

## All-Dana: The Missing Pieces

By David Foecke

Some of Irene Kahn's friends had a problem. They wanted to go on retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California, but were unable to afford the registration fees. They also found it emotionally difficult to apply for the scholarships for low-income people that are available at Spirit Rock. "Some low-income people are shy about asking for scholarships," explains Irene. "They are hesitant because they think they should be able to pay for it themselves. In this country, people on welfare are looked down upon. It is not cool to need to ask for money."

Many of the founders of Spirit Rock and similar centers such as the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts, received training at monasteries in Asia where they were charged nothing. Yet when those teachers returned to the West to teach and open meditation centers, they faced a market economy in non-Buddhist societies. And so they set up a system in which a fee was charged to cover the lodging and food expenses associated with retreats.

Is it only at monasteries or in Buddhist countries that teachings can be offered without charging a fee?

My friend Peter Doobinin also had a problem. Having recently turned to teaching vipassana full-time, Peter had built a sangha of several hundred students. His teachings were offered without fees, with students instead given the opportunity to make financial gifts ("*dana*") at the end of his classes and retreats. In not setting a price on the teachings, he was following an ancient tradition, the same one recommended by the Buddha to his disciples as the way to share the Dharma. The problem was, Peter was not making ends meet. He had exhausted his savings

and would either have to cut back on his teaching and find a part-time job or figure out some other way to generate financial support.

Peter is far from alone. Few Western vipassana teachers, even many of the more senior ones, are able to get by solely on the financial gifts they receive using this “dana system.” This is in contrast to the situation in Asia, where many of the Western teachers received their training. There, most of the full-time teachers live as monks and nuns supported completely by the Buddhist community.

Must one become a monk or a nun to support oneself teaching Dharma full-time?

The word *dana* as commonly used in the Western vipassana community most often refers to financial gifts, or money given voluntarily to support a teacher or a center. This is in contrast to registration fees, which is money paid in exchange for goods or services (room and board).

Traditionally, though, the word *dana* has many meanings. It is perhaps most frequently translated as “generosity.” Senior monastic Ajahn Pasanno defines it as “the quality of generosity that gives physically and from the heart.”

Another Theravadan teacher, Santikaro, tells us, “Dana is the first of the perfections (*paramis*, or virtues necessary for awakening) in both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. It is also an ancient economic principle that guides societies who value relationships over things and heart values over commercial ones.” The economics of Dharma transmission in much of Southeast Asia is rooted in the rural villages, where the majority of temples are located. “Dana is usually given at the temple that is part of your village,” says Santikaro. It is also given in the form of alms to the monks in those same villages.

“When I did intensive training in Asia, the entire Buddhist system was part of the social

fabric,” says Jacqueline Mandell, one of the first North American teachers to be trained in Asia.

“Generosity itself was a force. At one point, I stayed at the house of a layperson who would wake up at 3:00 A.M. every day to cook rice to offer to the monastics on almsround. The one who received this dana was understood to be pursuing his or her practice.”

Larry Yang, who recently ordained for six months in Thailand, says, “As a monk in Thailand, my experience was that people not only participate in an act of generosity by offering food. When they donate a meal to the monastery, often the entire family will sit down and watch the monks eat. It’s not about voyeurism or curiosity. It’s viewed as appreciation of the entire practice of giving.”

So when Mandell and other early Western teachers returned from Asia in the 1970s to teach Dharma, how could they stay true to the Buddha’s teachings on generosity in places where Buddhism was not part of the social fabric? To hold retreats, they had to reserve space at conference centers that charged market rates. When they purchased land to establish IMS, they had to take out a mortgage.

Faced with these circumstances, they created a hybrid system. “We made it up,” says Spirit Rock founder Jack Kornfield. Retreat centers would charge registration fees to cover the market costs of running retreats, while the teachers would offer the teachings freely out of generosity. “It became evident that a charge for room and board would be needed,” says Mandell. “It would have been difficult to duplicate what we had experienced in Asia until more education could be done in this country about the importance and benefits of generosity.”

But this new hybrid system has limitations of its own. Even with scholarship programs, the registration fees at the large retreat centers seem to represent a barrier to the wide availability of

the Dharma. And recalling my friend Peter's situation, the hybrid system does not seem to be serving Western lay teachers, who often lack adequate income, health insurance, pensions or other measures of financial security.

In addition, the hybrid system seems to have created and served a predominantly middle- and upper-class sangha, and one that is overwhelmingly Caucasian. In the summer of 2006, Larry Yang and Gina Sharpe helped transform the annual People of Color (POC) retreat at Spirit Rock into an "all-dana" retreat (without registration fees) by raising funds dedicated to underwrite the costs. "Since 1999, this annual retreat had never filled up and averaged only fifty percent of capacity," says Yang. "The 2006 POC retreat filled up in five days with a waiting list of seventy-seven people. In 2007 it filled up in twenty-four hours, a Spirit Rock record."

"If you were to ask most of the POC retreat participants," Yang adds, "the all-dana nature of the retreat would be a major factor in their attendance [due to] basic economic reasons. Equally important, however, was the message to Communities of Color that there was attention and care being given to their specific interests and needs by a primarily European American institution, one that many people of color had previously seen as unwelcoming, or at best, indifferent. On a collective spiritual and psychic level, the all-dana POC retreat is a very important experience for both the European American communities and Communities of Color."

And so there are growing calls at some centers to "fix" this hybrid system. Some advocate "realism" and capitulation to the economic status quo, where everything has a price. People only value what they pay for, goes this line of reasoning. This argument calls for eliminating the use of dana to support the teachers, instead charging high enough registration fees to support both the centers and the teachers.

But wouldn't a deeper exploration of the all-dana model be truer to our Buddhist heritage? "Dharma practice unfolds healthily when it is in the context of gratitude," says teacher Gil Fronsdal of the all-dana Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, California. And as Spirit Rock teacher and board member Mary Orr reminds us, "This is not a new model in the West. Other faith traditions have operated entirely out of the generous donations of their congregations, used to support their pastors and their facilities."

Successfully replicating this model more widely in the vipassana community will probably require the addition of several crucial elements from the Asian monastery system. When my friend Peter was at his crossroads, he took a very unusual and courageous step: he told his sangha he was not able to make ends meet with the gifts he was receiving. "The response from my students was one of complete surprise," says Peter. Because there was no mechanism for feedback, they had no idea they were not giving enough to meet their teacher's needs.

As Santikaro remarks, "In the traditional model, you can see that the monastery buildings need repairs, or that the monks are not getting enough food." At the scale of the village, feedback is built into the economics of sharing the Dharma. When nuns or monks go out on daily almsround, they publicly display their need via their empty alms bowls, and it is clear when the need is met: when the bowl is full.

Peter has now added this missing element to his dana system. He has a monthly meeting with his sangha to report his finances to the community. "The effects have been remarkable," says Peter. "My students have deepened their understanding and their practice of generosity. They have to ask themselves, 'How important is this practice for me?' As a result, their meditation practice is stronger. It all hinged on my completing the feedback loop by disclosing my finances." As a result, Peter is close to achieving what most teachers are unable to do: make a

living teaching the Dharma full-time.

Peter's practice of financial disclosure raises another missing element from the Asian monastic model. Traditionally, food, clothing, shelter and medicines are considered "requisites." What exactly are the requisites these days? And does this question apply only to monastics? Peter doesn't think so. Because he is discussing his needs with his sangha, Peter now has to ask himself, "How much is enough?" Who better to set an example in asking such questions than teachers of the Dharma?

"Traditionally, only those living a simple life were considered worthy of dana. Those who accumulated and consumed more than the basics were considered less worthy, if at all," says Santikaro. "Nowadays, though, where to draw the line is a difficult matter to discern. Are Blackberries, cell phones and notebook computers necessary basics for monastics?"

"All the Western [lay] teachers grapple with this," says Carol Wilson, a senior teacher at IMS. "You have to make life choices to support yourself. It is really personal. It seems to me that to have an upper-middle-class lifestyle in this country is not possible on the dana system alone."

On an institutional level, all-dana centers can serve as models for which the spread of the Dharma depends on the success of transmitting the Buddha's teachings on generosity. Larry Yang has been part of establishing the all-dana East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC) in downtown Oakland, California. "In the West, we mostly see the cultivation of dana as an individual practice," Yang says. "What does it look like as a collective social practice? We are all dependent on each other. This is what we are exploring by adopting an all-dana model at EBMC. We are trying to create a center that is closer to what I experienced in the monasteries in Thailand."

Wilson says, "It would be wonderful if there were a way to make that work on an ongoing

basis. We recently experimented with a ‘pay-as-you-can’ period at IMS. It wasn’t successful in terms of paying the bills, but it was successful in terms of the new people who were able to attend—and how grateful everyone was. I would love it if IMS were able to move in that direction.”

So what is preventing our moving in that direction? Do we believe that our communities cannot learn and practice this level of generosity? Santikaro, who is helping to establish Liberation Park, a new all-dana center in Wisconsin, says, “How we deal with money is going to have a huge effect on the kind of Buddhism we have in this country. If we mess this up, our Buddhism is going to be messed up. If we do this skillfully, we’ll have a healthy Buddhism.”

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