

Dhamma Talk: What is Dāna or Generosity?

Dhamma Speaker: Bhante Pannasara

Occasion: Sixth Vassana Dhamma Talk

*puriso ce puññaṃ kayirā taṃ punappunāṃ kayirātha
taṃ hi chandaṃ kayirātha puññaṃ uccayo sukho*

puriso [[purisa](#)]: some person; *ce* [puññaṃ](#) [[puñña](#)]: if meritorious activities; [kayirā](#): were to do; *taṃ*: that; [punappunāṃ](#) [[punappuna](#)]: repeatedly over and over; *kayirā*: should do; *taṃ hi*: in that; [chandaṃ](#) [[chanda](#)]: a delight; *kayirātha*: should take; *puññaṃ*: of merit; *uccayo* [[uccaya](#)]: accumulation; *sukho* [[sukha](#)]: leads to happiness

“A person may do some meritorious activity. He must keep on repeating it, over and over again. He must take delight in that [meritorious action](#). Accumulation of merit leads to happiness”.

01. The Meaning of Dāna (Generosity)

The Pāli word “**Dāna**” means **giving, offering, and generosity**. Its deeper meaning is **letting go or abandonment**. To truly understand Dāna, we need to see it as more than just giving something material.

Dāna is giving without expecting anything in return—not even a smile. Generosity is mentioned not only in Buddhism but also in other religions; however, Buddhism uniquely emphasizes **Dāna as a mental and spiritual process**.

Generosity is not just about giving. It is a **deep mental process**. To understand this, think of the process of getting data from a computer: first, you connect a pen drive, then the computer processes the data, you select what you want, and finally, after further processing, you can print it. Although the final output seems instantaneous, there is a complex process behind it that we often overlook. Similarly, **Dāna is a mental process**, not merely an external act.

The Buddha once explained: “**Dānaṃ yuddhaṃ ca samanamaḥu**” — giving (Dāna) is like a **mental battle**. When offering Dāna, one must fight the enemies in the mind, which disturb the generosity of heart. These three mental enemies are called:

- **Lobha** – Greed
- **Dosa** – Hatred or aversion
- **Moha** – Delusion or ignorance

To practice Dāna effectively, one must overcome these enemies, even temporarily. Instead of these three unwholesome states, one cultivates their opposites:

- **Alobha** – Non-greed or generosity
- **Adosa** – Non-hatred or loving-kindness
- **Amoha** – Non-delusion or wisdom

When offering Dāna, there are **three key moments** to be mindful of:

1. **Pūrvā moments (Purva)** – Before giving, preparing the mind
2. **Muncana moments (Muncana)** – During the act of giving
3. **Apara moments (Apara)** – After giving

During these moments, one must actively counter **Lobha, Dosa, and Moha**. This is why the Buddha emphasized that **Dāna is not just giving—it is a mental practice**. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is attaining **Nibbāna**. In this way, the Buddha taught: **“Taṇhakkhayo Nibbānam”** — the **eradication of craving or desire leads to Nibbāna**. Practicing Dāna helps cultivate this mental discipline.

02. Things we can give (Paritrāga / Generosity):

1. **Wealth (Āhāra, Dhana)** – Money, food, clothing, material resources
2. **Time (Kāla / Samaya)** – Being present, listening, spending time with others
3. **Effort / Labor (Viyoga / Viriya)** – Helping with work, volunteering, supporting others through action
4. **Knowledge (Ñāṇa / Paññā)** – Teaching, guiding, sharing experiences
5. **Friendship & Compassion (Mettā / Karuṇā)** – Kindness, love, encouragement, emotional support
6. **Spiritual gifts (Pattidāna / Puñña-dāna)** – Blessings, loving-kindness, meditation, transferring merit

People give according to their own practice: if one practices unwholesome actions, one will share harm; if one practices goodness, one shares benefit with society.

Among all types of Dāna, **giving food** is particularly essential. The Buddha explained this with the Pāli phrase: **“Sabbā sattā āhāratthikā”**, which literally means:

“All beings are dependent on food.”

Thus, offering Dāna, especially food, supports life, cultivates generosity, and purifies the mind.

Here, food (āhāra) doesn't only refer to physical food like rice, fruits, or meat. In Buddhist teachings, it has a broader meaning: anything that sustains life, energy, or consciousness.

1. Physical Food (Kāyika āhāra) – nourishment for the body. Without it, living beings cannot survive.

2. Mental / Spiritual Food (Cetasika āhāra) – wholesome thoughts, meditation, virtues, and Dhamma teachings that nourish the mind. Without these, the mind remains untrained and suffers.

Teaching Point:

- Just as living beings cannot exist without physical nourishment, the mind cannot flourish without wholesome “food” such as generosity (dāna), virtue (sīla), and wisdom (paññā).
- Therefore, offering food, helping others, or teaching Dhamma is not just generosity—it is supporting life itself.
- This phrase reminds us of **interdependence**: all beings rely on resources and care, and every act of kindness helps sustain life.

Modern Reflection:

Even in daily life, this teaching can be applied:

- **Feeding someone hungry is helping their life continue.**
- **Sharing wisdom or encouragement feeds the mind and heart.**
- **Supporting spiritual practice helps beings thrive in body and mind.**

03. Benefits of Offering Dāna (Giving/Generosity)

In Buddhism, offering dāna is not just a material act—it cultivates the mind and brings real benefits. Traditionally, it is said to produce five major results:

1. Āyu (Life/Long life) – Giving with sincerity can help the giver live a long, healthy life. It removes obstacles and generates protection from harm.

2. Vanna (Beauty/Attractiveness) – Acts of generosity bring inner and outer radiance. The giver becomes attractive in character, mind, and sometimes even appearance, inspiring respect and goodwill from others.

3. Sepa (Happiness/Well-being) – Dāna creates happiness, contentment, and peace of mind. By reducing selfishness, the giver experiences joy in giving rather than in possessing.

4. Bala (Strength/Power) – Generosity develops mental and spiritual strength. It gives courage, resilience, and confidence. In past lives, it could also manifest as wealth, influence, or protection.

5. Paññā (Wisdom/Insight) – The habit of selfless giving helps cultivate wisdom. By letting go of attachment, the mind becomes clear, calm, and perceptive, making it easier to understand the Dhamma and reality.

04. To whom we offer Dāna:

In Buddhism, Dāna (generosity or giving) is traditionally offered to the **Sangha**, which is the community of monks and nuns (Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis). The **Maha Sangha** refers to the fully ordained monks and nuns. Offering to them is considered highly meritorious because they have dedicated their lives to practicing the Dhamma, studying, teaching, and guiding laypeople.

We can also offer Dāna to:

- **Novices (Samaneras/Samaneris)** – junior monks or nuns.
- **Lay teachers or spiritual guides** – people guiding others on the path of Dhamma.
- **Those in need** – such as poor or needy people, though this is usually called general charity.

05. Why we offer Dāna to the Maha Sangha:

Offering Dāna to the Sangha has several purposes:

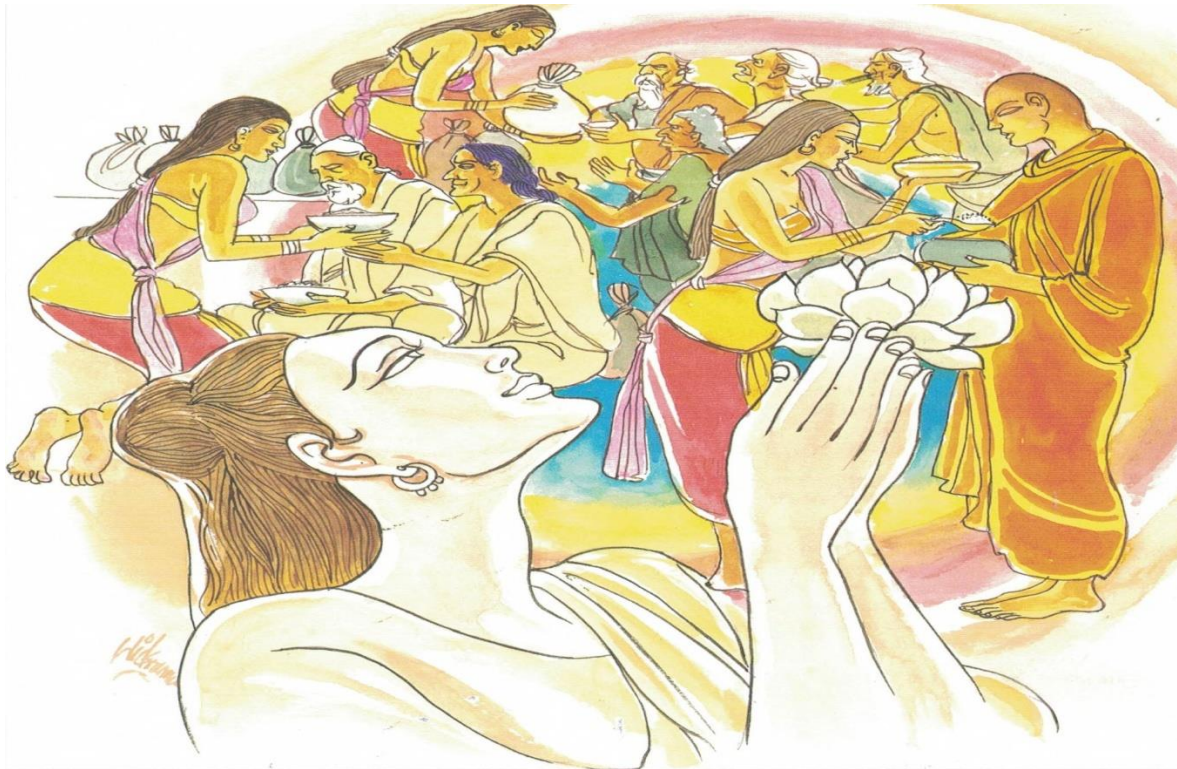
1. **Support their spiritual practice:** Monks and nuns rely on laypeople for food, robes, and medicine, so Dāna allows them to focus on meditation and teaching the Dhamma.
2. **Accumulate merit (Puñña):** Giving to the Sangha generates **spiritual merit** that benefits the giver in this life and future lives.
3. **Purify the mind:** Acts of generosity reduce greed, attachment, and selfishness.
4. **Strengthen the Dhamma community:** Supporting the Sangha helps preserve the teachings of the Buddha.
5. **Cultivate virtues:** Encourages humility, compassion, and the practice of generosity in daily life.

Verse 118 - **The Story of Goddess Lājā**
: [Chapter 9 - Pāpa Vagga \(Evil\)](#)

Pali text, illustration and English translation of Dhammapada verse 118:

*puññaṃ ce puriso kayirā kayirāth'etaṃ punappunaṃ |
tamhi chandaṃ kayirātha sukho puññaṃ uccayo || 118 ||*

118. “A person may do some meritorious activity. He must keep on repeating it, over and over again. He must take delight in that [meritorious action](#). Accumulation of merit leads to happiness”.



Repeat your acts of goodness. Delight therein. Goodness amassed brings happiness.

The Story of Goddess Lājā

While residing at the [Jetavana](#) Monastery, the [Buddha](#) spoke this Verse, with reference to the goddess [Lājā](#).

For a while Venerable [Kassapa](#) the Great was in residence at [Pippalī](#) Cave, he entered into a state of [trance](#) (jhāna/samadhi), remaining therein for seven days. Arising from trance on the seventh day, he surveyed with supernatural vision (*dibbacakkhu*) the places where he wanted to go for alms. As he looked abroad, he beheld a certain woman, the keeper of a field of rice-paddy, parching heads of rice (puffed rice) which she had gathered. Thereupon he considered within himself, “Is she endowed with faith or is she not endowed with faith?” Straightaway becoming aware that she was endowed with faith, he reflected, “Will she be able to render me assistance?” Straightaway he became aware of the following, “This noble young woman is wise and resourceful; she will render me assistance, and as the result of so doing will receive a rich reward.” So he put on his robes, took bowl in hand, and went and stood near the rice-field. When this noble young woman saw the Venerable, her heart believed, and her body was suffused with the five sorts of joy. “Wait a moment, Venerable,” said she. Taking some of the parched rice, she went quickly to him, poured the rice into the Venerable’s bowl, and then, saluting him with the five rests, she made an earnest wish, saying, “Venerable, may I be a partaker of the Truth you have seen?” “So be it,” replied the Venerable, pronouncing the words of thanksgiving. Then that noble young woman saluted the Venerable and set out to return, reflecting upon the alms she had given to the Venerable.

Now in a certain hole by the road skirting the field of growing rice lurked a poisonous snake. He was not able to bite the Venerable’s leg, for it was covered with his yellow robe. But as that noble young woman reached that spot on her return, reflecting upon the alms she had given to the Venerable, the snake wriggled out of his hole, bit her, and then and there caused her to fall prostrate on the ground. Dying with believing heart, she was reborn in heaven. As a goddess she came down from time to time and attended to the upkeep of the Venerable’s place—cleaning the premises etc. When the Venerable saw what had been done, he concluded, “Some probationer or novice must have rendered me this service.” On the second day the goddess did the same thing again, and the Venerable again came to the same conclusion. But on the third day the Venerable heard the sound of

her sweeping, and looking in through the keyhole, saw the radiant image of her body. And straightaway he asked, “Who is it that is sweeping?” “It is I, Venerable, your female disciple the goddess Lājā.” “I have no female disciple by that name.” “Venerable, when I was a young woman tending a rice-field, I gave you parched rice; as I returned on my way, a snake bit me, and I died with believing heart and was reborn in the Heavenly World. Since it was through you that I received this glory, I said to myself, ‘I will perform the major and minor duties for you and so make my salvation sure.’ Therefore came I hither, Venerable.” “Was it you that swept this place for me yesterday and on the preceding days, setting out water for drinking?” “Yes, Venerable.” “Pray depart hence, goddess. Never mind about the duties you have rendered, but henceforth come no more hither.” “Venerable, do not destroy me. Permit me to perform the major and minor services for you and so make my salvation sure.” “Goddess, depart hence, lest in the future, when expounders of the law take the variegated fan and sit down, they have reason to say, ‘Report has it that a goddess comes and performs the major and minor duties for Venerable Kassapa, setting out water for him to drink.’ Thereupon the goddess wept and wailed and lamented, standing poised in the air. About this incident the Buddha said, “Indeed, both in this world and the world to come, it is the doing of good works alone that brings happiness.”

Explanatory Translation (Verse 118)

*puriso ce puññaṃ kayirā taṃ punappunam kayirātha
taṃ hi chandam kayirātha puññassa uccayo sukho*

puriso [*purisa*]: some person; *ce* *puññaṃ* [*puñña*]: if meritorious activities; *kayirā*: were to do; *taṃ*: that; *punappunam* [*punappuna*]: repeatedly over and over; *kayirā*: should do; *taṃ hi*: in that; *chandam* [*chanda*]: a delight; *kayirātha*: should take; *puññassa*: of merit; *uccayo* [*uccaya*]: accumulation; *sukho* [*sukha*]: leads to happiness

“A person may do some meritorious activity. He must keep on repeating it, over and over. He must take delight in that [meritorious action](#). Accumulation of merit leads to happiness”.

Commentary and exegetical material (Verse 118)

puñña: meritorious acts. [Kusala](#) is another term to denote such acts.

Story Summary:

- **Goddess Lājā** was a celestial being who had accumulated merit through repeated acts of kindness and generosity.
- She delighted in her meritorious deeds, understanding that repeated good actions lead to increased happiness and spiritual progress.
- Upon hearing this teaching from the Buddha, she attained the **Sotāpatti Fruition**, marking her entry into the path of enlightenment.

This story illustrates the principle that **repeated wholesome actions, performed with joy and intention, lead to the accumulation of merit and resultant happiness.**

06. Conclusion

- **Dāna is more than giving; it is a mental and spiritual practice.**
- **Repeated acts of generosity, performed with delight and intention, accumulate merit (Puñña) and bring lasting happiness.**
- Offering Dāna supports the **Sangha, society, and oneself**, and helps in **eradicating desire (Taṇhakkhayo)**, the key to attaining **Nibbāna**.
- Just as all beings rely on food for survival (**Sabbā sattā āhāratthikā**), all beings benefit from **acts of generosity, virtue, and wisdom.**

Takeaway: Cultivate generosity in thought, word, and deed. Let your giving be wholehearted, repeated, and mindful. This is true Dāna, the foundation of happiness and spiritual growth.