

# Dana Paramita

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Dainen-ji

We see or hear the word “dana” and alms or money might pop into mind. This is our usual frame of reference. We see the word as the “suggested” dana for a workshop or for this occasion as being so many dollars. Let’s pick up this word and turn it this way and that. Let us look beyond the obvious and accepted. As we look at other aspects of this word, originally Pali and then Sanskrit, we see a concept people have been discussing for at least 2600 years. We see that it speaks of the voluntary giving of material, energy, and wisdom. In the “Paramita” series from a 1994 O-sesshin, Anzan Hoshin roshi says that dana is “a recognition of the fundamental richness of experiencing.”

The only self-describing species, we are human centric beings. We erroneously limit the idea of “voluntary giving” along with many other activities and qualities, as something only possible for humans. When that narrow, exclusive meaning is opened to include the world that arises as us and as all beings we are able to apply this understanding to our moment-to-moment experience.

When experience is viewed openly inevitably more and more angles and perspectives are exposed and the reality of a sharper, deeper, richer experience is known. We see, hear, taste, touch, feel, smell, and think, with more depth. The basic richness and luminosity of reality is revealed.

Investigation through practice continues to uncover meanings far more interesting in their inclusiveness than the handing over of money. Dana means generosity and richness. We understand this more and more completely as we practise the Dharma, the Teachings of Reality. The richness of the experiencing of the bodymind is vast and generous. Why would we choose to fixate on only one aspect of our experiencing? Usually this one aspect is, paradoxically, of poverty or lack or suffering. The only possible reason is ignorance.

We don’t know we have a choice. We fixate on only certain aspects of experiencing and ignore the rest. We literally rob ourselves of our own lives by ignoring our actual experiencing. As we learn to notice the richness which presents itself in, around, and as us we find ourselves more capable, more able to live as the Treasure House of which Dogen zenji spoke in the “Fukanzazengi”. It is then that we start to glimpse our indebtedness to the Lineage of Teachers who have been the vehicles for this priceless teaching for 2600 years. It is then that some of us decide to dedicate our marrow and bones and everything else to the preservation and continuation of this Dharma treasure.

The earth, our planet, our precious blue pearl, our home, is a sometimes decadently generous place. Humans do nothing and yet buds and leaves and flowers burst forth in cycles appropriate to their growth. In northern climes tiny flowers will bloom and carpet the tundra when the warmth of the sun increases intensity with the revolutions of the planet. At the equator lush tropical growth relentlessly reclaims land that has been stripped, burned, and leached by human misjudgement and misuse.

Huge pieces of equipment provided by ill-informed aid agencies are abandoned for reasons ranging from no hard currency with which to buy gas to civil war. Overnight, creepers and vines start to grow around these artefacts of the machinery of greed. Over time this evidence of not caring, not paying attention, will be

reduced to rust and dust and reintegrated into the soil. As a species bound by the contractions and playing out the views of self-image we live with stark evidence of the imbalance in our economics, our ecology, our basic housekeeping. For example, estimates are that 8 billion dollars would provide a basic education for peoples of the planet. We can't or aren't willing to do this and yet we find 12 billion dollars for perfume, 400 billion for illegal drugs and 700 billion for arms. These figures are by no means accurate. How could they be? But they are indicative of incredible imbalance.

The basic generosity of life is presented moment-after-moment in our own experiencing. All we need do is look. Each moment of experiencing presents seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, thinking, and feeling. All "we" ever have to do is notice. The bodymind adapts to the tiniest changes in environment, regulating temperature, renewing cells, and putting in place emergency programs and procedures to deal with too much, too little, or bad food, not enough, too much, or bad water. Bacteria and virus and parasites occupy and colonize the bodymind and it adapts. The skin is cut, a bone is broken, a baby is conceived, and the bodymind adapts. The generosity of the bodymind is so vast that when someone stops smoking after even forty or fifty years the cells that make up the bodymind start to cleanse and repair. The moments of life tick by unfolding the fabric of old age, sickness, and, inevitably, death. Even then the generosity of the bodymind would continue to present itself as food for beings if the process is not stopped by human intervention.

Film and video, radio, television, cameras, audio recorders, and print media have penetrated areas of life and behaviours of which our ancestors could never have even dreamed. Daily, the generosity of beings is broadcast and printed. An African lioness adopted three baby antelope, one died, one was eaten by another member of the pride, but she is still caring for one of the orphans. A dog in Belgium nursed three baby tigers after their mother died. A captive gorilla, Koko, adopted and even invented a name for a kitten. She called it "All ball". A troop of Vervet monkeys in Namibia looked after a young human for several years showing him where to find food and how to be a monkey. He is learning now to "be" a human through the generosity of other humans and the adaptability of the bodymind.

In spite of a day-to-day diet of stories showing greed, violence, and general bad behaviour generosity is still being manifested by human beings. Over a decade ago in Liberia, West Africa, during a civil war, a newly postpartum mother, Hilda, travelled 125 miles on foot carrying her infant to a village in the interior. This village was the home of her girlfriend who had gone to America, and as was the custom, had left her newborn at home with her parents. Hilda walked back to the capital on the coast, still carrying her own infant, and alternately carrying and leading her friend's child. Both women are now in the United States. The toddler is a teenager. In another instance in West Africa, a man carried a letter over 200 miles to the town where my friend, a refugee from that same civil war, had travelled. Why did he do it for someone he didn't even know very well? He knew a letter from Canada must be important during that time of strife.

Self-image is pervasive in every area of human experience. We have come to accept its creations and concepts such as the nation state, governments, economies, religions, and social roles as inevitable, natural, and "right". We don't even think of them as inventions or fabrications. The strands that have been woven out of unexamined assumptions and beliefs wrap each and every one of us in a cocoon of misunderstanding. The strands are choking us. When and if we are fortunate enough to find this practice of Zen we are given the priceless opportunity to look into and open these traps.

The elegant and radical opportunity to know your own experience rather than to "know yourself" is unique to this practice. Every aspect of practice reveals the richness and inherent generosity of our experience. The

experienced reality of the prose of practice, such as *Wrong action does not arise. There is only the arising of benefit. There is only the benefit of all beings* continuously unfolds our understanding. True, realized, and lived generosity is the basis of practice. Our usualness is so entangling that we can get lost over and over again. The quicksand of misunderstanding and the misguided efforts we make of trying to figure it out or of trying to make meaning out of events, pulls us under time and time again. Each time we notice anything at all about how we are and make the choice to practise the richness and generosity of this moment we are making a choice for freedom and the liberation all beings.

Be generous. Accept the generosity that is the life that is lived as you. Take responsibility for this generosity. The most generous act, the act of a Bodhisattva, one who is opening to openness, is the commitment to practise and teach beyond convenience. When monastic vows are taken the person is dedicating the life that lives as them to the liberation of all beings. In 2002 two monks, one originally from India, and one who emigrated from Britain specifically to study and practise at Dainen-ji, committed further to the liberation of all beings.

One such dedication was celebrated on the last evening of the May 2002 O-sesshin when Ven. Chunen Rampal received full ordination as a monastic from Zen Master Anzan Hoshin roshi. A visible and on-going sign to all of a fully ordained monk is the rakusu. This cloth "bib" worn around the neck by all monastics is a constant reminder of the history of the 2600 years of practice. It is encoded with information. Chunen shuso now wears a rakusu that has a bone ring as part of the straps. He polished the bone himself just as his practice has been polished for the past five years. The bone ring replaces the silver "knot of practice" pin of a novice. His first Dharma talk was given in front of the Roshi and the Sangha after he had offered incense to the Lineage as the new shuso.