



Panditārāma Shwe Taung Gon Sasana Yeiktha

Great Gifts and Giving Well

The Buddha's Teachings for Peace on Earth

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TOWARDS A WORLD AT PEACE

In the many years that the writer has known the Panditarama Sayadaw, the Sayadaw has always shown the greatest concern that misunderstandings and misconceptions might arise and take hold regarding the Buddha's true teachings, and that, in putting the teachings into practice in their daily lives, disciples do so in a manner that is incorrect or inappropriate. To see this deep and constant concern in the Sayadaw as both inspiring and comforting. There would indeed be cause for alarm if this sincere concern for the purity and perpetuation of the Buddha's teachings were to lessen in our eminent Sayadaws

In his dhamma-talks, two topics that the Sayadaw has repeatedly covered over the years are "Kusala Mangala", or "The Blessings of Good Deeds" and "Abhaya Dana", translated here as "Giving Goodwill." In his talk on Kusala Mangala, Sayadaw deals especially with the good deed of dana or alms-giving, and the states of mind that we should cultivate in our dana. Sayadaw clearly illustrates for us how dana promotes and strengthens our sila (morality or virtuous living) when it is correctly understood and practised. Then, in "Abhaya Dana", Sayadaw shows us that by living virtuously according to the five precepts, we are giving to all beings that very best gift of all, the gift of friendship and goodwill. The two topics become closely related, and deepen our understanding of a part of the Buddha's teachings that touches most of us, and show how we, as good disciples, should put the teachings into practice in our daily lives. Sayadaw clearly feels that followers of the Buddha's teachings should understand correctly, and should review honestly, their practice to ensure that they are truly good disciples in both name and deed. Minor infringements and seemingly insignificant misconceptions can have major consequences. A correct understanding of the Buddha's teachings, coupled with diligent practice, will lead to great happiness and merit.

The Blessings of Good Deeds

The Pali "Kusala" refers to pure and faultless deeds which give rise to wholesome, favorable results. "Mangala" means anything which works to remove all things base and evil, and to support and nurture all things good and beneficial. Thus, "Kusala Mangala" refers to the Blessings of Good Deeds. There are of course very many ways in which good deeds may be performed, but in his dhamma-talk "Kusala Mangala", Sayadaw refers repeatedly and especially to the good deed of dana or alms-giving.

The Buddha has said "He who gives alms, bestows a fourfold blessing he helps to long life, good appearance, happiness and strength. Therefore long life, good appearance, happiness and strength will be his share, whether amongst heavenly beings or amongst men"

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And "Five blessings accrue to the giver of alms the affection of many, noble associations, good reputation, self confidence, and heavenly rebirths"

Giving with goodwill

In the act of giving, there are two components, the material which is given, and the "cetana" or volition that prompts the giving, and the volition itself as of great importance. Thus, at one time, when questioned by the Buddha, Anathapindikata, the lay disciple had confessed that he had that morning nothing to offer but a coarse mess of broken rice grains with sour gruel.

The Buddha replied, "Householder, whether one gives coarse alms or the finest alms, if one gives casually, without thought, not with one's own hand, with no thought to the future, then, wheresoever that alms-giving bears fruit, his mind will not turn to the enjoyment of excellent food, of fine clothes and rich carriages, the enjoyment of the five senses, and his sons and daughters, slaves, and workers will not respect and honour his words. Such, householder, is the result of deeds done casually.

But householder, if one gives with consideration, after taking thought, with one's own hands, with a thought to the future, then, wheresoever that alms-giving bears fruit, his mind will turn to the enjoyment of excellent food, of fine clothes and rich carriages, the enjoyment of the five senses; and his sons and daughters, slaves, and workers will respect and honour his words. Such, householder, is the result of deeds done with consideration."

On another occasion, King Pasenadi of Kosala came to pay homage to the Buddha, and he related how he had been delayed because a rich man had died without leaving heirs, and he had been busy with his ministers in transferring all the man's wealth and property to the state. Although rich beyond reckoning, the man had been very miserly. He had not given anything in charity, and himself had lived like a pauper, eating left-over sour husk-gruel, wearing cheap coarse clothes, and driving about town in a rotten little chariot rigged up with a leaf-awning. The Buddha explained that in a previous life, the man had also been very rich. One day, he had instructed his wife to give alms to a Paccekabuddha (a silent or non-teaching Buddha) who had come and stood before their door. It was rarely that the husband gave away anything to anyone, and the wife took the opportunity to fill the monks bowl with choice food. The rich man later came across the Paccekabuddha in the street, and seeing the bowl filled with choice food, regretted that he had instructed his wife to give alms, and thought to himself,

"This monk will only have a good sleep after such a good meal. It would have been better if I had given the food to my servants. At least they would have given me better service."

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Because the man had offered alms to a Paccekabuddha, he had become a very rich man, but because he had later regretted his impulse to give, he became an extreme miser, reluctant to spend anything, even on himself, and he was unable to enjoy his wealth. Thus the Buddha said, " A mean man who has acquired a great fortune cheers and pleases neither himself nor his parents, nor his wife and children, nor his slaves, craftsmen and servants, nor his fiends and colleagues; nor does he make offerings to monks and yogis stimulating spiritual growth, productive of future bliss, fruitful in happiness, conducive to celestial attainment. Those riches of his, not being rightly used, are either confiscated by kings or by robbers, or are burnt by fire, or carried away by flood, or are taken by heirs for whom he has no affection. But if a generous man has acquired great wealth, he cheers and pleases not only himself but also his parents, his wife and children, his slaves, craftsmen and servants, his friends and colleagues, and he makes offerings to monks and yogis stimulating spiritual growth, productive of future bliss, fruitful in happiness, conducive to celestial attainment."

On another occasion, the Buddha spoke of five ways of giving badly, and five ways of giving well. The five ways of giving badly are,

1. a person gives without deference and respect,
2. gives without thinking,
3. gives not with his own hands,
4. gives leftovers from a meal,
5. gives holding no views as to the future

The five ways of giving well are,

1. a person gives in faith,
2. with deference and respect,
3. in time,
4. with unconstrained heart,
5. without hurt to self or others.

"And in giving with a gift with faith, wheresoever the full result of that gift ripens, there comes wealth, riches and great property, and he is fair to look upon and handsome.

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"And in vying a gift with deference and respect, there comes wealth, riches and great property, and his wife and children hearken diligently to him, listen to him and serve him with understanding heart.

"And in giving a gift in time, there comes wealth, riches and great property, and the goods that come to him in time are abundant.

And in giving a gift with unconstrained heart, there comes wealth, riches and great property, and he is able to enjoy the fullness of the fivefold joys of the senses.

"And in giving a gift without hurt to self or others, there comes wealth, riches and great property, and never from anywhere comes hurt to his property either from fire or water, kings or thieves, or ungrateful heirs"

Faultless giving

In his more than fifty years of ministering to his disciples, Sayadaw has come across far too many cases of dana where the occasion has been used as an excuse for undue merry-making, or as an opportunity to win reputation or even worldly gain. Much expense may be incurred, but such dana or alms-giving is not without fault, and can lose much of its merit.

Giving Gladly and with Goodwill

Little merit, much expense,

For donors who through want of sense,

Organize for fun and laughter,

Or 'tis fame and gain they hunger after.

Much the merit, less expense.

For giving without false pretense,

And good will moves the donors hand

In helping others the best they can

The common faults that can taint our alms-giving are -

- attachment to what has been given
- if one gives expecting name or reputation

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- if one gives expecting material gain
- if one gives in an absent-minded or irreverent manner
- if one gives with arrogance
- if one gives without goodwill

Giving that is noble is free of these faults. Such giving is kusala dana, and results in much merit for the giver. Such giving brings one never to achieving the Ten Perfection, and nearer to Nibbana.

The Ten Perfections

The Pali "parami" is usually translated as "perfection", and in the Buddhavamsa and Cariyapitaka of the Pali scriptures, we find enumerated the 10 Perfections leading to Buddhahood, namely:

1. Perfection in Alms-giving and Liberality (dana),
2. Morality (sila),
3. Renunciation (nekkhamma),
4. Wisdom (panna),
5. Energy (viriya),
6. Forbearance (khanti),
7. Truthfulness (sacca),
8. Resolution (adhitthana),
9. All-embracing Kindness (metta),
10. Equanimity (upekkha)

In the Visuddhi Magga, the Ten perfections of all Buddhas are further explained: -

"The Great-Beings (maha-satta) are concerned about the welfare of living beings, not tolerating the suffering of others, wishing long duration to the higher states of happiness of beings, and being impartial and just to all beings. Therefore:

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(1) They give Alms (dana) to all beings so that they may be happy, without investigating whether they are worthy or not

(2) By avoiding to do them any harm, they observe Morality (sila)

(3) In order to bring morality to perfection, they train themselves in Renunciation (nikkhamma).

(4) In order to understand clearly what is beneficial and injurious to beings, they purify their Wisdom (panna).

(5) For the sake of the welfare and happiness of others they constantly exert their Energy (viriya).

(6) Though having become heroes through utmost energy, they are nevertheless full of Forbearance (khanti) towards the manifold failures of beings.

(7) Once they have promised to give or do something, they do not break their promise (vow) or truthfulness (sacca).

(8) With firm and unshakable Resolution (adhitthana) they work for the weal and welfare of beings.

(9) With unshakable kindness (metta) they are helpful to all.

(10) By reason of their Equanimity (upekkha) they do not expect anything in return. All Buddhas therefore have the Ten Perfections of dana, sila, nikkhamma, panna, viriya, khanti, sacca, adhitthana, metta and upekkha. As true disciples of the Buddha, as we aspire to the realization of nibbana, we too must strive to develop the ten Perfections listed above.

In our striving for these absolute qualities to develop, the term "Perfection" becomes somewhat inappropriate, as most of us are "far from perfect". When first translated, the term "parami" was perhaps being used with reference to the Buddha and "perfection" may have been applicable, but, as used in every day conversation. "aptitude" or "inborn talent" is perhaps a closer rendering of the Pali "parami." What most of us have as ordinary worldlings, are "aptitudes" which we must nurture and strengthen in our rebirths through samsara.

A Christian would take aptitude to be a gift of God. A Buddhist takes parami as being the result of one's past kamma, so parami is not a gift of God, but the fruit of past kamma.

A person who has certain aptitudes, such as being uncommonly skilful as a musician, or scholar, or as a yogi who makes swift progress, is commonly spoken of as "having parami", thus, "parami" is an inborn aptitude, an innate characteristic

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of personality, rather than perfection itself. Used in this way however, "parami" assumes a rather narrow compass. "Parami", used in the religious sense, refers not only to aptitudes or skills, but also to states of mind.

"Parami" refers to the noble deeds and noble thoughts of high-minded people who are ever eager to forego personal and selfish gain for the good of others.

In our alms-giving, we should give with total goodwill and sincerity, without pride, without expectation of reward, and without condescension. As disciples of the Buddha, we accept that good deeds will beget good results, but it should not be the craving or desire for these good results that spurs our giving. Rather, we should be mindful of the recipient's needs, and with compassion in our hearts, we really ought to be thankful for our opportunity and ability to help. As we gave thus mindfully and with respect, we should also be mindful of our aspiration for the ultimate peace of Nibbana, and we pray mentally that the merit of our giving may be a support as we strive toward Nibbana. Such giving becomes 'parami dana', or giving which fosters and strengthens the nobility of mind that permits and encourages self-sacrifice for the good of others. Such 'parami dana' also keeps alive our noble aspiration for Nibbana as we journey through samsara. We repeat this giving, as pure as we can make it, so many times in this life that the action, and the "cetana" or goodwill that prompts the action, become instinctive, and in a future rebirth, it truly becomes 'instinct', an inborn, indelible and noble part of our character, an aptitude and state of mind that we have honed closer to perfection.

How dana leads naturally to sila

In his talks, Sayadaw has illustrated clearly how parami dana fosters and strengthens our morality. Dana is an act of giving. A basic characteristic of dana is 'alobha', freedom from greed. A characteristic of theft is 'Lobha', or greed. For a person who has learned to give correctly, with goodwill and compassion, the precept to abstain from stealing is not difficult to keep. When a person has compassion and goodwill for others, and is carefully mindful of the needs of others, then clearly such a person is incapable of stealing from others. Indeed, compassion and goodwill for others make it difficult to undertake any action which would cause discomfort, unease or suffering for another. Therefore, such a person is a good, kind and moral person. Armed with goodwill and compassion, such a person becomes incapable of harming others, or wanting to harm others.

The Buddha's five basic precepts are: -

1. to abstain from killing,
2. to abstain from stealing
3. to abstain from wrongful sexual conduct,

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4. to abstain from lies, harsh speech, and slander and
5. to abstain from intoxicants and liquor, the cause of sloth and other evils.

Many people, including devout Buddhists, look upon these basic five precepts as being relatively unimportant, as being not of a high order or level. However, these five precepts are the basic precepts upon which all other 'higher' or more stringent precepts are based. These five precepts, though few in number, are the firm ground and foundation upon which all other codes of discipline are based. Thus, one cannot keep the eight precepts without first keeping the five basic precepts. When one looks at the five precepts in this way, one realises their true great worth, importance and indispensable nature.

Abhaya Dana

A good Buddhist keeps the Five Precepts with goodwill and compassion, and not out of fear, or necessity, or to keep up appearance, but his heart and mind incline him to do good. Keeping these Five Precepts was recognized by the Buddha as "abhaya dana", the giving freedom from harm and anxiety. Such giving was praised as the giving of the 'great gifts' of friendship and peace of mind, and of freedom from fear, ill-will and hate.

The Buddha taught: "Monks, there are these great gifts, recognized as such from the first, known for many a day, known by tradition, ancient and unconfounded, not scorned by discerning recluse or godly man."

"Herein, monks, a noble disciple abandons taking life and abstains therefrom."

"Thus abstaining, to uncountable beings,

- - he gives freedom from fear,
- - he gives freedom from hatred.
- - he gives freedom from ill-will."

"In giving freedom from fear, hatred and ill-will, the noble disciple (too) becomes a partaker in boundless fearlessness, friendship and goodwill. This, monks, is the first great gift. This, monks, will result in merit and goodness, the cause of happiness, divine, resulting in happiness, leading heavenward and conducive to what is pleasing, lovely, precious, beneficial and delightful."

"Again, monks,

a noble disciple abandons stealing, and abstain therefrom,

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a noble disciple abandons lustful, evil ways, and abstains therefrom,

a noble disciple abandons lying and malicious speech and abstains therefrom,

a noble disciple abandons intoxicants which cause indolence and other evils, and abstains therefrom."

"Thus abstaining, to uncountable beings,

- - he gives freedom from fear,
- - he gives freedom from hatred,
- - he gives freedom from ill-will."

"And in giving freedom from fear, hatred and ill-will, he (too) becomes a partaker in boundless fearlessness, friendship and goodwill. These, monks, are great gifts. These, monks, will result in merit and goodness, the cause of happiness, divine, resulting in happiness, leading heavenward and conducive to what is pleasing, lovely, precious, beneficial and delightful."

In his teachings, the Buddha attached very great importance to keeping goodwill and love in one's heart, and to giving love and goodwill to one another. On one occasion, He said " though with pious heart a disciple took refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, his reward would have been greater if he had, with pious heart, undertaken to keep the precepts:

to abstain from taking life

to abstain from taking what is not given

to abstain from carnal lusts

to abstain from lying

to abstain from intoxicating liquor, the cause of sloth"

The Buddha then continued: "and though with pious heart he undertook to keep the precepts, greater still would have been his reward if he had conceived even a passing thought of amity and goodwill."

On another occasion, the Buddha admonished his monks thus:

"Monks, if for just the lasting of a finger- snap a monk indulges a thought of goodwill, such an one is to be called a monk. Not empty of result is his musing. He abides doing the Master's bidding. He is one who takes good advice, and he eats

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the country's alms-food to some purpose. What then should I say of those who make much of such a thought"

If each of us were to follow the Buddha's teaching to 'make much of such a thought' (of love and goodwill), the world would certainly be a safer, happier place for all.

The Pagodas of Shwe Taung Gon

Tharmanay Kyaw Sayadaw

Senior Teacher, Panditarama

In ancient times, the Myanmar people had a great penchant for constructing pagodas. It certainly remains that way these days. It seems like it's going to continue in the future, as well. "Four million, four hundred and forty-six thousand, seven hundred and thirty-three were the pagodas of Pagan," it is said. Though not numerous as ancient Pagan, other cities have their share, as well.

Sayadaw often says, "We, too, are building pagodas. The pagodas we build are Dhamma pagodas indeed. We are working to help people establish the Buddha-Dhamma in their hearts. We are helping them build Dhamma pagodas.

The pagodas that most people are building, if they are built without need, are not very beneficial. The Dhamma pagodas we are helping construct are needed everywhere. They need to be built in every human heart.

Not every one of the pagodas which are built is worthwhile. With these Dhamma pagodas, however, the more you build, the better. The more you build, the greater the benefit. There is great benefit for the Sasana**, and great benefit for oneself. Each and every Buddhist needs to endeavor to construct a Dhamma pagoda in their own heart. Where these Dhamma pagodas endure, so the Sasana endures, and where these Dhamma pagodas do not endure, neither does the Sasana. As Dhamma pagodas disappear, so does the Sasana. In the hearts of those who haven't established Dhamma pagodas, the Sasana is absent. So that the Sasana does not disappear, we need to construct a Dhamma pagodas in each of our hearts, inside each of us.

There are a great many pagodas at the Shwe Taung Gon Sasana Yeiktha. Local and foreign monks and nuns, men and women, old, young, and middle aged, of all ages and from every stratum of society, come to build their pagodas. The foreign men and women take the pagodas they have been building at the Shwe Taung Gon Sasana Yeiktha back with them when they return to their respective countries and continue to work on them. These are Dhamma pagodas indeed, Satipatthana*** Dhamma pagodas. These Dhamma pagodas are costless to build. Sayadaw and the other senior teachers have already imparted the proper construction technique.

These Satipatthana Dhamma pagodas are being constructed without a pause from three in the morning until eleven at night. When sitting, they are being built. When standing, they are being built. When walking, they are being built. When

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lying down, they are being built. When eating, they are being built. When showering, they are being built. Even in on the toilet, they are being built. The Buddha advised us that it is possible to do this everywhere, all the time and directed us to become proficient at this type of continuous construction.

The Buddha Dhamma is very thorough indeed. In the Buddha's teaching, there is nothing superfluous, and there is nothing missing. (Anguttara Nikaya, and *passim*)

At Shwe Taung Gon Sasana Yeiktha, some yogis build their Dhamma pagodas for a week, some for a month, some for a year, and some for many years. One's own Dhamma pagoda grows by just as much as one is able to build. The higher one's Dhamma pagoda goes, the more meaning ones life has, the higher its value. So if you wish the value of the brief life you've got to rise higher and higher, just build your Dhamma pagoda higher and higher.

* Pagodas often contain sacred relics of the Buddha or other Buddhist masters.

** The dispensation of the Buddhas teachings.

*** The practice of mindfulness.