



THE VALUE AND PRACTICE OF DANA IN BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

'Dāna' or generosity is considered a mandatory practice within the Buddhist followers. Giving Dana is a selfless path to enlightenment and to attain Buddhahood. Literally, Dāna is giving away of money, grains, land, medicines, precious jewels, dress, shoes, umbrellas, etc. to the needy ones in the community. Pāramitā is literally understood as to go beyond the material life. Hence, Dāna is related to non-attachment or freedom from the worldly attachment. Primarily Dana is divided into two types: worldly Dāna and Punya Vishaya Dāna, of which the latter only brings merit to its practitioners. It has been found, since ancient time that Dāna was also in practice in Nepalese Buddhism in its local form and colour. As in Buddhism, Dana is a common practice found in other religions like Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, etc.

KEYWORDS: Dāna, generosity, practice, enlightenment, Pāramitā, freedom, attachment, Nepalese, religions, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, etc.

INTRODUCTION :

The term 'Dāna' literally means generosity and is taken as a form of sacrifice within the Buddhist philosophy. It is considered mandatory to follow the proper path and perform prescribed practices in order to pursue the path to enlightenment. The Mahāyāna practitioners believe in the six Pāramitās – Dāna, Śīla, Kṣānti, Vīrya, Dhyāna and Prajñā Pāramitā. Without perfecting all of them, one cannot attain Buddhahood.

Every Buddhist practitioner is expected to perfect Dāna Pāramitā along with other Pāramitās. Literally, Dāna is giving away of money, grains, land, medicines, precious jewels, dress, shoes, umbrellas, etc. to needy and elderly ones in the related monastery or in the community. Pāramitā is literally understood as to go beyond the material life. Hence, Dāna is related to non attachment or freedom from the worldly attachment. Each practitioner must embrace the practice of generosity.¹

In Hinduism, the acts like generosity, alms giving, public services, etc. are attached to as means of merit making, and nothing is to be expected in lieu of such actions. In Hinduism such an act of generosity is mainly related to construction of public shelters, schools, and other works of public welfare. Rīgveda elaborates about Dāna. Other texts such as Bhagvat Gīta, Mahabharata, different Purānastoo mention about different forms of Dāna such as KanyaDāna, VidyaDāna, Dharma Dāna, BhumiDāna, Anna Dāna and so on. The act of Dāna is believed to make this world and the world beyond prosper. These kinds of practices had been gradually imbedded in the society as part of religious rite. It has been a common practice in South Asia that travelers are provided with accommodation and fooding in public shelter house. Hence, this is an old social practice.²

¹ Anoja, *Mangala Upadesh*, Kathmandu: Sulakshanakirti Vihara, 2069, p. 75.

² Nirmala Kumari Koutha, *History of the Hindu Religious Endowments in Andhra Pradesh*, New Delhi, Northern Book Center, 1998, p. 128.

Jainism also has the provision of Dāna of four kinds. It is one of the ten good deeds. To donate food, medicine, knowledge, etc.³ Shikhs believe that generosity is one of the three good deeds. Hence, to give a portion of one's earnings to needy people is a supreme spiritual act.⁴

Generosity is one of the ten Pāramitās in Buddhism. One has to get perfection in six Pāramitās, and one among them is Dāna. In the lack of perfection in all the Pāramitās one cannot become a Buddha. Dāna represents to the development of non attachment. Hence, it has been considered an excellent medium to remain in detachment, one of the three poisons of Buddhism.⁵

In all religions, Dāna is considered an act of making merit. If someone practices Dāna with the pure mind and heart, it is considered closer to the attainment of Nirvana. In Hinduism, Rig Veda has discourse on how merit accumulated through Dana or generosity remains unparishable. In the Hindu tradition, Akshaya Tritiya is the best day for generosity.⁶ In Buddhism, it is believed that Dāna offered with independent mind, without any motives, keeps one happy in the world beyond. It also purifies the mind of the donor and makes them happy.⁷

According to Buddhism, Dāna intended for welfare of many is believed to facilitate the attainment of Bodhijnana. Dāna helps to renounce attachment and develop the feeling of Tyaga or sacrifice. It helps the practitioner to concentrate on their meditations.

Buddhism lays strong emphasis on the practice of Dāna. There are Dāna practices at the religious and cultural level. Pancadāna, Navadāna and the Samyak Dāna are observed in different auspicious times. The practice of Pāramitās keeps greater importance in Buddhism. One can become a Buddha only after perfecting the Pāramitās. So, they are of prime importance in Buddhism. Theravada emphasizes on ten Pāramitās and six Pramitas. The first position is given to Dāna in both Theravada and Mahāyāna traditions. Dāna is the first among the Pāramitās.⁸ Theravadins take it as the ten meritorious acts. The later is the one which is good and supposed to be done by all. It creates good result as it has always been regarded as the good Karma. They are divided into three groups in which the first group is laid upon prime importance.⁹ Similarly, Dasabhumika Sutra also discusses about Dāna Pāramitā. Theravadins believe in collective Dāna to be put into the Dānapatra rather than giving to individuals. According to them, it accumulates merit. Thus, they think that Dāna provided to the Saṅgha is meritorious. Since the monks who abandoned the worldly life live there in the community for the pursuit of attaining Nirvana.

An inscription at Dhandyo Chaitya refers to the donation made by an Upasika. She has donated land to the Saṅgha. It also mentions about the Saṅgha Bhojan.¹⁰ During the medieval times in Nepal, Dāna has become a popular practice. During the time of Shiva Deva donating grains to feed the Saṅgha became very popular. It is also related to Pañca Dāna. He built a Vihāra and performed such Dāna.¹¹ During that time Dipaṅkara Buddha also became a popular cult. Historical sources mention that images of Dimpamkara

³ Thomas Watts, *Encyclopedia of World Poverty*, London, SAGE Publications, 2006, p. 143

⁴ Marianne Fleming, *Thinking about God and Morality*, UK, Heinemann Educational publisher, 2003, p. 45

⁵ Anoja, *op cit*, p. 75.

⁶ Cheto Nath Sharma Acharya, *Hamra Dharmik Chad Parva*, Kathmandu: Sanatan Dharma Seva Samiti, 2045, pp. 27-30.

⁷ Peter Harvey (ed.), *Buddhism*. UK: Continuum, 2001, p. 186.

⁸ Ranjana Bajracharya, *Bauddha Parva*, Kathmandu: Shakya Ja., 2056, p.3.

⁹ Bhikshu Gyanapurnika Mahasthavira, *Dasa Punya Pushpa*, Kathmandu: Santi Sukhavasa Prakashan, 2056, p. 3

¹⁰ Dhana Vajra Bajracharya, *Licchavikalkā Abhilekh* Kathmandu: Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, 2030, p. 9.

¹¹ Dhanavajra Vajracharya, Kamal P. Malla, *The Gopalrajvamsavali*, Kathmandu, Nepal Research Center Publication, 1985, p.78

Buddha were made in large number. King Jayasthi Malla of Kantipur and Atrit Singh, a Mahapatra from Pāṭan, donated Dimkara images in Itumbahal¹² and Dharmakirti Vihar.¹³ Then after they performed PañcaDāna.

In this way, Nepal has been practicing Dāna since the remote past. Various forms of Dāna such as Pañca Dāna, Nava Dāna, and Smyak Maha Dāna are still in practice today.

As mentioned in several Buddhist texts, Pāramitā is an act that takes practitioners to enlightenment. In Mahāyāna, Dana is a means to attain Buddhahood. Therefore, it has been categorized in Buddhism as a good Karma which is always believed to bring good Karma.

In Buddhism, Dana is primarily divided into two types: worldly Dāna that which does not accumulate merit, and Punya Vishaya Dāna one which brings merit. The first type of Dāna is practised due to the fear and compulsion in order to save face in the society or whatever. The worldly Dāna does not bring merit, and that it also does not come from the inner mind of the donor. But in contrast, the Punya Dana accumulates merit as it originates from the inner mind and is selfless in nature. It is believed that this Dāna is so spiritual, purified and sacred that the Donor never feels lack of material to donate to others. This type of Dāna is also in practice in Nepalese Buddhism. It also develops love and affection towards entire sentient beings.

Physical properties are necessary component in social life. Out of that property a large part is spent for survival of the family, and the remaining portion is invested in social welfare work to support those in trouble. Thus, such activities could help improve the society.

Dāna is also classified into two in another perspective - PujāDāna and Anukampa Dāna. The former refers to distributing clothes, foods, medicines, etc. to show respect to the Buddha and others who uphold Silas such as monks and nuns. The Anukampa Dāna refers to poor, beggars, animals, and so on.

At the same time, three more types of Dāna are also mentioned - Supreme Dāna, medium Dāna and lesser Dāna. Supreme Dāna refers to the offering of things which is better than the donor uses. Medium Dāna is donating similar which the donor uses, and finally, lesser Dāna is things or foods which the donor does not consume.

There are further classifications of Dāna too:

- Amisha Dāna - to donate foods, medicines, clothes, land and other physical goods.
- Abhaya Dāna - to rescue one from fear and death due to compassion, and
- Dharma Dāna - to share knowledge or religious teachings that lead one to free from attachment, delusion, greed and so on.¹⁴

Bodhicharyava Tārā says that Dharma Dāna is the best of all the Dānas.¹⁵ Dhammapada further says -
 Sabba Dānaṃ Dhamma Dānaṃ jināti
 Sabbarasaṃ Dhammaraso jināti
 Sabbaratiṃ Dhammaratiṃ jināti.¹⁶

According to Buddhism, the three persons, recipient, donor and donated must be qualified for the purpose otherwise it will not accumulate merit. There must be right feeling in between. If one out of three is not qualified then the Dāna itself does not bring merit rather it turns into sinful act. So, it is not wise to donate inappropriate things. The Dāna recipient must be a qualified one to receive it. Here in Buddhism, Bhikṣus are considered the qualified recipients of Dāna during PañcaDāna, Nava Dāna and Samyak Dāna. Bhikṣus are believed to be the faithful followers of the Buddha. While offering Dāna, one has to be happy and trust in Karma and its consequences.

¹² D. R. Regmi, *Medieval Nepal, Part 1*, Calcutta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1965, p.393.

¹³ Hem Raj Shakya, *Sri Hiranyavarna Mahaviharasthit Pindapatra Abhilekh*, Lalitpur: Mukta Bahadur Dhakhwa, NS 1100, p. 14.

¹⁴ Anoja Guruma, *op cit*, pp. 77-78.

¹⁵ Divya Vajra Vajracharya, *Bodhicharyavatara*, Lalitpur: Bodhi Prakasan Kendra, BS 2043, p. 132.

¹⁶ Dhammapada Verse 354. Sakkapanha Vatthu.

Among the Newārs in the Kathmandu valley, there are different types of Dāna in practice. Pāṭan is a prominent Buddhist city where various Buddhist rituals and traditions have been preserved intact.

Pañcadāna and Samyak Mahadāna are related to Dipaṃkara, the Buddha of the past. Both these celebrations are prominent rituals in Patran. Dāna is practised for the welfare of entire sentient beings. During this festival, the Buddhists lay importance to Dipaṃkara Buddha as representative of the Primordial Buddha and the Buddhas of the past. The Upāsakas and Upāsikas or the followers offer grains, cereals, fruits, and rice porridge to the Dipaṃkara Buddha. This Dāna is also offered to the Ārya Saṃgha, Vajracharyas and ShakyaBhikṣus. This practice is also believed to bring about welfare of the people, good health, peace and happiness, and accumulate merit. The day of the Dāna is organized on special days as fixed according to the local calendar. These celebrations are annual, optional or specially organized. During Pañca Dāna, particularly paddy, rice, cereals, salt, sweets, money are included in Dāna. These five things are donated. Therefore, it is called Pañca Dāna. The word itself comes from 'PunyaJa' [sacred rice].¹⁷ It is donated in the name of Kakruchanda and Dipaṃkara Buddha.¹⁸

Dāna is common to Buddhism and Hinduism. Both practitioners believe that merit accumulated through these ways is the greatest in life. It always creates feelings of sacrifice mitigating selfishness and the self centered ego. It also helps in the concentration of one's mind. Dāna is significant in protection and continuity of the Saṃgha, and is also instrumental in the missionary activities of Buddhism.

CONCLUSION

'Dāna' is a form of practice prevalent among Buddhist followers. Dana is giving away foods, clothes, medicines, etc. to the needy ones with a belief that it helps attain enlightenment or Buddhahood. Pāramitāis to go beyond the material life and free oneself from the worldly attachment. Of the two prominent types of Dana: worldly Dāna and Punya Vishaya Dāna, only the latter one is believed to bring merit to its practitioners. Since antiquity, Dāna was also in practice in Nepalese Buddhism, especially among the Newar community, in its local form and colour. As in Buddhism, Dana is a common practice found in other religions like Hinduism, Jainism, Shikhism, etc. All practitioners believe that merit accumulated through Dana is the greatest in life which helps create feelings of brotherhood among the people in the world. Dāna is significant in the protection and giving continuity of the Saṃgha, and is also instrumental in the missionary activities of Buddhism.



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¹⁷ Ranjana Bajracharya, "Panchadan: Offerings for the Dharma", *Voice of Culture* Vol II, Kathmandu, 1998, p. 7.

¹⁸ Asha Kazi Bajracharya, *Pañcadāna Vidhi*, Lalitpur: Siddhi Raj Shakya and Family, NS 1102, p. 1.