

Foundation Series on Buddhist Tranquil Wisdom Insight Meditation (TWIM)
As taught by
Sister Khema and overseen by Most Venerable “Bhante” Vimalaramsi Maha Thera
the Gift of Dhamma is Priceless!

Training→ FS- 02- What is Dana?

Dana is Generosity of thoughts, words, and deeds.

Before even approaching the actual meditation practice, the student needs to prepare themselves by the practice of pure generosity. This is part of the development of Sila or morality. Dana is the first part of Sila.

It's very unfortunate that today, the word Dana, mostly means “please give money” to the teachers of the Dhamma, be they lay people or monastics. This is sad. Generosity practice was more than this in the beginning. It was a preparatory practice.

A meditator is learning meditation, Loving Kindness meditation or otherwise, so that they can shift personally and change the world around them. They are essentially learning a practice to give it away! But you cannot give something away that you do not have. First you must prepare yourself to develop the gift properly.

There are three kinds of generosity the meditator needs to develop in earnest that will have effect on their meditation later. They are Generosity of thoughts, of words and of deeds; that is, Generosity of mind, verbal speech, and physical actions.

Q: Why are these important?

A: Well, it's kind of like a car. Before you travel a long distance with your car, you need to be sure it has the right fluids, proper air in the tires and the engine timing is just right. You might say that when you are going to practice meditation, you need to warm up by opening the heart first, by remembering what it's like to have a lighter mind, by giving up something in life, actually experimenting by practicing renunciation.

In many situations, this can mean being challenged to give up taking things so personally for the first time in our life. In today's society, many of us have experienced feeling like a victim in some way or other. People seem very ready to climb into the role of being the victim. Instead, removing yourself out of the picture is a new exercise to consider. This offers another angle to what might actually be going on in a situation. You take a moment and consider “how would it be if “I” or “ME” was not in the equation?” In essence this is the first level practice of renunciation.

This kind of practice of renunciation is to make a conscious decision to consider the most impersonal positive side in any situation instead of giving in to thinking in terms of the most negative and

personal view. Most of us are all too ready to judge a situation without considering all the real information. It's so easy to judge something without all the facts, isn't it? People do this all the time. Our newspapers feed this to us as being an ok approach too. But this isn't the truth of what is going on in this world. Practicing the removal of the personal aspect is one road to finding out the truth of a situation.

When practicing generosity of mind, our perspective must shift away from taking things personally and consider how the same situation would look if it was viewed totally impersonally? We have to stop after an event happens and say to ourselves, what would the same situation look like if there was no "I", "ME", or 'MINE" in the mix?

Q: How can I practice generosity through speech?

A: Have you ever been in a situation where other people around you were being unfairly critical of someone who was not there, or judging someone openly without all the facts when they could not defend themselves? What if you brought up the idea of gathering in all information before coming to any conclusion? What if you said something to that person who was being critical, or stood up for the criticized person when no one else would do that? This would be stepping away from concern for yourself and reaching out to another human being to see if you could help in some way without harmful cost to yourself.

This is one way to practice generosity of speech.

Another way is complimenting someone in an office setting, telling them they are doing their job well, that they look happy today, are dressed very nicely, or that they bring sunshine into your life. Just letting people know that you appreciate them is something we can do openly rather than assuming they don't need to hear anything. Our assumptions are what often lead us into trouble. Letting out positive vibrations through our speech is not costly and can really help to change home and work environments. Leaving this out of the equation can really lower production in an any office or store situation.

So these are a couple of things you need to try out for yourself.

When we do this kind of practice, it's important to feel the openness of the heart as you do it. Mean what you are saying and take note of how your heart feels at the time you say it. This is the beginning of opening up a heart and lightening mind. Feel the difference.

Q: You talked about deeds too. What about them?

A: Practicing generous deeds can take on many shapes. Most of the time this involves putting yourself and your time aside for others. There can be a planned generous deed like taking your turn to bring food, flowers, incense to a temple. This is lovely.

There can also be a spur of the moment deed that happens. Suppose you are driving on a highway and there is an accident and you are the first one on the scene and people need help. You stop and do what needs to be immediately done as best you can. When help arrives you go on your way. This opportunity can appear in front of you and you can do it or not. It isn't planned. It is just pure giving at the time of need.

Perhaps you are riding a bike and you see a person falling off their bike. Do you ride by or stop and help them get up? Do you help or ignore the situation? How would you want to be treated in that same situation if it were you who fell? Why did this event appear in front of you? Is it an opportunity or a bothersome impediment during your daily routine in life? How you frame the event in your mind before, during, and after it happens is important too? Perhaps this is the universe giving you an opportunity to perform pure generosity through an actual physical deed!

About merit

In Buddhism, there is a thing called merit. Building merit is good and helps with the positioning of future rebirths. But people can get consumed performing merit and forget what the real teaching is all about and this is an imbalance. There is a lovely story in the Dhammapada about a person who lights a candle and then walks through a village offering their flame so people can light other candles. This is how pure merit is supposed to work.

Even stronger merit is when you give merit away after building it up so that all beings can share in your own merit! Sharing merit is an act of selflessness; an act of giving up craving; an act of generosity. After teaching the Dhamma, monastics will often give away any merit they acquired for the benefit of happiness for all beings. This is a selfless act.

Q: Should we ever accept gifts or just give away things?

A: That's a very good question. In balance, a person should remember that receiving a gift is important too. Helping others to build merit is what this is about. The person giving the gift to you is practicing generosity and this should not be supported and not turned down. If you do not need the gift that is given, you can share it or give it to someone later on who will use it. But it should not be turned away.

Q: Is there a way to give a gift and a way to receive it?

A: Yes. There are a few parts to the giving of a gift that should be considered.

1) prepare the gift with a happy mind and good intention; 2) See the person happy in your mind; 3) give the gift with loving kindness; 4) reflect on having given the gift afterwards. Then let the event go gently into the past. This is how to give a gift properly.

When receiving a gift, receive it graciously and with a smile of acceptance. Sending loving and kind thoughts to the person giving the gift is very good.

Always keep a light mind and have fun creating happiness in other people.

Q: Can these acts of generosity involve all three parts of thought, word, and deed?

A: Yes, surely. Suppose you are in a food market line. There is a mother with a small child in a basket in front of you. She is struggling now to empty her basket for the cashier and not block the line too long. Her baby is starting to fuss and maybe cry too. You are standing behind her basket.

So you think, "I bet I can make this little baby smile a bit and calm down." And then you compliment the mother about her little baby with kind words. Mom's love this. Begin by sending loving kindness to the little child. They will pick up on this right away so don't be surprised at the look you get from them! Then you start to occupy the baby by making faces with it, or playing peek-a-boo with it behind your hat while smiling. It starts to calm down and watch you.

In this example, your radiance has changed the entire environment in the store. You have relieved the mother, relaxed the cashier, calmed the people around you, made the baby happier and you may even be having fun too! This is using all of the parts of generosity in daily life coupled with sending out loving kindness. Thoughts, words and deeds are happening here. And look how you can affect the world around you? See? The whole store is smiling now!

So, don't be shy about this. This is a great practice to see how you can affect the world around you without much cost to you at all. It is a gift we can give each other through life.

Q: How is this preparing you for the practice of the meditation?

The entire meditation practice is about opening the heart and emptying out old suffering of the past. A lot of suffering is stored inside us behind a little locked gate. We have locked in the sorrows of yesterday in our minds and heart sometimes holding onto the past as if it were today. Now we are going to open this gate and we need our heart to be operational and not locked up so tight. We need to be gentle with ourselves. If we prepare a little bit, we can handle the outflow better when having begun to feel again through these acts of generosity, we are ready to go deeper and look inside. Clearing out the rubbish, so to speak, preparing ourselves for the journey, we can then begin to experiment with the deeper potential of clear mind, pure mind.

It is next to impossible to succeed in doing the more advanced investigation into the deeper states without doing proper preparatory work first. So this gives you some ideas about what you can do to prepare for further work.

Much Metta and smiles

Rev. Sister Khema

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