

UNIT 1.3A

THE FINEST GIFTS YOU CAN GIVE

1.3A ☸ TEXT	<i>Numerical Discourses 8.39</i>	1.3A ☸ PALI	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya 8.39</i>
<p>There are these five gifts which are great gifts —pristine, of long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated and never before adulterated— which are not suspect and never will be suspect, and are not scorned by ascetics and sages who are wise.</p>	<p>Here a noble person:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) gives up the destruction of life, and refrains from it. 2) gives up taking what is not given, and refrains from it. 3) gives up sexual misconduct, and refrains from it. 4) gives up false speech, and refrains from it. 5) gives up fermented and distilled intoxicants which are the basis of negligence, and refrains from them. 	<p><i>pañcimāni dānāni mahādānāni aggaññāni rattaññāni vaṃsaññāni porāṇāni asaṃkiṇṇāni asaṃkiṇṇapubbāni, na saṃkiyanti na saṃkiyissanti, appaṭikuṭṭhāni samaṇehi brāhmaṇehi viññūhi.</i></p>	<p><i>idha ariyasāvako: pāṇātipātaṃ pahāya pāṇātipātā paṭivirato hoti... adinnādānaṃ pahāya adinnādānā paṭivirato hoti... kāmesumicchācāraṃ pahāya kāmesumicchācārā paṭivirato hoti... musāvādaṃ pahāya musāvādā paṭivirato hoti... surāmerayamajjapamādaṭṭhānaṃ pahāya surāmerayamajjapamādaṭṭhānā paṭivirato hoti.</i></p>
<p>In doing so...a noble person gives freedom from fear, gives freedom from hostility, and gives freedom from oppression to an immeasurable number of beings.</p> <p>...One will also share in the immeasurable freedom from fear, freedom from hostility, and freedom from oppression.</p>	<p><i>...ariyasāvako aparimāṇānaṃ sattānaṃ abhayaṃ deti averaṃ deti abyābajjhaṃ deti. ...aparimāṇassa abhayassa averassa abyābajjhassa bhāgi hoti.</i></p>		

1.3A ❖ COMMENT

A. We are used to hearing about *dāna* or generosity at the end of retreats, when the suggestion is made that we can support our teachers and meditation centers by giving a cash donation (all major credit cards accepted). Not only does this practice open our hearts and counteract a grasping state of mind, but it has the practical benefit of providing a livelihood to teachers and sustaining the non-profit mission of the dharma centers.

However, despite what one so often hears about such *dāna* practice being ‘an ancient Buddhist tradition’, this really only goes back to the 1970s when the founders of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre MA wanted to establish an alternative economic model and not ‘charge’ for the teachings. In ancient times, of course, all the teaching was done by mendicants who had no needs beyond minimal food and clothing, and who were not even allowed to touch money. The different approach to remuneration was a noble sentiment, and has worked more or less well over the last forty years, but this emphasis on *dāna* as a financial transaction has had the unfortunate consequence of eclipsing other more expansive teachings about *dāna* that were fundamental in the early tradition.

We begin by looking at generosity because the Buddha often led with the topic, and it is considered an appropriate way to prepare the ground for teachings on integrity. Keep in mind, however, that we are talking about a particular quality of mind rather than a behavior or a habit. Generosity involves an attitude of lessening attachment to sense objects or views, of caring authentically for the well being of another, and a psychological stance of giving over rather than taking in.

B. Generosity can involve giving many different things: giving time, giving attention, giving kindness. In this text we find one of the more inspiring and beautiful approaches to *dāna*—giving the gift of harmlessness. In this view, the most generous gift we can give one another is our ethical good behavior. Most of you will recognize the so-called five precepts (more on these later), but here they are presented as five gifts to be bestowed on others. Moreover the language speaks of them being ancient, etc., suggesting that like the dhamma itself {see 1.1B} there is something timeless and universal about acting with such integrity.

C. The passage concludes by asserting that when giving the gift of harmlessness to others, one also give the same gift to oneself; that is to say, one shares in its benefits. Ethical behavior is therefore the greatest gift one can give to oneself, for it prevents harmful situations from developing and lays down the conditions for healthy things to happen. Once again we encounter the basic reciprocity of interdependent causation.

1.3A ◆ LANGUAGE

A. Technically the word ‘*dāna*’ refers to a gift (cf. the English cognate ‘donation’), and it is only from extension of this notion of ‘the giving of gifts’ that we get to the more abstract sense of ‘generosity’. Another word used often for generosity is ‘*cāga*’, which has the sense of ‘letting go’ or

'giving up' (Skt. *tyaj*) one's attachment to things. Notice even in English the close relationship between 'giving' and 'giving up'. To give a gift one must let go of it, which can only happen in moments of non-attachment. Again, lessening attachment to an object is evident, but in this context what is involved is letting go of the selfish pleasure that might come from misbehaving.

B. The text not only mentions 'giving up' (*pahāya*) the five forms of misbehavior, but also speaks of 'holding back' or 'refraining' (*paṭivirato*) from each of them. This is an interesting word, worth a closer look. The element *rato* is a past participle of *ramati* that means 'to enjoy' or 'to be pleased' by something. The prefix *vi-* gives it a sense of separation or detachment, thus 'refraining from enjoying' something that is harmful or unskillful. The additional prefix '*paṭi-*' has a sense of 'back', so we build up to something like 'holding back from indulging in the enjoyability of such things that cause harm to oneself or others'. [This is not meant to be a literal rendering, but assembles some of the basic linguistic elements that shape the meaning of a word. We will see this sort of analysis often in this course.]

The problem with unskillful behavior is that it often feels good. There is an indulgent pleasure in lashing out at someone, or just taking what you want when you want it, or seeking sexual gratification wherever it may be found, or altering consciousness with substances that distort perception and judgment. The precise language the Buddha is using here recognizes this, but also sees how it leads to harm. So one needs not only to break the allure of an instant's indulgence, but also sustain the attitude of non-participation in this human reflex over multiple mind moments in order to develop it into a character trait. The repetition of such moments of restraint, will eventually yield the 'great fruit' {see 1.2b} of psychological transformation.

1.3A ★ INVESTIGATION

A. This should be something we can easily investigate in our own lives: How can we best protect our children from harm? By refraining from beating or abusing them, whether through anger or neglect. How can we gain the trust of those with whom we work? By not taking more than is freely offered, even when unobserved. How can we keep our marriages and partnerships healthy? By not misbehaving sexually outside the parameters of the relationship. What is the best thing we can do for a good friend? Be honest and truthful. When out on the town or attending a party, we give the gift of safety to those relying upon us for a safe ride home by abstaining from drinking. There are so many different ways of observing how our actions affect the people around us. Pay attention to the effects your attitudes and actions have on others, and see if you can see the value of giving the gift of integrity.

B. Notice also that this text speaks of the gift of freedom—from fear, from hostility, and from oppression. Misbehavior can be seen as a kind of yoke or binding we put upon those around us. If we are angry, people are right to be afraid because we can easily lash out and hurt them either physically or emotionally. If we are greedy and selfish, we are likely to step on the rights of others with hostility and oppress them in various ways. See if you can begin to look at behavior in this way—that harmful emotions impose upon others, while benevolent intentions give freedom in

various ways to the people around us. And turning the practice back toward yourself, see if you can relate experientially to giving yourself gifts of integrity and gifts of freedom from harm.

1.3A 🌀 PRACTICE

A. Most Buddhists in most Buddhist countries—for centuries past as well as today—do not practice meditation, but consider generosity to be a major cornerstone of their practice. See if you can make the practice of generosity a major part of your own practice, not by giving money, but by giving the gift of ethical integrity—to both yourself and to everyone with whom you come in contact. Look for ways to give your time, your attention, your care, your harmlessness, to others at every opportunity. And see how by doing so, you are also doing something immensely valuable for yourself.

B. In addition to whatever minor acts of giving you might be able to do throughout your day, see if you can set as a challenge the performance of one major generous act each day. This may take any form, and it's up to you to define it however you like. But engage with the practice of generosity.

C. Begin to take notice when other people are generous to you or to each other. There are many small and unobtrusive acts of generosity that take place every day. Whether or not you acknowledge these with a smile or a nod or a kind word, notice when they occur and allow them to have the subtle transformative effect of uplifting your mind momentarily.