



Dana

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The word *dana* is from the Pali language, which would have been used in the time and place of the historic Buddha. We translate *dana* as *generosity*. To this day, Buddhist monks in Asia carry begging bowls, which are filled with food by the laypeople among whom they live; thus, it is through the *dana*, or *generosity*, of the larger community that the monks are sustained.

In the back of the room, are what SIMS calls *dana* baskets. One represents the livelihood of tonight's teacher. The other is the wherewithal of our organization. They are a place where the generosity of teaching and the generosity of your support meet each other. The generosity of the volunteers staffing those tables is another venue for *dana*.

It's easy for me to slip into thinking about *dana* as a transaction: *Tim* and *Tuere* teach us, and in return we support *them*. Or, we value what *SIMS* does, when it hosts events like this one, so we support *it*.

I call this perspective *transactional*, because it has a *this-because-of-that* quality. In this way of thinking, there is a distinct separation of roles: *teacher* and *student*, *donor* and *recipient*. Whatever your role, from this viewpoint, there is always a *self* and an *other*. The thing is, a *self-and-other* perspective seems difficult to reconcile with the context of a teaching that indicates *no self*. There is another perspective, which I find personally valuable; the challenge is that I don't know how to explain it, so I'll try to convey it through a personal story:

In my experience, mediation can work even when you do it entirely wrong—as I was late one night during one of my early retreats. My body is not really cut out for sitting for long periods, and I was not used to it then. So there I was, it was after-hours, and my sit had long since gone from uncomfortable, to painful, to something that seemed like the edge of endurance. One thing about pain is its ability to bring focus. But rather than the easefulness of right concentration, my focus that night was sheer contraction—there was me, the pain, my dislike of the pain, and my willful determination.

Earlier that night, Rodney Smith, one of the retreat leaders, had talked briefly about the *I am* meditation associated with the Hindu sage Nisargadatta. In this case, the phrase

refers not to the *I am* of the ego, but rather to the *I am* of being itself—I relate it to the Old Testament phrase “I am that I am”. At any rate, that phrase, *I am*, emerged in the midst of the me, the pain, the dislike, and the determination, and it all went from being like a clenched fist, to being like a receptive, open-palmed hand. The sensation of pain was the same, but the dislike fell away, and rather than sitting willfully, I was simply there—sitting. It was spring and there was the song of frogs outside, the sound of a train in the distance, the hum of the mechanical system, and the sensation of pain, and I had no preference or sense of priority with respect to any of it. *No preference or priority* sounds bland and uninvolved, but on the contrary it was like suddenly finding myself in the midst of the symphony of the current moment—it was indescribably intimate and vivid.

It’s said that the dharma is beyond value and is therefore freely offered. Transactionally, that makes no sense, but when the notions of *self* and *other* soften, a wholeness emerges in which being itself is infinitely worthy, and depthless sufficiency underlays the way things simply are. When infinite worth is found everywhere, the notion of value becomes nonsensical, and thus the dharma, to me, is literally outside of value. From this vantage, appreciation and generosity are simply there as what makes sense, and so the dharma is freely offered, and freely received, and freely supported.

When *self* and *other* soften, so do the notions of *teacher* and *student*, *donor* and *recipient*, *samsara* and *nirvana*—all things share a wholeness in the unfolding of the current moment. When I bow, I intend it as a recognition of the same kind of softness in my relationship with things. It is this softness—around the practice of *dana*—that I wish to offer you.