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Dāna Maha-p,phala Sutta

The Discourse on Giving That is of Great Fruit | A 7.49 = A:B 7.52

Theme: On the best motivation for giving

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003; rev 2010

1 Introduction

1.1 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WHOLESOME GIVING

1.1.1 This discourse given to Sāriputta and the laymen of Campā mentions seven good reasons for giving, and they are rated in an ascending order according to the results that arise after death. The best reason for giving is the seventh one, that is, as “an adornment for the mind, a support for the mind” [§9-10].

1.1.2 The significance of the Sutta teaching is twofold:

1.1.2.1 (1) We should be mindful and respectful when we are making an offering, as it is a moment of very good karma. The karma is good when our mind is wholesome, especially when preparing the gift, while giving, and after the giving. In short, give joyfully.

1.1.2.2 (2) The time of giving is not only a time of good karma in terms of our physical action of giving, but it is also a time for the practice on **the recollection of charity** (*cāgānussati*). It helps us to recall the joy of giving by making the wholesome note, “This is an adornment for the mind, the benefit of a support for the mind” (*cittālaṅkāraṃ citta,parikkhār’attham*) [1.1.2.4].

1.1.2.3 In other words, the giving is part of our cultivation of moral virtue (*sīla,bhāvanā*) as a support for mental cultivation—this is called “**the recollection of moral virtue**” (*sīlānussati*).¹ With abundant moral virtue, it is easier for us to cultivate the mind, mainly because we feel joy recollecting that we have been morally virtuous (that we have not broken the precepts).

Conversely, if we find difficulty in meditating, we should examine our moral conduct with insight or wisdom, and rectify any unwholesome habits or resolve negative thoughts. The Commentary takes this twin practice of calming the mind and using insight or wisdom to examine oneself, as the practice of “calm and insight” (*samatha,vipassanā*) (AA 4:123).²

1.1.2.4 A very vital key to the success of any wholesome meditation is the cultivation of joy (*pāmoj-ja*) in meditation, as stated in **the Vimuttāyatana Sutta** (A 5.26).³ The cultivation of joy in meditation is often an effective way of overcoming most distractions, even the mental hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*).⁴ A good way of cultivating joy is the recollecting of charity [1.1.2.2].

And to do this, we need to highlight the moment when we are actually doing the act of charity, by making the wholesome note, “This is an adornment for the mind, the benefit of a support for the mind” [§9]. A simpler way to do this is, while giving, to reflect, “May this giving beautify my heart. May it bring joy to my life, especially my meditation.”

¹ On the recollection of moral virtue, see *Sīlnussati*, SD 15.11.

² AA 4:123. However, it should be noted here that these 2 terms are *not* types of meditation, but rather *aspects* of meditation that we need to cultivate for a proper practice: see **Refuge 2**, SD 3.2 (4.2) & *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1 (4).

³ On joy as a meditation catalyst, see **Vimuttāyatana S** (A 5.26,2.3), SD 21.5 (2).

⁴ On the 5 mental hindrances (*pañca nīvatāṇa*)—sensual desire, ill will, restless and worry, sloth and torpor, and doubt—see *Nīvaraṇa*, SD 32.1.

1.1.3 The Dāna Maha-p,phala Sutta goes on to make an interesting statement, thus:

... he makes a gift, thinking, “This is an adornment for the mind, a support for the mind”—with the body’s breaking up, after death, he reappears in the company of Brahma’s Retinue. [§10].

Then, having exhausted that karma, that power, that status, that sovereignty, **he is a non-returner**.⁵ He does not come back to this world. [§10.2]

This statement is interesting because a non-returner, after death on earth, is, as a rule, reborn in one of the pure abodes.⁶ However, this statement is very significant in at least two important ways:

(1) If this is a reference to a non-returner as one “on the path” (*anāgamī, magga*), then, he spends his life *as such* amongst the Brahma’s Retinue (*brahmā, pārisajja*), the lowest of the 1st-dhyana realms, with the life-span of half an aeon.⁷ After that, he becomes a non-returner, that is, he is reborn in one of the pure abodes (this last point is not stated in the Sutta).

Clearly, this person’s rebirth in the Brahmā world and attaining of **non-return** are the result of his act of charity. However, while his giving may bring rebirth to the Brahma world, it is not karmically sufficient to bring his non-return. This fruiting of nonreturn clearly has arisen from his recalling, “This is an adornment for the mind, the benefit of a support for the mind” [§10], which helps in his meditation to attain dhyana, which in turn prepares him for the attaining of non-return.

(2) The second significant point is that his state as a non-return of the path is not a “moment,” as stated in the Abhidhamma tradition, but, in this case, lasts half an aeon.⁸ Furthermore, in **the Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 142), there is mention of alms being given to the 8 kinds of saints, that is, an arhat, an arhat-to-be, a non-returner, a non-returner-to-be, a once-returner, a once-returner-to-be, a streamwinner and a streamwinner-to-be. This shows that the saints-to-be (those “on the path”)—because they must take time to consume their meals—are not mere mind-moments (as claimed by the Abhidhammikas) but last for a significant duration.⁹

1.2 The 7 kinds of giving fit nicely into the 7 levels of heavens that the giver is reborn in after death. The Commentary notes that the highest motivation for giving, unsoiled by lower motivations and leading to non-return, need some level of mastery in calm [“adornment”] and insight [“support”] so that one cultivates a genuine motivation for giving.

⁵ A **non-returner** (*anāgamī*), on overcoming the 5 lower fetters (*orambhāgiya saṃyojanā*), is reborn in the Brahmā worlds known as the Pure Abodes (*suddh’āvāsa*) [foll n].

The 10 fetters are: (1) self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), (2) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma, rāga*), (5) aversion (*paṭigha*), (6) greed for form existence (*rūpa, rāga*), (7) greed for formless existence (*arūpa, rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61, A 5:13, Vbh 377). In some places, no 5 (*paṭigha*) is replaced by ill will (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*orambhāgiya*), and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddhambhāgiya*). See **Is rebirth immediate?** SD 2.17 (4.4), the 5 kinds of non-returners.

⁶ The Pure Abodes (*suddh’āvāsa*) are the 5 highest heavens of the form world (*rūpa, loka*) where only non-returners [prec n] have their last birth before becoming arhats and attaining nirvana. These worlds are Āviha (“non-declining”), Ātappa (“Unworried”), Sudassā (“Clearly Visible”), Sudassī (“Clear-visioned”) and Akaniṭṭha (“Highest”) (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46).

⁷ On the realm of Brahmā’s Retinue, see SD 1.7 (Appendix).

⁸ An **aeon** (*kappa*) is a world-cycle: see SD 2.19 (9) & SD 49.8 (15.2).

⁹ See **Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga S** (M 142,3-10) n, SD 1.9. Cf (**Hatthi, gāmaka**) **Ugga S** (A 8.22), where Ugga similarly offers alms to monks who have variously attained some level of sainthood (A 8.22,10), SD 45.15. On the gradual nature of awakening, see SD 49.14 (4).

1.3 RELATED SUTTAS

1.3.1 This Sutta should be studied with the following Suttas that also discuss giving, the first two of which shares many common points with the Dāna Maha-p,phala Sutta:¹⁰

(Aṭṭha) Dāna Sutta 1 & 2 (on the motive behind giving) (A 8.31-32),¹¹

Dāna Vatthu Sutta (on the grounds for giving) (A 8.33),¹²

(Dāna) Vacchagotta Sutta (on the benefits of giving to those freed from the mental hindrances) (A 3.57),¹³

Suppavāsa Sutta (on the 4 blessings that accrue from giving of food) (A 4.57),¹⁴

Sumanā Rāja,kumārī Sutta (on the various levels of benefits the giver obtains) (A 5.31),¹⁵ and

Sappurisa Dāna Sutta (the true individual¹⁶ gives out of faith, respectfully, at the right time, with a generous heart, without belittling anyone) (A 5.148).¹⁷

1.3.2 For an interesting study on how giving helps the giver through the active compassion of recipient, see Liz Wilson's "Beggars can be choosers: Mahākassapa as selective eater of offerings" (2003).¹⁸

1.3.3 When asked, give

*Saccam bhaṇe na kujjheyya
dajj'appasmim pi yācito
eteḥi tīhi thānehi
gacche devāna santike*

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One should speak the truth;¹⁹ one should not be angry.
When asked, one should give, even when one has little.
By these three means,
one would go into the presence of the gods.

— — —

¹⁰ See esp **Aputtaka S 2** (S 3.20/1:91-93), SD 22.5 (2).

¹¹ See A 8.31-32/4:236 @ SD 6.6 (6a & 6b).

¹² See A 8.33/4:236 f @ SD 6.6 (6c).

¹³ See A 3.57/1:160-162 (SD 22.12).

¹⁴ See A 4.57/2:62 f (SD 22.13).

¹⁵ See A 5.31/3:32-34 (SD 22.14).

¹⁶ "True individual" (*sappurisa*), also "good person, ideal individual." The qualities of a *sappurisa* are given at D 33.2.2(6)/3:252, 34.1.8(7)/3:283; M 113; A 7.64/4:113, 8.38/4:144 f & M 110.14-24/3:23 f.

¹⁷ See A 5.148/3:172 f (SD 22.15).

¹⁸ In J C Holt, J N Kinnard & J S Walters (eds), *Constituting Communities: Theravada Buddhism and the religious cultures of South and Southeast Asia*. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2003:57-70 (ch 3)

¹⁹ It is possible for us to take *sacca* here as identical to Skt **sātya*, "pleasant," rather than *satya*, "true," since "pleasant" makes a good contrast to "angry" in the same line. Cf Dh 408, where Uv 33.17 suggests the reading *sātyāṃ*. See Brough, Dh:G 22 (p184). See Dh:N 116 n224.

The Discourse on the Giving That is of Great Fruit

A 7.49

Some laymen desire to hear the Dharma

1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying on the shore of Gaggarā Lake in Campā. Then, a large number of laymen followers [upasakas] from Campā approached the venerable Sāriputta and, having gone up to the venerable Sāriputta, saluted him, and sat down at one side.

As they were sitting there at one side, they said to the venerable Sāriputta:

1.2 “It has been a long time, bhante, since we have heard a Dharma talk in the Blessed One’s presence. It would be good if we can hear a Dharma talk in the Blessed One’s presence.”

1.3 “In that case, brothers, come again on this uposatha day [observance day],²⁰ and perhaps you will get to hear a Dharma talk in the Blessed One’s presence.”

1.4 “As you say, bhante,” the laymen from Campā said to the venerable Sāriputta. Then rising from their seats, saluted him, and then circling him rightwise, they left.

Gifts that bear great fruit and those that do not

1.5 On that uposatha day, the laymen from Campā went to the venerable Sāriputta and, having saluted him, stood at one side. Then the venerable Sāriputta, together with the laymen from Campā, approached the Blessed One, and having gone up to the Blessed One, saluted him and sat down at one side.

1.6 Seated thus at one side, the venerable Sāriputta said this to the Blessed One: [60]

2 “Bhante, might there be the case where a gift that is given in a certain manner does *not* bear great fruit nor great benefit for a certain person?

And, yet might there a gift that is given in a certain manner *does* bear great fruit, great benefit for a certain person?”

2.2 “There might be the case, Sāriputta, where a gift that is given in a certain manner does *not* bear great fruit nor great benefit for a certain person.

And yet there might be the case, Sāriputta, where a gift that is given in a certain manner *does* bear great fruit, great benefit for a certain person.”

Motivations for giving

3 “What, bhante, is the cause, the reason, why such a gift that is given in a certain manner does *not* bear great fruit nor great benefit for a certain person?

3.2 And what, bhante, is the cause, the reason, why such a gift that is given in a certain manner *does* bear great fruit, great benefit for a certain person?”

(1) FOR THE SAKE OF REBIRTH.

3.3 “Here, Sāriputta, there is the case where a person makes a gift seeking his own profit, with a mind attached (to the reward), seeking to store them up for himself, thinking, ‘I’ll enjoy this after death.’

3.4 He makes his gift—food or drink; cloth, vehicle; garland, perfume or ointment; bedding, shelter or lighting accessories²¹—to a brahmin or a recluse.

²⁰ “On this uposatha day,” *tad-ah’upasathe*. Cf (Tad-ah’) Uposatha S (A 3.70/1:205-215), SD 4.18.

²¹ “Lighting accessories,” *padīpeyya*, “that which is connected with lamps.”

3.5 What do you think, Sāriputta? Might a person make such a gift as this?”

“He might, bhante.”

3.6 “Now, Sāriputta, having made this gift seeking his own profit, with a mind attached (to the reward), seeking to store them up for himself, thinking, ‘I’ll enjoy this after death,’ with the body’s breaking up, after death, he reappears in the host of the Four Great Kings.

3.7 Then, [61] having exhausted that karma, that power, that status, that sovereignty, he is a returner, coming back to this world.

(2) ON ACCOUNT OF ETHICS

4 Then there is here the case of a person who makes a gift, *not* seeking his own profit, nor with a mind attached (to the reward), nor seeking to store up for himself, nor thinking, ‘I’ll enjoy this after death.’

4.2 Instead, he makes a gift, thinking, ‘**Giving is good!**’

4.3 He makes his gift—food or drink; cloth, vehicle; garland, perfume or ointment; bedding, shelter or lighting accessories—to a brahmin or a recluse.

4.4 What do you think, Sāriputta? Might a person make such a gift as this?”

“He might, bhante.”

4.5 “Now, Sāriputta, having made this gift, thinking, ‘Giving is good!’ with the body’s breaking up, after death, he reappears in the host of the devas of the Thirty-three.

4.6 Then, having exhausted that karma, that power, that status, that sovereignty, he is a returner, coming back to this world.

(3) FOR THE SAKE OF TRADITION

5 Or, instead of thinking, ‘Giving is good!’”

5.2 he makes a gift, thinking,

‘This was given in the past, done in the past, by my father and my father’s father. **It would not be right for me to let this old family custom die!**’

5.3 He makes his gift—food or drink; cloth, vehicle; garland, perfume or ointment; bedding, shelter or lighting accessories—to a brahmin or a recluse.

5.4 What do you think, Sāriputta? Might a person make such a gift as this?”

“He might, bhante.”

5.5 “Now, Sāriputta, having made this gift, thinking,

‘This was given in the past, done in the past, by my father and my father’s father. It would not be right for me to let this old family custom die!’ with the body’s breaking up, after death, he reappears in the company of the devas of Yama.

5.6 Then, having exhausted that karma, that power, that status, that sovereignty, he is a returner, coming back to this world.

(4) OUT OF COMPASSION

6 Or, instead of thinking, ‘This was given in the past, done in the past, by my father and my father’s father. It would not be right for me to let this old family custom die!’

6.2 he makes a gift, thinking,

‘**I cook, but they (being recluses) do not cook [do not keep house].** It would not be proper for me when I do cook not to give to those who do not.’²²

²² “He makes a gift, thinking, ... etc,” *aham pacāmi, ime na pacanti, na arahāmi pacanto apacantānam dānam adātun ti dānam deti: Dāna Maha-p-phala S* (A 7.49.4(4)/4:61,14-15), SD 2.3; (**Aṭṭha**) **Dāna S = Dāna S 1** (A 8.31/4:236), SD 6.6. Here, a wordplay on *pacāmi, pacanti*, etc. Cf *apaca* (as in *anāgāre pabbajite apace brahma, cā-rayo*, “a homeless renunciant who cooks not, a celibate” (A 8.38/4:245.6*), where it means lit “not cooking,” and fig “who does not keep house.” Cf **Bhikkhā Parampara J** v285: *Na pacāmi na pācemi, na chindāmi na chedaye, tam*

6.3 He makes his gift—food or drink; cloth, vehicle; garland, perfume or ointment; bedding, shelter or lighting accessories—to a brahmin or a recluse.

6.4 What do you think, Sāriputta? Might a person make such a gift as this?”

“He might, bhante.”

6.5 “Now, Sāriputta, having made this gift thinking, ‘I cook, but they (being recluses) do not cook [do not keep house]. It would not be proper for me when I do cook not to give to those who do not,’ with the body’s breaking up, after death, he reappears in the company of the Tusita devas.

6.6 Then, having exhausted that karma, that power, that status, that sovereignty, he is a returner, coming back to this world.

(5) FOR THE SAKE OF ONE’S RELIGION

7 Or, instead of thinking, ‘I cook, but they (being recluses) do not cook [do not keep house]. It would not be proper for me when I do cook not to give to those who do not,’

7.2 he makes a gift, thinking, ‘Just **as there were the great sacrifices of the sages of the past**—Aṣṭaka, Vāmaka, Vāma,deva, Viśvā,mitra, Yamad-agni, Aṅgī,rasa, Bhāra,dvāja, Vāsiṣṭha, Kāśyapa, and Bhṛgu²³—in the same way, I will distribute my gifts.’

7.3 He makes his gift—food or drink; cloth, vehicle; garland, perfume or ointment; bedding, shelter or lighting accessories—to a brahmin or a recluse.

7.4 What do you think, Sāriputta? Might a person make such a gift as this?”

“He might, bhante.”

7.5 “Now, Sāriputta, having made this gift thinking, ‘Just as there were the great sacrifices of the sages of the past—Aṣṭaka, Vāmaka, Vāma,deva, Viśvā,mitra, Yamad-agni, Aṅgī,rasa, Bhāra,dvāja, Vāsiṣṭha, Kāśyapa, and Bhṛgu—in the same way, I will distribute my gifts,’

7.6 with the body’s breaking up, after death, he reappears in the company of the Nimmāṇa,ratī devas [who delight in creation].

7.7 Then, having exhausted that karma, that power, that status, that sovereignty, he is a returner, coming back to this world.

(6) FOR THE SAKE OF MENTAL CALM

8 Or, instead of thinking, ‘Just as there were the great sacrifices of the sages of the past—Aṣṭaka, Vāmaka, Vāma,deva, Viśvā,mitra, Yamad-agni, Aṅgī,rasa, Bhāra,dvāja, Vāsiṣṭha, Kāśyapa, and Bhṛgu—in the same way, I will distribute my gifts,’

8.2 he makes a gift, thinking, [62] ‘When this gift of mine is given, **it calms my mind**. Satisfaction and joy arise.’

8.3 He makes his gift—food or drink; cloth, vehicle; garland, perfume or ointment; bedding, shelter or lighting accessories—to a brahmin or a recluse.

8.4 What do you think, Sāriputta? Might a person make such a gift as this?”

maṃ akiñcanaṃ ṇatvā, sabba,pāpehi ārataṃ, “I cook, he cooks not: I have wealth, he nothing: I’m bound tight | to worldly things but he is free: the food is his by right” (J 496/4:372* = v285). (CPD: ‘apaca).

²³ The list of names of ancient Vedic rishis—**Aṭṭhaka, Vāmaka, Vāma,deva, Vessā,mitta, Yamat-aggi, Aṅgī,rasa, Bhāra,dvāja, Vāsetṭha, Kassapa, and Bhagu**—is stock: **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3/1:104 ×2); **Te,vijja S** (D 13/1:-238, 239, 241-243); **Caṅkī S** (M 95/2:169, 170); **Subha S** (M 99/2:200 ×2); **Doṇa Brāhmaṇa S** (A 5.192/3:224, 229); **Dāna Maha-p,phala S** (A 7.49,7/4:61); V 1:245,20; DA 1:273; VvA 265.15. Skt cognates: **Aṣṭaka** (son of Viśvā,mitra & author of Rg Veda 10.104), **Vāmaka** (cf RgV 10.99), **Vāma,deva** (author of RgV 4.1-41, 45-48), **Viśvā,mitra** (RgV 3.33; author of most of RgV 3 & 9.67.13-15, 10.137.5, 167), **Jamad-agni** (descendent of Bhṛgu, son of Bhārgava, and father of Paraśu,rāma; often named with Viśvā,mitra as adversary of Vāsiṣṭha; RgV 3.62.18, 8.101.8, 9.62.24, 62.25), **Aṅgī,rasa** (one of the 7 great rishis, author of RgV 9), **Bhāra,dvāja** (a son of Bṛhaspati), **Vāsiṣṭha** (one of the 7 great rishis, author of RgV 7, adversary of Viśvā,mitra), **Kāśyapa** (one of the 7 great rishis and priest of Paraśu,rāma and Rāma,candra; cf RgV 9.114.2), and **Bhṛgu** (one of the 7 great rishis). See *Vinaya Texts* (tr Rhys Davids & Oldenberg) 2:130 n3 & V:H 4:337 nn5-9.

“He might, bhante.”

8.5 “Now, Sāriputta, having made this gift thinking, ‘When this gift of mine is given, it calms my mind. Satisfaction and joy arise,’

8.6 with the body’s breaking up, after death, he reappears in the company of the Para,nimmita,vasavattī devas [who lord over the creations of others].

8.7 Then, having exhausted that karma, that power, that status, that sovereignty, he is a returner, coming back to this world.

(7) THE BEST WAY TO GIVE

9 Or, instead of thinking, ‘When this gift of mine is given, it calms my mind. Satisfaction and joy arise,’ he makes a gift, thinking, ‘**This is an adornment for the mind, the benefit of a support for the mind.**’²⁴

9.2 He makes his gift—food or drink; cloth, vehicle; garland, perfume or ointment; bedding, shelter or lighting accessories—to a brahmin or a recluse.

9.3 What do you think, Sāriputta? Might a person make such a gift as this?”

“He might, bhante.”

9.4 “In this case, Sāriputta, this person, having made his gifts *not seeking his own profit, nor with a mind attached (to the reward), nor seeking to store them up for himself,*

nor thinking, ‘I’ll enjoy this after death,’

nor thinking, ‘Giving is good,’

nor thinking, ‘This was given in the past, done in the past, by my father and father’s father. It would not be right for me to let this old family custom die,’

nor thinking, ‘I cook, but they (being recluses) do not cook [do not keep house]. It would not be proper for me when I do cook not to give to those who do not,’

nor thinking, ‘Just as there were the great sacrifices of the sages of the past—Aṣṭaka, Vāmaka, Vāmadeva, Viśvāmitra, Yamadagni, Aṅgī, rasa, Bhāra, dvāja, Vāsiṣṭha, Kāśyapa, and Bhṛgu—in the same way, I will distribute my gifts,’

nor thinking, ‘When this gift of mine is given, it makes the mind serene. Satisfaction and joy arise,’

10 —but, he makes a gift, thinking, ‘This is an adornment for the mind, the benefit of a support for the mind’—with the body’s breaking up, after death, he reappears in the company of Brahma’s Retinue.

10.2 Then, [63] having exhausted that karma, that power, that status, that sovereignty, **he is a non-returner.**²⁵ He does not come back to this world.²⁶

11 This, Sāriputta, is the cause, this is the reason, why such a gift that is given in a certain manner does *not* bear great fruit nor great benefit for a certain person.

11.2 And yet, Sāriputta, this is the cause, this is the reason, why such a gift that is given in a certain manner *does* bear great fruit, great benefit for a certain person.”

— evaṃ —

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²⁴ *Cittālankāraṃ citta,parikkhār’attham*. The meaning is that recollecting on charity (*cāgānussati*) is helpful to our meditation: see **Sambādh’okāsa S** (A 6.26/3:314 f), SD 15.6. See (1.1.2).

²⁵ On **non-returner** (*anāgāmi*), see (1.1.3) n.

²⁶ For an explanation, see (1.1.3)