

Shoyo Sensei's Dharma Message:

Buddha-Dharma: Introduction – 9

Question (1):

Dana is one of the most important practices for us Buddhists. But, I don't know much and I'd like to learn more. What is *Dana* first of all?

Answer (1):

Dana means to share and give whatever we think we possess. *Dana* can be done by material, time, space, knowledge, energy, information, fearlessness, Dharma, skill, smile, kind words, and much more. All what we think that we possess can be the object of *Dana*.

Dana has two aspects: (1) Promotion of positive energy and (2) Reduction and final elimination of attachment, a cause of *Dukkha* (stress, fear, worry, anxiety and suffering), by learning to let go. In this session, I will focus on the first power of *Dana*, promotion of positive energy.

Dana gives us positive energy. Whatever we give, the action of "giving" always produces positive energy. For example, suppose a salesperson spends extra time to find a pretty scarf for her customer. At the moment the customer takes the scarf, this salesperson feels positive energy, though she is not giving it for free, but because of her giving of "extra time." Even if we do *Dana* to show off to be a good person, it gives a certain amount of positive energy.

Question (2):

Why does the action of *Dana* give pleasure and positive energy?

Answer (2):

Dana is "giving up" the possession from the mind, not from the object, the place or the matter. When you "let go" (give) something with genuine mind, it necessarily gives you positive energy. This is the effect of genuine giving. That is how a genuine *Dana* effects and works. When you have a backpack on your shoulder, and when you let it down, you feel relieved. This is the effect of letting it down.

It is not "I" who produces positive energy or reduces greed and attachment, but the powerful of *Dana* itself. It is because *Dana* is a tool that is designed and programmed by the Buddha himself to promote positive energy and reduce self-centeredness. All other Buddhist practices are also the tools that are programmed thus by the Buddha. It is the nature of *Dana* that produces positive energy -- "*Dana* gives happiness" and "That Is The Way It Is." Shinran Shonin called this power of Dharma "*Jinen Honi*." The Buddha called it "*Dharmata*," "The Way It Is." Buddhist practices, when they are correctly performed, necessarily manifest the "Dharma-Power" (or so called "Other-Power") and promote positive mind. None of the Buddhist practices are "Self-Power" as such.

Question (3):

Why is *Dana* so important?

Answer (3):

Buddha-Dharma improves the conditions of our life here and now. Learning Buddha-Dharma changes the condition of our life in a positive way and fills our day-to-day life with joy, peace and the wholesome happiness. In our life, human relationships are a major part and *Dana* surely promotes happiness in our human relationships. *Dana* is easy to start with. The Buddha taught the importance of *Dana* always as the first of Dharma.

Dana is important for us Jodo Shinshu followers. It is because Pure Land means the "Land of Happiness." The "Land of Happiness" is not a place or space. It is an experience, an experience of highest happiness and positive energy. The goal of Jodo Shinshu teaching is to experience "Land of Happiness" here and now. *Dana* is the simplest source that produces positive energy in our daily life.

Question (4):

You said that giving gives us a good feeling. But, don't we also feel good when we get something? Doesn't getting give us even better feeling? Or is this good feeling bad?

Answer (4):

It is our lack of wisdom that makes us feel good when we get something. When we travel and buy souvenirs, for example, buying one or two souvenirs may be ok. But, it often does not stop there. When we feel good, we accumulate more. Accumulation invites more accumulation. At the end, carrying a lot of souvenirs becomes a real burden to us. We may feel excited with this accumulation, but actually it results in stress. Good feelings gained by the accumulation of materials, fame or title and good feelings gained by "letting go" are fundamentally different. It can be referred to as the difference between hell and heaven. Enlightened, awakened and wiser people don't collect too much.

Question (5):

How do we do *Dana*?

Answer (5):

Dana is designed to be a gradual, step-by-step program. The more *Dana* we do, the better we do it. It is similar to playing the piano: When we play the piano for fifteen minutes everyday, we will definitely become better at playing the piano than those who never practice it.

The better we become in doing *Dana*, the more *Dana* we will want to do. That is, we will want to give better and more objects, or for a longer period of time. For example, at first, we may share our VCR with our friend for a short time, perhaps for one hour. Sharing is giving temporarily or only for a short time. If our friend does not return it after one hour, we may get upset and mad. But, the practice of *Dana* enables us to say, "You can return my VCR anytime you like." And finally, we may be able to share it permanently. That is, we can give it to him. The more we give, the more positive energy we receive.

Question (6):

Where do we start *Dana*?

Answer (6):

Dana starts closest to us, not from far away at all. Space, for example, means that we start *Dana* from the closest place and gradually we expand *Dana* to other parts of our life. In other words, we start *Dana* at home. Starting with "my people" and "our people," we expand it to anybody. The circle of *Dana* becomes larger and broader.

Question (7):

When we give something, we experience various feelings. Sometimes, we give for a good reputation, name or fame. Sometimes, we give because we think it is duty. Sometimes, we give because of fear. Of course, sometimes we give with a pure heart. What does Buddha-Dharma teach about these feelings?

Answer (7):

Dana can be categorized into three types, by degree of expectation:

- (1) "Servant of *Dana*": *Dana* to get back something;
- (2) "Friend of *Dana*": *Dana* to make people (such as parents, children, spouse, relatives or friends) happy;
- (3) "Lord of *Dana*": *Dana* with no expectations.

Whatever we give and how much we give, the act of *Dana* always gives us positive energy. However, the degree of positive energy differs depending on our mental state at the moment of *Dana*. "Servant of *Dana*," for example, gives us the least amount of happiness. When we don't get anything back, we even become angry and hateful. "Friend of *Dana*" gives us positive energy, but not fully. Because, behind this *Dana*, there are still certain expectations: such as "I want you to enjoy it," "I want you to appreciate it," "I want you to write me a thank you letter," etc.). When these expectations are not achieved, the original positive energy transforms into sadness, regret, anger and stress. "Lord of *Dana*" expects nothing. From the beginning to the end, there is only positive energy.

Question (8):

Are you saying that our attitude towards *Dana* is crucial?

Answer (8):

Yes. The mind matters in doing *Dana*. There are also three other attitudes of *Dana*:

- (1) *Dana* out of pity and sense of sorry: e.g., to poor people.
- (2) *Dana* out of love and caring: e.g., to parents, children, and spouse.
- (3) *Dana* out of admiration and respect: e.g., to Dharma, Buddha, temple, Sangha, or the BCA.

All these three bring us positive energy, but their effects are different. Which is more effective in the wholesomeness, to give a flower to a pretty girl, to give a flower to a sick child, or to offer a flower to the Buddha? *Dana* to the Buddha or to Buddha-Dharma is the highest. Offering a flower to Amida Buddha derives from admiration towards Wisdom and Compassion. We are enhancing our wisdom and compassion by offering flowers to the Buddha. Therefore, whatever we offer to the Buddha, we do not use the word “give.” But, we say “offer.”

In spite of their financial difficulties, our Issei pioneers did a tremendous *Dana* towards Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. That is because they truly understood the power of *Dana*. Because, they experienced true happiness through *Dana*. Owing to their act of *Dana*, we are now able to receive Buddha-Dharma at our temple and BCA. Those Issei pioneers closed their life with full of gratitude, appreciation, thankfulness and peacefulness. How could they do that? It is not unrelated to their practice of *Dana*. The Buddha once said, “*Dana* is like a war: Just like soldiers investigate all over looking for their enemies, investigate, search and look for any chances of *Dana*.”

(The section of “*Dana*” continues.)

Gassho,
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