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Translated by Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche, (Gampopa 1998:187) Namyāna Requested Sūtra says, “you should give your hand to those who desire hands, should give leg to those who desire legs, should give your eye to those who desire eyes, should give your flesh to those who desire flesh, should give your blood to those who desire blood and so forth”. So, we do not need to worry too much about our motivations or expect to have pure intentions when we give. As it says, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*, translated by Stephen Batchelor, (Shantideva 1979: 48) “those who lack the pure intention of compassion

should not give their body away. Instead, both in this and future lives, they should give it to the cause of fulfilling the great purpose”.

It is also a fact that it would be tough to practice generosity as per the text but one should practice it slowly day by day. It is with the belief that surely one day one will reach such a level where you can practice generosity with any difficult. Practically it may seem inconvenient for us to act for the sake of others. As a human being everyone wants to be happy by trying to avoid unpleasant feeling. Hence, we should try to be able to act in such a way that others will be happy by witnessing our way of doing things in the most unselfish way possible. Even this would count as the practicing of generosity in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

## 2. Generosity of fearlessness

Secondly, there is the generosity of fearlessness, which is a uniquely Buddhist notion. More than any other religion Buddhism realized the disorder which may be brought in the mind by fear, worry and anxiety, and the consequent importance of developing fearlessness as a basic principle of Buddhist spiritual life. The exact meaning of the generosity of fearlessness means to give protection from the fear of thieves, diseases, flood, earthquake, and road accident so forth. The Bodhisattva Bhūmi says, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, translated by Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche, (Gampopa 1998:189) “The generosity of fearlessness is protecting from things like lions, tigers, crocodiles, kings, robbers, thieves, rivers, and so forth”. This is the generosity of fearlessness, which gives the comfort and safety to someone, who feels constantly threatened in their life. In fact, this is the gift, which makes someone fearless which leads to a more peaceful and harmony life. Today we have no security at all. We see numbers of road accident while going back home from office. There have been series of cases of kidnappings and robberies in the city. Rape cases are to be seen in every day newspaper as well as increasing population of the country year by year. Hence, Buddhism encourages us to give security to every sentient being by establishing a more peaceful society. As far as natural disaster is concerned countries like India face many problems in the form of landslides and floods every year. Recently Nepal has been devastated by an earthquake, which took thousands of lives and left many injured and homeless. However, Mahāyāna Buddhism ethically gives the theory of the generosity of fearlessness and practice of the generosity of fearlessness. This is one of the most important aspects of spiritual practice on the path to enlightenment.

In a deeper sense, fearlessness in Mahāyāna Buddhist text is recognized as complete fearlessness which is synonymous with enlightenment. It states, *A Survey of Buddhism* (Sangharakshita 2006:474) “In the present context, however the generosity of fearlessness means that the bodhisattavas attempts to relieve people of anxiety regarding person, property, and livelihood either by providing material safeguard or psychological treatment. Among the immense Buddhist repertoire of spiritual exercises are many which especially aim at the conquest of fear. Midnight visits to graveyards and other fearsome places concentration on the various stages of decomposition of a corpse, meditation on death are all practices in which fear, stimulated to the point at which it invades the conscious mind, can be faced and overcome. The enemy must be dragged out into the open before it can be slain”.

In fact, bodhisattva's efforts are for the moment directed mainly to the creation of a feeling of confidence and security in the minds of men and animals.

### 3. Generosity of spiritual teaching (dharma)

Thirdly there is the principle of the generosity of *Dharma* in the Mahāyāna Buddhist text. It is considered to be the highest form of generosity. Mainly it is encouragement of practice of generosity to the monks and Buddhist practitioners those who don't possess material things to make the practice of generosity to attain enlightenment or Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. Beings as it were in possession of the means to get enlightenment, the bodhisattva out of compassion desires to share it with all sentient beings. Even out of compassion, Buddha himself made the generosity of *Dharma* to his five disciples in Varanasi at Sarnath as soon as he attained Buddhahood under the bodhi tree in Bodhgaya. Therefore, in the same way *A Survey of Buddhism* (Sangharakshita 2006:476) "wisdom gives birth to compassion and compassion in its turn is productive of various methods, technically known as skillful means (*upaya*) by means to which the bodhisattva enables beings to participate in his own transcendental experience. One of the most important of methods is to communicate at the intellectual level through the spoken or the written words". The generosity of *Dharma* requires interest of the recipient. This is not something that can be done with force and vigor. One cannot receive the *Dharma* until you completely agree and accept the possibility that you already have some different view in your life. It is to be given to someone who is interested in Buddha teaching and interested in *Nirvāṇa*. *Dharma* is the method that gives the right direction to the path leading to *Nirvāṇa*. The generosity of *Dharma* is sometimes a subject of giving a new standpoint aspect of spiritual practice. *Dharma* gives you the wisdom that enables you to understand that which is or wrong on philosophical issues like metaphysical and epistemology.

Traditionally in the Mahāyāna Buddhism there is an image in Buddhism of the Bodhisattva Manjughosha. He is the *bodhisattva* of wisdom. He is gives wisdom. In his right hand he holds a spiritual text symbolizing the sutras. In his left hand he holds a sword symbolizing the destruction of ignorance. To give the *Dharma* is to eliminate the wrong views. In fact, all problems of life come into being as a result of wrong views which varies from culture to culture and religion to religion. According to Buddhism the right views are rooted in principle of loving kindness. The *Dharma* is given as a key to a meaningful life and helps create a peaceful society.

Now I would like to take consideration of how or in what manner one should give the generosity in terms of explanation in the classical Mahāyāna Buddhist text. The Bodhisattva Doctrine says, *A Survey of Buddhism* (Sangharakshita 2006:477) "He should always be very courteous to the supplicants, and receive them with every mark of respect and deference. He should also be happy and joyful, when he gives away anything. This condition is important and essential. The donor should be happier than the recipient of the generosity. A *bodhisattva* should not repent his generosity after bestowing gifts on others. He should not talk of his charitable deeds. He should give quickly and with a humble heart. He should make no distinction between friends and enemies, but should give to alike. He should give to the deserving and the undeserving, the wicked and the righteous, everywhere and at all

times. But he should not lose the sense of measure and proportion in his charity.” The above passage emphasizes that bodhisattva or a real Mahāyāna practitioner is ready to sacrifice even his or her own life for the sake of all sentient beings, practitioners will make such a sacrifice only if it is needed. Whatever the *bodhisattva* gives away has been acquired by honest means and is both logical and moral. Especially in terms of generosity of *Dharma*, it should be given without any mistake and perversion. Therefore, the *Bodhisattva Bhūmi* says, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, translated by Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche, (Gampopa 1998:189) “In the generosity of the Dharma, the meaning should be shown without mistakes, it should be shown logically, and the disciple should be allowed to practice perfectly the basis of the training.”

A good motivation plays an important role in the generosity of *Dharma*. Scriptures advise us to avoid evil thought and maintains good thought when one gives the generosity of *Dharma*. One should give *Dharma* without consideration of wealth, honor, praise, fame, and worldly activities. One should give the generosity of Dharma to others to eliminate pain and sufferings as well as to attain enlightenment. This is the third stage of the generosity in the practice of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

#### 4. Generosity of loving kindness

The last stage of generosity in the classical Mahāyāna Buddhist text’s list is the stage of loving kindness. Loving kindness according to the traditional text is explained as a sort of feeling of friendliness towards all beings, where one wishes for the prosperity, happiness, successfulness and sound health of others without any attachment which is known as loving-kindness. Mahāyānists give lot of important to the generosity of loving kindness by saying *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Translated by Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche, (Gampopa 1998:125) “the mahāyānist practitioners should not separate their minds from loving kindness and compassion for even a moment and all of others’ benefit is preserved by love and compassion, not by hatred.” We grew up in a society and culture where loving kindness is like a beautiful thread woven into the fabric of human relationship and interaction. Our personality started in the mother’s womb and we grew through her endurance of pain and suffering. After we were born she developed our body. When we came to this world we did not bring any provisions. We just came with a naked body and without any material things. It was our mother who fed us when we were hungry. She clothed us when we were cold and she gave us her wealth when we had nothing. So, we were born with this kind of loving kindness relationship. In the ethical notion of Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is said that each and every being were our mothers in our previous lives. Beings do not have certain point to beginning. Each and every being takes births countless times. It is completely beginning-less. It is difficult to point or prove that there is a point of beginning where we started from. All sentient beings hence are our mothers just like the one in the life. Therefore, it is our duty to love all sentient beings. The Beginningless *Saṃsāra Sūtra* says, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, translated by Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche, (Gampopa 1998:128) “This whole world—if this all were made into pieces the size of juniper berries by one person, and another person were to count them, it is possible to exhaust the whole world. But one cannot count the number of times one sentient being has been our mother”. In the same manner Ācārya Nāgārjuna says in his work the Letter to a

Friend says, Nagarjuna's letter to Friend (Nagarjuna 2006: 50) "Using pieces the size of juniper berries, the earth is insufficient to account for the limit of one's maternal lineage." According to Buddhism we are beginning-less each and every time of our birth we need to have a mother. Without mother human life is less possible for ordinary person. She performed the same kind of kindness every period of time as usual. Therefore, a mother's kindness is limitless, so, as sincerely as possible, we should try to develop the generosity of loving kindness in your heart, and desire for each and every beings' benefit and happiness.

I think everyone is able to practice the generosity of loving kindness, which is another word for friendliness. Loving kindness is a basic level of generosity. Loving kindness teaches us to look beyond ourselves to the needs of others and it encourages us to kindly love all sentient beings. This is the real position of care ethics. Mahāyānist would like to encourage everybody to a wholehearted practice of loving kindness. This is the fourth kind of generosity in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

### **Result of Generosity**

In Buddhist thought, the theory of karma is fundamental for all of Buddhist doctrines, because it provides a form of the operation of this world and its beings. Pertaining to the theory of karma it is deeply connected to the four noble truths, which is a fundamental teaching of Buddhism. Karma can be both positive and negative as Buddhism speaks of positive karma as merit and much effort is expended in acquiring it. In fact, whatever one does has a positive or a negative karma. Some picture it as a kind of spiritual capital like money in a bank account whereby credit is built up as the deposit on a high realm or lower realm rebirth. According to Buddhism making generosity in general and particularly to monk is the best way to accumulate merit for lay persons. Damien Keown rightly pointed out by saying, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Damien Keown 1996:40) "One of the best ways for a layman to earn merit is by supporting the order of monks. This can be done by placing food in the bowls of monks as they pass on their daily alms round, by providing robes for the monks," Even monks give back to generosity of dharma in return to lay followers by listening to dharma and attending religious activities and by donating money for the preservation of monasteries and temples. It is very interesting to say according to Buddhism merit can be accumulated by congratulating other donors and rejoicing in their generosity. Therefore, one can accumulate merit in such an easy way. Somehow this is to say that merit is accumulated as by product of doing what is right and demerit as by a performance of acts what is wrong.

In terms of classical Mahāyāna text dealing with result of practice of generosity, it is divided into two levels. They are the ultimate level and the conventional level. It is fact that Buddhist aim of life is to attain Nirvāṇa. It is always considered to be the ultimate aim of life. Therefore, the Bodhisattva Bhūmi says, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Translated by Khenpo Konchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche, (Gampopa 1998:192) "all the *bodhisattvas* who fully perfect the practice of generosity will achieve the unsurpassable, perfect, complete enlightenment." In terms of conventional level, one will get great prosperity by the practicing the generosity of wealth etc. Again, the *Bodhisattva Bhūmi* says, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Translated by Khenpo Konchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche, (Gampopa 1998:193) "One will become strong by practicing the generosity of food. One will achieve a good complexion by making generosity of



cloths. One will become stable by the generosity of conveyances. One will have good eyesight by giving generosity of lamps.”

In the Precious Garland by Nāgārjuna, the result of the generosity of *Dharma* is explained as such by saying Nagarjuna’s Precious Garland Buddhist Advice for Living and Liberation. Analyzed, translated and edited by Jeffrey Hopkins (Nagarjuna 2007:33) “And through stainless giving of the doctrine. You will attain memory of your continuum of lives.” In the same text the fruit of generosity of fearlessness is described by stating *Nagarjuna’s Precious Garland Buddhist Advice for Living and Liberation*. Analyzed, translated and edited by Jeffrey Hopkins (Nagarjuna 2007:32) “Through Giving the five essentials as well as non-fright to frighten. You will not be harmed by any demons and will become the best of the mighty”.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, generosity can be said to be the embodiment of Buddhist culture in general and Mahāyāna Buddhism in particular based on the principle of give what you can taking care of others. In terms of principles of bodhisattva generosity is the first step of leading towards Buddhahood. There are ten stages (*bhūmi*); in the first stage called Great Joy *bodhisattva* emphasizes the practice of generosity. As an ordinary person, in the principle of generosity even you can take what you need from others. What we need and what we can give is not different. In fact all sentient beings want to be happy and tries to avoid pain and suffering in their day to day life. Particularly as human beings no one can survive without love, friendship, relative, etc. Therefore, generosity is one of the best means to establish lasting friendships with others and is inevitable to attain Nirvāṇa and Buddhahood. So, these are the four basic forms of generosity, the first pāramitā that the Lord Buddha taught. It is also the easiest form of spiritual teaching to understand as well as practice. This is one of the aspects of the ethical position of Buddhism.

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