

# Giving Is Good: Generosity from Everyday, Buddhist, and Evolutionary Perspectives

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## Introduction

Giving - known as “dana” in Pali, the language in which the teachings of the Buddha were first written down - is the first of the ten “paramis” or perfections of a Bodhisattva, a highly Awakened person who postpones his or her ultimate enlightenment to bring all beings to liberation.

The other nine paramis (with links to the fantastic Access to Insight website, for more information) are virtue ([sila](#)), renunciation ([nekkhamma](#)), discernment ([pañña](#)), energy/persistence ([viriya](#)), patience/forbearance ([khanti](#)), truthfulness ([sacca](#)), determination ([adhitthana](#)), good will ([metta](#)), and equanimity ([upekkha](#)).

In their most complete expression, these are combined with compassion and skillfulness, and they are untainted by any kind of craving, self-centeredness, or positional views.

Of course, these qualities are present to some degree in us all. Even without being - or even aspiring to be - a Bodhisattva, it is a wonderful thing both to express these qualities as they already exist, and to cultivate them further in our mind and heart, in our thoughts and words and deeds.

You can read this article within a Buddhist framework or simply for its reflections on the deeply human, widespread, and everyday matter of giving.

## The Realm of Giving and Generosity

The specific meaning of “dana” is giving, which is related to the quality of “caga” (in Pali), or generosity. The one involves doing, while the other involves being.

While this distinction is useful in its comprehensiveness, in actuality generosity and giving, being and doing, are intertwined and inextricable. Being is itself a kind of doing, as you cannot help but radiate certain qualities out into the world. And every doing - at each endlessly disappearing and regenerating instant of NOW - is a microscopic slice of being.

Giving and generosity can be expressive or restrained. For example, we might give to our child or someone else we love fondness and affection (expressive), and we might also give the holding of our temper or our hand in anger (restrained).

The essence of generosity is that we give outside the framework of a tight, reciprocal exchange. Yes, we may give the coffee guy \$2.50 for a latte, and we may trade back rubs with our partner, but neither is particularly generous in its own right. On the other hand, tossing the change from \$3 into the tip jar is indeed generous, as would be doing an extra great job on that back rub when it's your turn.

While "dana" often means something fairly narrow and specific – alms for a monk or nun, or donation to a teacher – in the broadest sense, we are generous and giving whenever we *be* or *do* in the territory these words point to:

- Serve
- Contribute
- Donate, grant, award, bestow, make a gift of, bequeath
- Praise, acknowledge
- Love, care, like
- Sacrifice, relinquish
- Devote, dedicate
- Be altruistic
- Forgive
- Forbear, restrain yourself for the sake of others

Let's consider some concrete examples; you give whenever you:

- Pat an arm in friendship, sympathy, or encouragement
- Put money – or a banana or chocolate – in the donation bowl
- Relax your position and open up to the viewpoint of another person
- Offer anything out upon the internet or in a newsletter, etc.
- Try to help someone
- Wave someone ahead of you in line
- Try to cheer someone up
- Make a gift
- Write a thank you note
- Love
- Listen patiently when you'd rather be doing something else
- Cultivate qualities in yourself that will benefit others
- Change a diaper – at either end of the lifespan
- Give some money to a homeless person

Express gratitude or appreciation  
Vote  
Volunteer your time  
Tell somebody about something great

In particular, you are generous whenever you “give no man or woman cause to fear you” – in other words, when you live in a virtuous, moral way. In Buddhism, the Five Precepts are the common, practical guide to ethical conduct: do not kill, steal, lie, intoxicate yourself, or cause harm through your sexuality. Quoting Bhikkhu Bodhi, referring to the Anguttara Nikaya: “By [the meticulous observance of the Five Precepts], one gives fearlessness, love and benevolence to all beings. If one human being can give security and freedom from fear to others by his behavior, that is the highest form of *dana* one can give, not only to mankind, but to all living beings.

Last, perhaps as an antidote to the too-common practice of treating those closest to us the worst of all, the Buddha stressed the importance of honoring and caring for one's parents, one's spouse and children, and one's employees and dependents. For example, in one sutta (discourse), offering hospitality to one's relatives is one of the great auspicious deeds a layperson can perform.

### **Giving Is the Most Natural Thing in the World**

When you consider all this, it's clear that we spend a lot of time giving to others. It's the most natural thing in the world. Most giving is small, in passing, hardly noticed, the breath and wallpaper of life. It's not hard to overlook. And with all the attention paid in the media to images and words of destruction and horrible mistreatment, it is easy to conclude that the true home of humanity is on the dark side of the force.

Yet, while it is certainly true that we are animals atop the food chain and capable of great aggressiveness, it is even more true that we are genetically programmed to be cooperative and generous. The defining feature of human society is cooperation; notwithstanding the daily weird killing on the 6 o'clock news, harmful aggression is the exception, not the rule: that's why it's news.

Consider these facts about human beings – in other words, you and me:

- We evolved from a rarity in the animal kingdom: species composed of groups of individuals that routinely shared food with each other, even when they weren't related.

- Our ancestors were unusual among animals in another way as well, in that they cooperated to gather and hunt.
- A third distinctive feature of humans is that males often stay involved after children are conceived to protect and share food with them and their mother. While we might wish this were even more common, it's important to remember that in almost all animal species, fathers take zero interest in their young.
- Genetically, our nearest relative – the chimpanzee – has DNA that is about 98% similar to our own. That crucial 2% is largely directed at brain development, and the portions of the brain are especially affected have to do with language, expressing emotion and reading it in others, and planning – all at the heart of cooperative activity.
- Under stress, researchers have found that the fight-or-flight activations of the sympathetic nervous system are commonly channeled down “tend and befriend” channels for women. I haven't seen a study on this yet, but probably there are comparable “fix and huddle” channels for men (sorry about the lack of rhyming for guys . . . ).
- Exotic game theory analyses have shown what's evident in hunter-gatherer cultures, at the UN, and on the playground of the local elementary school: that there is an evolutionary advantage in being a trustworthy cooperative partner, one who gives at least as much as he or she receives. In particular, studies have shown that in an intensely harsh natural environment – such as was present on the plains of Africa – groups that have members who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the group will over time come to dominate other groups that lack such altruistic and generous members.
- To quote Robert Sapolsky (Foreign Affairs, January/February, 2006):  
“Across the roughly 150 or so primate species, the larger the average social group, the larger the cortex [the portion responsible for higher order reasoning, communication, and social judgment] relative to the rest of the brain.”

In sum, over three or four million years, the groups of hominid ancestors that developed giving, generosity, and cooperation to a fine art were the ones that survived to pass down the genes that are our endowment today. As a result, we are “born and bred” to want to give, to contribute, to make a difference.

One way to see the centrality of that impulse in the human experience is to observe what happens when it's thwarted:

- On the job, even well-paid workers who feel they lack ways to contribute and add value have much less job satisfaction.

- In mid-life, when the developmental task of what Erik Erikson called “generativity” (versus “stagnation”) is not fulfilled, depression and a sense of aimlessness are the result.
- In adolescence today, getting shunted off to quasi-reservations of high schools and malls – away from the world of adult work that was the natural province of teenagers throughout most human history – breeds a sense of alienation and irrelevance that in turn fosters poor motivation and a predilection for drugs and other risky behaviors. One reason so many adolescents are angry is that there’s no way for them to be *useful*.

### **Generosity and Giving in Buddhist Practice**

Generosity and giving were usually the first things the Buddha discussed with people encountering his teachings for the first time. It’s that fundamental.

Giving is the foundation of the gradual training of the mind and heart that led to less suffering and, ultimately, to enlightenment. To paraphrase Bhikkhu Bodhi on the Access to Insight website: “The goal of that path is the destruction of greed, hate and delusion, and the cultivation of generosity directly debilitates greed and hate, while facilitating that pliancy of mind that allows for the eradication of delusion.”

As a result, giving or generosity is one of the three bases of meritorious deeds, the first of the four means of benefiting others, and (as noted) the first of the ten "perfections." Generosity is also included among the essential attributes of the good or superior person, along with faith, morality, learning and wisdom.

In keeping with the central role of *motivation* in determining the effects – the karmas – of an action (of thought, word, or deed), the discourses of the Buddha emphasize the importance of the giver’s intentions before, during and after the act of generosity.

Again, to quote Bhikkhu Bodhi: “Generosity associated with wisdom before, during and after the act is the highest type of giving. Three examples of wise giving are: giving with the clear understanding that according to the kammic law of cause and effect, the generous act will bring beneficial results in the future; giving while aware that the gift, the recipient and the giver are all impermanent; and giving with the aim of enhancing one's efforts to become enlightened.”

### **The Benefits of Giving**

Consider these benefits of giving:

- It feels good in its own right.
- It's enlightened self-interest. As noted above, fair-play and cooperation build up a reputation that is advantageous over time; become known as a miserly stiff-arm artist, and you may as well leave town.
- As noted just above, in Buddhism, giving embodies the practice of non-attachment and is an antidote to greed, one of the "three poisons" (in addition to hatred and delusion). The Buddha said that if people knew the value of giving, they would not take a single meal without sharing their food with others.
- Giving also opens the clenched fist of self-contraction into the open hand of generosity. We release self – a prime engine of suffering – when we give from the heart.
- Generosity, especially with our possessions, carries the lesson that at the boundary markers of life – birth and death – we come in with nothing and we can take nothing with us.

As Karl Menninger put it: "Love cures – both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it."

## **Challenges to Generosity**

### **Inhospitable Conditions**

Sometimes it's actually not safe to be giving and generous. For example, it could be risky to pick up an unsavory hitchhiker, or loan a friend a lot of money who never pays it back, or be open with how you really feel with someone who you know will use it against you. In some settings – such as many high schools – being open-handed and generous exposes you to ridicule and sneering doubts about your true motives.

Or it could simply be clear that giving will most likely be a waste of time. Maybe there's just no point in offering yet again your truly wise counsel to an aging parent who never listens. Or in giving your neat idea for a fundraising project to a non-profit whose board is tied up in knots. Or loaning your table saw to a neighbor who broke the last one you had.

In cases like these, a prudent person conserves his or her resources for more opportune moments. Cast your seeds where they are likely to take root and flourish; don't try to plant roses in a parking lot.

### **Fear**

But more often than not, the real challenges to giving lie inside our own heart. Often we hoard our energy and time and money for some kind of last battle that never comes, afraid that if we give we'll give out, running on empty at the end of our days. Or we are afraid that if we give our all, then we'll have no face-saving excuse for it not being successful. Or we are nervous about wearing our heart on our sleeve and revealing what we really care about.

These fears should be considered guilty until proven innocent. Test them in small, safe experiments to see if they are actually true. When (typically) you discover they're bogus, push them aside. Even if they're true in some small way, evaluate that cost in light of the (usually) greater benefits of being generous.

### **American Culture**

In many parts of the world, people believe that the best way to achieve security for themselves is through alliances with others that require a certain openness to giving and generosity. But in America, there is a longstanding belief that security is attained through amassing personal resources: to put it very bluntly, through owning the biggest possible pile of gold and guns. While Americans certainly give generously to charities and other good causes, there is undoubtedly a cynical strain of "look out for #1 and don't be a chump" woven throughout our culture.

The way to deal with the background noise of culture – insidious because it slips so quietly through our filters – is by being mindful of it and bringing it into conscious awareness. Notice how rare it is to see an act of sincere – not ironic or tactical – generosity in TV shows or in commercials. Try to flag counter-examples, both in media and in your personal life, where giving turns out well. Reflect on what you've seen yourself or heard about, regarding the everyday generosity of people in other countries; for example, a well-traveled friend once casually observed: "I've seen most of the world, and it's interesting that the happiest people are usually the poorest ones." And, if you like, consciously take a stand in your own mind for the cultural values you want to be your own.

### **Ego. I and Mine.**

As soon as we separate "me" from "you," or "us" from "them," we instantly make a distinction between the good things on our own side of the line, and feel

there is inherently a loss if any of those good things were to slide over to the other side - where "they" are.

Unfortunately, this separation, this dualism, is hard-wired in our brain since a fundamental biological requirement for the survival of any organism is to distinguish between what's inside its skin from what's outside.

But try to observe how me-ness constrains and distorts your natural impulses to give.

That observing will tend to take you directly to opening your heart and hand.

### **Practices of Giving**

Open your heart. Just that.

Take in the pleasures of generosity so that "gladness of heart" motivates you, as the Buddha suggested, toward more generosity in the future.

Identify forms of giving you naturally, effortlessly enjoy, and do more of those.

Decouple working from its results, so the effort, the activity itself is a practice of generous giving.

Tithing

Stretch yourself. Give a little more than you planned and see how that feels.

As a focused experiment, push through a specific fear about giving and see what happens.

Deliberately pick a habit of withholding or stinginess, and for a day or week or year, do the opposite.

Address your innermost thoughts. Are they generous? Generous in forgiveness? In praise of others? In understanding, compassion? Or are they judgmental, snippy, denigrating, withholding, and fearful?

### **Giving and Emptiness**

Giving is intimately joined with emptiness, the characteristic of existence that everything in it is interdependent and lacking in any inherent self-nature



fundamentally distinct from everything else. This of course includes the psychological self: my, myself, and mine.