

Dana Paramita

In many traditions in diverse societies the act of giving has been considered to be of particular importance. Jesus is said to have said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” When I first heard this as a child, I assumed that the giving referred to giving something material – like a (physical) present. It was only later that I began to realise that the essence of this teaching was more to do with giving that which is not material: giving something of ourselves.

There is a saying:

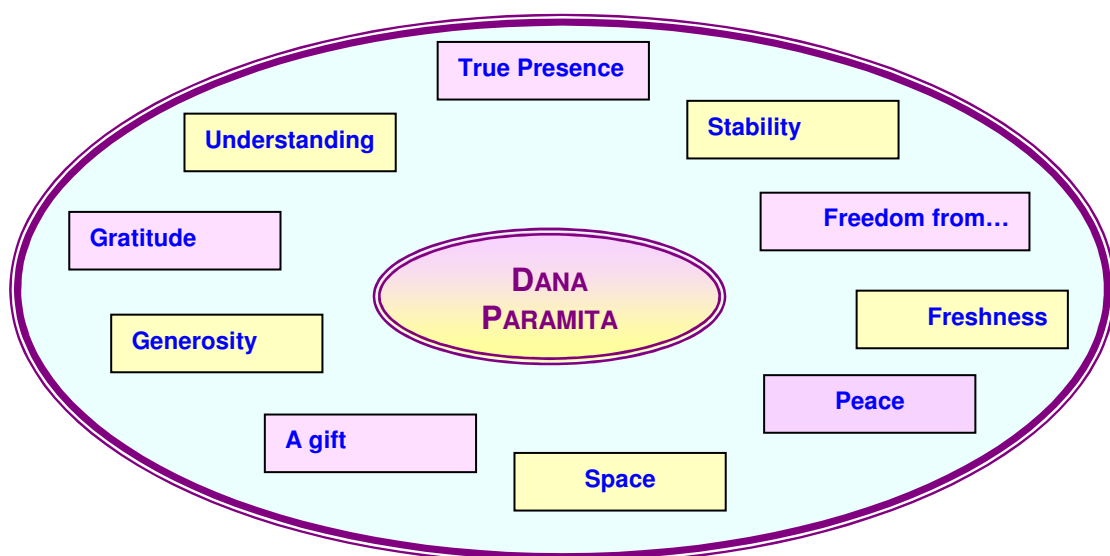
Give a man a fish,
and you feed him for a day;
Teach him how to fish,
and you feed him for his life.

In “The heart of the Buddha’s teaching”, Thich Nhat Hanh has a lovely chapter on the six Paramitas. One of the Paramitas is Dana Paramita, which is to do with giving, offering, and generosity. In this handout we will explore the essence of Dana Paramita.

In Chinese, the symbol for paramita has to do with crossing to the other side of a river.

- ❖ The implication of the six paramitas is that they can help us to move from our present state of suffering, strife and discontent to the other shore of gratitude, love, understanding and meaning.
- ❖ In order to cross over from the shore of suffering to the shore of joy and well-being, we have to do something: this something is called paramita.
- ❖ No one else can do this work for us: we have to do it ourselves; this involves considerable effort.

Dana Paramita is specifically to do with giving – offering something positive – and generosity. Thich Nhat Hanh discusses eight, which are given below, to which I have added generosity and gratitude.



We will now briefly look at each of these.

True Presence

It is very easy to spend much of our time in a state of background “mental chatter” (or a pre-occupied mind) in which we are not really in the present moment, and thus are not giving our True Presence to the person we are with, for example our partner.

If we focus on the present moment, and give our True Presence to those we are with at the time: or to a flower, a cloud, a mountain, a river – or any other aspect of nature and the cosmos: then we can experience the true essence of our being deeply.

Thich Nhat Hanh gives a moving story of a very well-to-do father who is also very busy with his work – and so is often away from home for days or weeks. He asks his son what he (the son) would like for his birthday. His son replies: “Daddy, I want you.”

If we do not give our True Presence today, tomorrow it may be too late.

- ❖ To give our True Presence is a wonderful gift.
- ❖ To give our True Presence is to BE in the Present Moment.

(See also D5)

Stability

In a relationship we can give our stability. That is, we can become stable and dependable, like a solid mountain. As we become stable, others will appreciate this stability and so will be able to trust us, and we will come to trust ourselves.

There is a mantra which we can use (or in the context of Autogenic Training use as a Positive Affirmation):

Breathing in,
I am a mountain;
Breathing out, I am stable.
Breathing in, I am a mountain,
Breathing out, I smile.

The person we love needs us to be solid and stable.

Freedom from Negative-Mind-States

If we are to give of our true selves, we must first address toxic and negative states within us. These include anger, the wish or desire for revenge, cravings (which by their very nature can never be satisfied), and the idea that we have a separate, permanent self (especially in the sense of living within an Ego-centric mental construct).

“Happiness is not possible unless we are free from afflictions – craving, anger, jealousy, despair, fear, and wrong perceptions..... Some kinds of happiness actually destroy our body, our mind, and our relationships. Look deeply into the nature of what you think will bring you happiness and see whether it is, in fact, causing those you love to suffer.”

Hanh 1998; p 194-195

Taking drugs may bring temporary “happiness”; they may also destroy our mind, or body, and our relationships. True happiness will embrace watering the positive seeds of others (see A4; D3)

Wrong perceptions include being judgmental** – which is one of the concepts covered in D1 on this website: “Reflections on foundations of mindful living”: being judgmental suggests that we are coming from an Ego-centric perspective; yet our very being is inter-linked and interconnected with other human beings – and indeed the whole of nature and the cosmos. Thus we inter-are.

**Thanks to Lynne Philip for this specific aspect of what we can give: i.e. Freedom from being judgmental.

As we become free from these negative mind states, we will become more and more free to truly be present for others – and form meaningful relationships.

One way to become free of these negative mind-states is to be in the present moment: there are so many wonders all around: flowers; trees; clouds; mountains; rivers; rain; sunshine; the smiling face of a child.

Freshness

What else can we give? We can give our freshness.

Over the years we can easily become stale and unattractive as a result of all the stressors on us. If, on the other hand, we can keep in touch with the freshness of spring and our youth – at least mentally, that will be a great blessing to others.

We can help ourselves to stay fresh with a mantra / positive affirmation:

Breathing in I see myself as a flower,
Breathing out, I feel fresh,
Breathing in I see myself as a flower,
Breathing out I smile to the cosmos.

Adapted from Hanh, 1998

Peace

It can be wonderful to sit next to someone who is at peace with themselves. We too can give something very precious: our inner peace. When practising the Autogenic Therapy Standard Exercises, or when meditating, we sometimes can get in touch with a deep inner peace. We can equate this deep inner peace to a lake or loch that has become absolutely still:

Breathing in
I become as still water;
Breathing out
my Being reflects things
as they truly are.

Adapted from Hanh 1998, p 195

If the surface of a lake is perturbed by the wind, it becomes uneven and can no longer mirror the world in a truthful way. If we are perturbed mentally, this too will distort our view and perspective of the world.

Only when we are in contact with the stillness of our centre can we begin to see and reflect the world as it really is.

Space

If we are to develop fully, we need – from time to time – space from others. A plant in a pot needs space to expand and grow to maturity; if it is not re-potted from time to time, its roots will become tangled and confused; and the plant itself will become cramped and stunted.

In the same way, as human beings, we need space from those we love. So we need to give space to our partner. This can take many forms: it may be allowing them to go away for the week-end on their own, or away for a holiday on their own, without feelings of resentment.

This will allow both them and us to grow and develop: and so not end up with “tangled roots”.

“The person we love needs space in order to be happy. In a flower arrangement, each flower needs space around it in order to radiate its true beauty. A person is like a flower. Without space within and around, she cannot be happy. We cannot buy these gifts in the market.”

Hanh 1998; p 195

“We cannot buy these gifts in the market.” So, in other words, we have to create the gift of space in our relationships ourselves.

Disciplines such as Meditation and Autogenic Therapy can help us to create the space we need.

A Gift

It may sometimes be the case that we feel that we have tried to give everything, and yet harmony in the relationship has not been restored. A gift such as flowers may, at times, say and mean more than words.

This is what Thich Nhat Hanh says about the matter:

“Giving is a wonderful practice. The Buddha said that when you are angry with someone, and you have tried everything and still feel angry, practise Dana Paramita. When we are angry, our tendency is to punish the other person. But when we do, there is only an escalation of the suffering. The Buddha proposed that instead, you send her a gift. When you feel angry, you won't want to go out and buy a gift, so take the opportunity now to prepare the gift while you are not angry. Then, when all else fails, go and mail that gift to her, and amazingly, you'll feel better right away.....”

Hanh 1998; p 195-196

Generosity

If we have a lot of money, and give a lot of it away, we are not necessarily being generous. Generosity comes from the heart.

If someone is in distress, or needs our help, and we give of our time and True Presence (see also D5), that is being generous.

We also need to be generous to ourselves, in the sense of giving time to be authentic and so truly ourselves. Regular daily practice of Mindfulness or Autogenic Training helps us to be truly ourselves: and if we are truly ourselves, what we give in terms of time and attention to others will become a great gift.

Gratitude

We can give of our gratitude to others and the whole cosmos; or, on the other hand, we can be resentful and live within a negative mind state. I was once having difficulty selling our flat in Edinburgh and was becoming upset and resentful about this. I spent a week-end away in which my brother Brian and I each did a focused meditation, based on a meditation card that we each drew separately. The card that chose me was "Gratitude". To start with I was very irritated about this as it was the last thing I felt I wanted to reflect on when the flat was not selling. However, after a thirty minute meditation on Gratitude, my whole perspective changed – and the irritation had dispersed.

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I have a friend who is so positive about the present moment, the weather, the wonders of nature – whenever we meet, that my heart lifts.

We have a choice: we can see the world as being bereft of meaning and always think ill: or we can be aware with gratitude of every breath we breathe.

The gratitude of my friend is infectious – a wonderful gift to share with others.

Understanding

If we do not understand someone, we are in some sense going to be alienated from them. Without understanding, we cannot truly love another person.

When I was at school, a friend of mine said that the only pupils in the school that she did not like were those she did not know: this is a profound truth. If we really know and understand another human being, we cannot hate them: we may hate what they have done, but not them in themselves.

“When another person makes you suffer, it is because he (she) suffers deeply within himself, and his suffering is spilling over. He does not need punishment; he needs help. This is the message he is sending.”

Hanh 1998; p 196

Our task is thus to understand the suffering of the other: and then make (or be) the appropriate response. Happiness is not an individual matter: it depends upon a reciprocal response and understanding with the other.

Understanding is crucial to our Being – and being in harmony.

As human beings we have the wonderful opportunity to give something of ourselves each day; this will involve giving of our time. In the hurly-burly of life, we can easily forget the essence and Wisdom of Dana Paramita. I am reminded of Beginner's Mind:

“In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; but in the expert's there are few. The goal of practice is always to keep our beginner's mind....”

“In the beginner's mind there is no thought, 'I have attained something.' All self-centred thoughts limit our vast mind. When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something. The beginner's mind is the mind of compassion.”

Suzuki 1970 pp 21 & 22
See also D1

Beginner's mind embraces the inter-relatedness of all things (D4): this realisation of the reality of the inter-relatedness of all things dissolves ego – and allows our compassion to flow.

By practising Autogenic Therapy and / or Meditation regularly, we enable ourselves to keep our Beginner's Mind; and with our Beginner's Mind we can practise Mindful Living (D1) and Dana Paramita. Such practices increase activity in the middle pre-frontal cortex, and the associated crucial dynamics for the well-being of ourselves and others (C2 & A3).

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References and sources

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- Kabat-Zinn, Jon 1990 (2006). Full Catastrophe Living: How to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation.** ISBN 0-7499-1585-4
- Segal, Zindel V.; Williams, J. Mark G.; & Teasdale, John D.: 2002; Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: a new approach to preventing relapse. 2002 ; The Guilford Press, New York; ISBN 1-57230-706-4**
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Linked themes in this Autogenic Dynamics section

A3	Towards a concept of happiness and well-being
B6	Perceptions, flowers, and reality
C2	Mindsight – <i>our seventh sense and associated pre-frontal cortex functions</i>
D1	Reflections on foundations for Mindful Living
D3	Store Consciousness and Watering our Positive Seeds
D4	Duhkha, Impermanence, and Inter-relatedness
D5	Seven Practices of Mindfulness