

## **Dana and Teacher Support**

By Robert Beatty

Since the time of the Buddha there has been a tradition that those who teach the Dharma are supported directly by their community. They do not ask for this, it is offered freely. In Asia, where it is understood that the practice of generosity (dana) forms the bedrock of spiritual practice, this tradition has evolved into a system where the interdependence of the teachers and their community is implicit.

Individuals who devote themselves to teaching are held in great respect, and their communities take seriously the reciprocal responsibility for supporting the teacher and the teachings. In turn, the teacher upholds the responsibility of living an exemplary life, and making the teachings readily available. It is understood that to support the teacher is to support oneself.

In Asia support of the teacher takes the form of preparing food, providing transportation and medical care, constructing and maintaining shelter and providing all the requisites of life for him/her. This allows the teacher to devote him/herself to practice, study and deepen his/her ability to realize and share the Dharma.

The act of intentionally sharing one's energy, material wealth or time is understood to enhance one's capacity of letting go of attachments. This letting go is a central facet of the path of freedom from suffering.

As we introduce Buddhism to the West, teacher support is inevitably evolving into different forms. Those who teach are frequently householders who support themselves, and sometimes a family, without a center or monastery. Their community is often geographically dispersed. Teachers participate directly in the cash economy, taking care of their own needs. As householders, their teaching may be particularly relevant to us because they are living lives of the Dharma amidst questions of money, relationships, sexuality, and raising a family.

A "Dana Basket" is provided at lectures and retreats to give the community members the opportunity to practice dana and to support their teacher financially. This basket can be understood as a conduit for the stored energy of money to supply the requisites of the teacher so that he/she can focus on teaching. This system of teacher support is radically different from that of most Western schools of training and personal growth where there is a fixed fee. The fact that there is not fixed fee leaves the responsibility with the individual to decide what amount of support is appropriate for them. It also guarantees that the teachings are available to persons of all economic levels. Dana invites each individual to develop his/her

own capacity to be generous in a context that directly assists his/her own spiritual growth. As in Asia, to support one's teacher is to support oneself and to help make the teachings available to others.

People often ask for guidelines concerning dana. The Dharma is a way of life and path of liberation that is priceless, so how can one possibly be guided? There is no obligation to give. When the gift of the Dharma is experienced as precious there is a reciprocal opportunity to participate generously in the support of the teacher and teachings. One guideline is perhaps: "to give until your heart feels full, to do your utmost to return what has been given." One may also seek guidance by looking at the fees that are charged for similar events or workshops in our culture. Evening events and lectures commonly cost \$15 and even movies now cost \$8.00. Leaders of workshops are typically paid \$45-\$70 per person per day. Some itinerant Tibetan teachers charge each person \$25 for an evening and \$140 per day. [Numbers updated 2008.] The decision of what to give is deeply personal. Those with lesser means are free to contribute less, and those with greater means may offer more according to the direction of their heart.

The practice of dana invites us to reflect upon what is really important to us. When we have benefited from the teachings we may direct some portion of our financial resources to support the Dharma. We are invited to transcend our capitalist-materialist conditioning which requires that we "get the best deal at the lowest possible price." Capitalism encourages us to seek happiness through the satisfaction of desires. Dana provides us the opportunity to realize that true happiness arises with non-attachment.

During its 2500 year lifetime Buddhism has adapted to many cultural traditions. In some periods and cultures the monks were very wealthy and controlled great land holdings. At other times and places they took vows of poverty and refused to touch money. In America the different lineages are adopting various strategies. Tibetan teachers charge admission to teachings. In the Zen world it is common to establish centers that provide housing and income for the teacher, and to charge membership dues and a fixed fee for sesshin. Vipassana teachers are attempting to remain with the dana approach modeled on the practice in Southeast Asia. It remains to be seen which of these strategies will be viable in the development of American Buddhism.

Dana, as the foundation of our spiritual life, helps us recognize and practice our natural interconnectedness. As life gives generously to us, so we give generously back to life. We belong to what we support, and what we support nourishes us.