



# The Idea of *Dhammadāna*

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*The present article explores the meaning of dhammadāna, “the gift of Dhamma,” as evident in relevant Pāli texts and in relation to the meritorious deed of publishing Buddhist books for free distribution.*

## Introduction

A very meritorious and praiseworthy way of disseminating the Dhamma takes the form of book publications that are strictly for free distribution. The indubitably wholesome intentions that underpin such activities can at times be associated with the assumption that to have one’s writings appear with a commercial Buddhist publisher somehow reflects a lack of ethical integrity and an insufficient respect for the Buddha’s teaching.

The viability of such assessments can best be explored in the light of relevant Pāli passages regarding three related topics:

- The importance given to efficacy when spreading the Dhamma.
- A precedent set by the Buddha when teaching King Pasenadi.
- The significance of the term *dhammadāna* in the Pāli discourses and commentaries.

## Efficacy in Teaching the Dhamma

The *Mahāvagga* (I.11) of the *Vinaya* reports the Buddha encouraging his first arahant disciples to set out to spread the Dhamma, asking them:<sup>1</sup>

*Bhikkhus*, teach the Dhamma; let not two [of you] go by one way.

The injunction to go each by a different way suggests a concern with efficacy in teaching, as in this way the potential of spreading the Dhamma becomes augmented.

A concern with efficiently spreading the Dhamma is also clearly a motivation when opting to publish for free distribution, based on the apprehension that some potential readers may not be able to afford to buy a book, together with the notion that such way of publication is inherently meritorious.

In actual practice, however, increased efficacy in distribution is not necessarily the subsequent outcome. Publications for free distribution are notoriously difficult to get. Once they do become available in the course of some event or other, there can be a tendency to grab one or more copies even without having a real interest in its content, as a result of which the book(s) may just end up accumulating dust in the corner of a bookshelf.

The problem of accessibility also affects authorship of publications for free distribution, as successfully employing this avenue requires, besides securing donorship for the printing, implementing a network for distribution. Without the latter, the book in question will only be briefly accessible to those who happened to be around when and where it came out and will soon fall into obscurity.

A related issue is that holding a high administrative position in a Buddhist organization or monastery makes it considerably easier to publish for free distribution. In other words, the key requirement to become a successful author

is not necessarily erudition or depth of practice, but much rather the ability to inspire donors for print runs and volunteers for setting up distribution networks.

Besides, manuscripts that have been submitted to professional publishers and then rejected can always be put out for free distribution, as this does not require going through a process of peer review. Once published, such books are not necessarily reviewed by those competent in the same field. As a net result, some publications for free distribution can be of bad quality.

This is of course not invariably the case, as material made available for free can be remarkably profound and beautifully produced, and some books by commercial publishers can be rather disconcerting. Nevertheless, there seems to be a tendency for free distribution publications to be of lower quality.

In the present age of information, the key question for a potential reader is often where best to invest the limited reading time available. The chief problem is not just finding out about the existence of a publication on a certain topic, which with free distribution publications is not always easy, but much rather making the right choice when confronted with the staggering wealth of alternative sources of information that are available. This makes publications for free distribution considerably less appealing, unless one knows the author already very well, simply because probabilities are higher that the content may not really be worth one's time.

Of course, the situation varies according to individual circumstances and requirements. Particularly in a traditional Buddhist country, free distribution may turn out to be the preferable option. The point is only that this is not necessarily the case.

When instead opting for commercial publication, a commendable procedure would be to waive royalties. Often publishers who do not have to pay royalties will be willing to grant the right to put a pdf version of the book on one's

personal website after it has been published, perhaps two or three years later. Such a way of publishing would combine free availability (at least of the pdf version) with the advantages of peer review, a distribution system, and copy-editing that come with a commercial publication. Moreover, it would offer Buddhist laypersons an opportunity to engage in right livelihood by working for a Buddhist publisher. In sum, such a procedure could offer a way of making the Dhamma available that has an appeal due to its professionalism and efficiency.

The proposed conclusion is not meant to dismiss publication for free distribution. The point is only to suggest that there can be reasons for opting instead for commercial publication.

## The Teaching to King Pasenadi

The central question that remains, however, is how far commercial publication conflicts with the spirit of the Dhamma. Of considerable relevance to this issue is a Pāli discourse, according to which a teaching given by the Buddha became an occasion for payment. The episode in question begins with King Pasenadi visiting the Buddha. Realizing that the king was suffering from overeating, the Buddha decided to give him a teaching:<sup>2</sup>

On that occasion, [the Buddha] spoke this verse:

“People who are constantly mindful  
Know their measure with the food they have gotten.  
Their feelings become attenuated;  
They age slowly and guard their longevity.”

Now at that time the brahmin youth Sudassana was standing behind King Pasenadi of Kosala. Then King Pasenadi of Kosala said to the brahmin youth Sudassana:

“Come, my dear Sudassana, memorize this verse in the presence of the Blessed One and recite it to me when my meal is served. I will arrange for a hundred coins as a perpetual daily grant to be given to you.”

The brahmin youth Sudassana said, “Yes, your majesty,” in assent to King Pasenadi of Kosala, memorized this verse in the presence of the Blessed One, and recited it when a meal was served to King Pasenadi of Kosala.

In this discourse, a teaching originally given by the Buddha becomes an occasion for earning money, a hundred coins (*kahāpaṇa*) for every single day of reciting the Buddha’s teaching at meal times. The Buddha does not express any reservations about this. The announcement that a payment of a hundred coins will be given is made right in front of him, which would have afforded an excellent opportunity to inform the king that this is inappropriate, had the Buddha’s attitude been similar to the reasoning of some modern critics of commercial publication.

In fact, the brahmin youth “memorized this verse in the presence of the Blessed One,” which gives the impression that the Buddha would have repeated the verse to enable such memorization. This apparently happened even though he was clearly aware that the purpose of such memorization was to earn money.

This episode thereby sets a fairly clear precedent for evaluating different avenues of publication. Without in any way intending to discount the meritoriousness and praiseworthiness of free distribution, there seems to be no real basis for considering this to be the only viable option for an author committed to ethical integrity and a deep respect for the Dhamma.

This is not to endorse commercialization of the Dhamma in principle, which at times can indeed become highly objectionable. The point is only to clarify that the

criticism of avenues of publication that do not involve free distribution is without support in the Dhamma itself.

## Two Types of Gifts

The conclusion suggested above can be explored further by surveying relevant passages in the Pāli discourses and their commentaries on the topic of “the gift of Dhamma.”

Occurrences of the term *dhammadāna* often come in contrast to “material gifts” (*āmisadāna*). This can be exemplified with the following passage:<sup>3</sup>

*Bhikkhus*, there are two types of gift: a material gift and the gift of the teaching. *Bhikkhus*, this is supreme of these two types of gift, namely the gift of the teaching.

The superiority of *dhammadāna* recurs in a verse in the *Dhammapada*. No longer providing an explicit contrast to material gifts, although the same does appear to be implicit, the verse simply proclaims:<sup>4</sup>

The gift of the teaching surpasses every gift.

The Pāli commentaries explain that the term *dhammadāna* can stand for teaching the path to the deathless.<sup>5</sup> Alternatively it can refer to teaching what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, blameworthy and blameless.<sup>6</sup> The commentary on the *Dhammapada* illustrates the nature of *dhammadāna* by affirming the superiority of even a four-line verse to the most lavish gifts of robes to Buddhas, Paccekabuddhas, and arahants.<sup>7</sup>

In a monograph study of *dāna* in Theravāda Buddhism, Banks Findly (2003: 59) envisions a “reciprocal act of *dānadhamma-dhammadāna*” in the following form:

while donors operate under the rubric of *dānadhamma*, the teaching about (that is, the obligation of) giving, re-

nunciants act under that of *dhammadāna*, the giving of teaching.

This would fit the recurrent contrast made between material gifts and gifts of the teaching, together with the emphasis placed on the superiority of the latter. Less convincing, however, is the suggestion by Banks Findly (2003: 184 and 195) that “Dhamma is a gift only for renunciant giving,” whereas “*āmisadāna* is an act reserved for non-renunciants who have and can give material wealth.”

*Bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* can certainly make gifts of their excess requisites to their companions. For example, the Buddha himself is on record for offering his leftover food to a *bhikkhu*. If the latter accepts, he becomes a “heir in material things,” *āmisadāyāda*.<sup>8</sup> The terminology implies that the Buddha’s gift pertained to the category of what is *āmisā*, “material.”

Conversely, lay disciples can make a gift of Dhamma by giving teachings. An example in case is the householder Citta, who at times would even make such gift of teaching to *bhikkhus*.<sup>9</sup>

It follows that the recurrent distinction in the Pāli texts between material gifts and *dhammadāna* cannot invariably be taken to refer to the distinction between laity and renunciants. Instead, it concerns the difference between offering something material and giving a teaching.

When applied to the question of publication, it would follow from this distinction that the gift of a book, whatever its contents, would pertain to the category of material gifts (*āmisadāna*). In contrast, the giving of *dhammadāna*, as the act of teaching the Dhamma, would rather take place when the book is being written.

If this is correct, it would imply that, as long as an author is sincerely dedicated to furthering the spread and understanding of the Dhamma, without any ulterior motivation, the act of *dhammadāna* has been established, independent of whether the book is later gifted or sold.

A Buddhist book on sale need not be considered as implying that the author must be selling the Dhamma, just as a Buddha statue on sale would not be considered as implying that the artist must be selling the Buddha.

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Abbreviations:

AN: *Aṅguttara-nikāya*  
Dhp: *Dhammapada*  
Dhp-a: *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*  
DN: *Dīgha-nikāya*  
It: *Itivuttaka*  
It-a: *Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā*  
MN: *Majjhima-nikāya*  
Mp: *Manorathapūraṇī*  
SN: *Saṃyutta-nikāya*  
Vin: *Vinaya*

References:

Banks Findly, Ellison 2003: *Dāna, Giving and Getting in Pali Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Vin I 21 (= SN I 105; see also DN II 45): *mā ekena dve agamittha, desetha, bhikkhave, dhammaṃ.*

<sup>2</sup> SN I 81: *tāyaṃ velāyaṃ imaṃ gāthaṃ abhāsi: manujassa sadā satīmato, mattaṃ jānati laddhabhojane; tanu tassa bhavanti vedanā, saṅikaṃ jīrati āyu pālayan ti. tena kho pana samayena sudassano māṇavo rañño pasenadissa kosalassa piṭṭhito ṭhito hoti. atha kho rājā pasenadi kosalo sudassanaṃ māṇavaṃ āmantesi: ehi tvaṃ, tāta sudassana, bhagavato santike imaṃ gāthaṃ pariyaṇuṇitvā mama bhattābhīhāre bhāsa. ahañ ca te devasikaṃ kahāpaṇasataṃ niccabhikkhaṃ pavattayissāmī ti. evaṃ deva ti kho sudassano māṇavo rañño pasenadissa kosalassa paṭissutvā bhagavato santike imaṃ gāthaṃ pariyaṇuṇitvā rañño pasenadissa kosalassa bhattābhīhāre sudaṃ bhāsati.*

<sup>3</sup> It 98 (= It 101): *dve 'māni, bhikkhave, dānāni: āmisadānañ ca dhammadānañ ca. etad aggaṃ, bhikkhave, imesaṃ dvinnaṃ dānānaṃ yadidaṃ dhammadānaṃ.* A similar statement can be found in AN I 91.

<sup>4</sup> Dh 354: *sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti;* see also AN IV 364.

<sup>5</sup> Mp II 159: *dhammadānaṃ ti idh' ekacco amatupattipāṭipadaṃ kathetvā deti, idaṃ dhammadānaṃ nāma.*

<sup>6</sup> It-a II 131: *dhammadānaṃ ti idh' ekacco ime dhammā kusalā, ime dhammā akusalā, ime dhammā sāvajjā, ime dhammā anavajjā ... dhammaṃ deseti, idaṃ dhammadānaṃ.*

<sup>7</sup> Dh-a IV 74: *sace pi hi cakkavālagabbhe yāva brahmalokā nīrantaraṃ katvā sannisinnānaṃ buddhapaccekabuddhakhīṇāsavānaṃ kadaliḡabbhasadisāni cīvarāni dadeyya, tasmīṃ samāgame catuppadikāya gāthāya katā anumodanā va seṭṭhā.*

<sup>8</sup> MN I 13.

<sup>9</sup> SN IV 281ff.